

Radial Design in Wallace Stevens

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In some early Stevens poems there is evidence of a typographical pattern I call "radial design," a device in which the poet selects a central unit (such as a word) and on both sides evenly arranges a pattern of other units. Radial design is no accident. One finds not only a definite historical consistency in the way the pattern develops but also a tight continuity between it and ideas about language and perception expressed in the poems themselves. Stevens' overall aim is to impose this fixed, spatial structure upon the sequential flow of a poem in order to suspend the representational function of its language and thus compel us to observe words as things in themselves.

I do seek a center and expect to go on seeking it. . . . It is the great necessity even without specific identification.

Wallace Stevens, in a letter to Sister Maria Bernetta Quinn

Many of the obscurities in Wallace Stevens' verse can be resolved if we think of his poetic structures as operating on two verbal levels, the empirical and the semantic. The empirical plane derives from the physical nature of words and would include rhyme, meter, and typographical design. The semantic plane, on the other hand, derives from the referential nature of words and consists of such elements as imagery and diction. This dichotomy could, of course, be applied to any poet, but in the case of Stevens it can serve particularly well, often having an effect somewhat like that of a microscope stain that allows structures, previously hidden by another layer of organization, to become suddenly visible. In especially the early poetry (from his first important lyrics published in 1915 to those included in the final, 1936, *Ideas of Order*), Stevens liked to undergird his themes with meticulously wrought—and concealed—empirical structures.¹

Perhaps the most ambitious of these is radial design, my term for a pattern Stevens employs in several poems, all of which appear in the first version of *Harmonium* (1923). He creates radial design using syllables,² words, phrases, verses, or stanzas as typographical units, arranging them evenly on both sides of a central unit in order to form a pattern having a numerical or, in some cases, geometric symmetry. The central unit works as a key to correlations a reader may make between this radial structure and everything else the poem is saying.

In "Life Is Motion" (*CP*, 83),⁴ for example, the word "stump" is the central unit, having on each side 11 words³ or 19 syllables; and this same word, we shall find, also acts as a kind of fulcrum for the statement of the piece:

In Oklahoma,
Bonnie and Josie,
Dressed in calico,
Danced around a stump.
They cried,
"Ohoyaho,
Ohoo" ...
Celebrating the marriage
Of flesh and air.

On a semantic plane, two figurative weddings frame the poem: at the beginning, the nuptial of interaction between Bonnie and Josie and, at the end, the marriage of flesh and air, this latter wedding suggesting a harmony of man and the physical world. But if we interpret the poem only this far, the radial design supervenes as a mere oddity.⁵ We need, at this point, to observe Joseph N. Riddel's remark about the reflexive nature of Stevens' poetry, "wherein the self (or subjectivity) of the poet is objectively manifest in the verbal phenomenon of his poetic world."⁶ Radial design is a vehicle of this reflexive mode. Bonnie and Josie cannot recognize this pattern, but the poet-speaker can. It works to make the poem a kind of dramatic monologue—not, in the usual sense of this term, delineating the uncommon lines of a speaker's personality but rather defining the nature of what he shares with all other men, the perceptual faculty. On a semantic level, the poet-speaker sees the earthy,

spontaneous dance swirling around the stump; and yet on an empirical level, he also sees that this same “stump” hubs the rigid and artificial radial design. He does not perceive in two separate acts, however, but only one, apprehending a composed reality that resolves into two constituents, motion and permanence. The motion we associate with the dance, the permanence with the radial design. The speaker celebrates the marriage of man and his world, of order and chaos, of permanence and flux; he structures a fixed form, projects it into the flow of sensation, and then somehow “discovers” this same fixed form as if the physical world itself were yielding it. Life is motion wearing the fiction of permanence. The congruence of dance and design, of pressing impulse and permanent order, represents the whole of reality which the speaker—in one act—creates and finds.

Radial design suggests that Stevens has tailored lyrical structure to the particular issues that this topic of perception raises. A poem with such a pattern renders a polarity similar to the one lying at the core of human knowledge. Our two-level dichotomy between empirical and semantic relation transposes into a verbal medium the radical antinomy Stevens sees between object and subject. Within the Kantian framework the poet uses for his epistemology, the object is of its very nature inaccessible. The mind must integrate, interpret, and make symbols from the stimuli it receives; it must of necessity distort the *noumenon*, the pure thing-in-itself. The naked eye is an illusion;⁷ perceived reality “is never the thing but the version of the thing” (*CP*, 332). And so in its very deceptiveness, radial design effects the kind of astonishment a man feels in discovering that he has been deceived by what lies right in front of him and, more, that in large measure he himself is the deluder, his own “sleight-of-hand man” (*CP*, 222).

1915

Although not yet creating a true radial design in 1915, Stevens nevertheless uses a geometric plan of centralization in the very early poem, “Sunday Morning” (*CP*, 66).⁸ In Figure 1 the roman numbers list the order of stanzas; the letters designate the frames created by the paired sections.

On an even larger structural scale, a dramatic unity, based on the figure of the woman, exists between Frames A and D. In Frame A the poet stages her action: she enjoys the calm sentence of an immediate, material reality, gives up this reality for daydreams about the Christian promise of immortality (I), and then awakens to a new consciousness of the physical world (VIII); in Frame D he engages her in a kind of dialogue with the narrator. Even though the third-person reference persists in D (the second person would destroy the poem's elegiac mood), the two clearly participate in a dialectic that moves toward the narrator's paradox, "death is the mother of beauty," the key antithesis to the creed impelling the woman's reveries. "Death is the mother of beauty" argues that change is the essential quality of all reality—a direct challenge to the static terms of the Christian heaven. Representing only one phase of a world-in-change, death would act as a mother in that it would presuppose or "generate" its alternate phase, life, one form of which is beauty—to be taken broadly as the life of the mind.

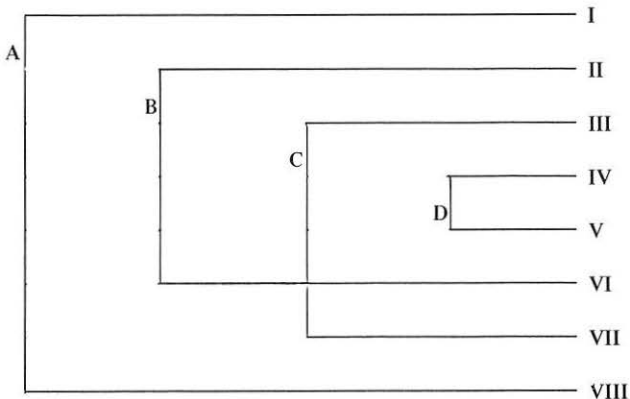
A and D comprise the poem's essential statement; the other

Figure 1. *Frame A*. The woman abandons her hope of a Christian paradise, an act the narrator portrays as an awakening from a daydream.

Frame B. The narrator continues his attack against Christian belief, but here the two stanzas are more functionally equivalent, each one developing the argument of the more important section immediately preceding it.

Frame C. The narrator traces the history of religious belief, submitting that man is progressing toward the realization of a divine humanity.

Frame D. The quasi dialogue between the woman and the narrator yields the central statement of the poem: "death is the mother of beauty."



two frames play developmental and supportive roles. Frame B, for instance, restates and clarifies but does not say anything really new. The second stanza merely spells out the argument of the first, as does the sixth stanza that of the fifth. (In addition to having equivalent functions, the components of B correspond rhetorically. In each the narrator changes from the interrogative to the hortatory mode, first trying through mordant questions to erode the Christian position and then moving to replace it with a hedonistic alternative.) Frame C corroborates A and D in a different way. Probably as a counterpoint to the woman's excursions into the past and the future, the narrator briefly outlines the history of divinity and then makes predictions about an age to come. His thesis is that the concept of God has been drawing close to the concept of man. Christ, as both God and man, represents an advance over Jove: our blood is viewed as "commingling" with the Christian "heaven," a synonym here for divinity. But there is a third stage also envisioned. Now in the future tense, the narrator asserts that our blood will come to be fully the blood of paradise—that is, fully divine—only when the earth will be good of and for itself, when it will "seem all of paradise that we shall know." The seventh section takes up this future vision with such close continuity that the two parts of Frame C could stand together as a single poem. This second part of C keeps the important symbols of blood, sky, and star (this last changed to the god-like sun); and it suggests, largely through these same symbols, that man will not lose but transform religious experience. Without Jove, the sensual freedom associated with paganism will reach a meridian of expression; and without Christ, the spiritual riches of Christianity will become, in their secularization, as accessible as trees, lakes, hills, or the interlocked hands of men that perish. that Stevens is consciously using these frames seems apparent in a 1915 letter to Harriet Monroe, who as editor of *Poetry* told him that the entire poem could not be included in the journal. He replied that "provided your selection of the numbers of *Sunday Morning* is printed in the following order: I, VIII, IV, V, I see no objection to cutting down. The order is necessary to the idea" (*L*, 183). To reduce the work, Stevens excerpts B

and C and makes a simple sequential arrangement by collapsing the essential frames, A and D. Doing so, he can easily preserve

preserve "the idea" because of the strong continuity already existing between the stanzas of these important frames.⁹

In spite of its frame-within-frame scheme, however, "Sunday Morning" does not show a true radial design. In contrast with our paradigm, "Life Is Motion," it does not base its plan of centralization on an empirical system of relation and does not have the perception of the speaker as its topic. But most importantly, the arrangement diagramed in Figure 1 signifies nothing in terms of what the poem says. Where the radial system of "Life Is Motion" becomes a kind of silent metaphor—as crucial to the poem's argument as that of its dance image—the equivalent structure in "Sunday Morning" merely serves a rhetorical function, organizing pairs of sections so that the most important parts appear at the center and at each end. Stevens can comply with Ms. Monroe's request and destroy this rhetorical framework because he does not involve it with "the idea" of the poem itself.

1917

A true radial design does not appear until "All over Minnesota" (See *OP*, 7) is published in 1917,¹⁰ a sketch that, however unassuming, clearly indicates a new direction in Stevens' use of verbal structure (Fig. 2).

Stevens himself does not segment the poem into these small typographical stanzas; I am using white space in Figure 2 to show how radial design determines the poem's printed layout and how strongly the four-unit, frame-within-frame arrangement recalls the plan of "Sunday Morning." The imagery of Frame A brings the mind's eye to a scene (line 1) and then draws it away (line 13), while Frame B uses color contrast (red-white, white-green) to blend Jalmar into his wintry milieu. On an aural level, C advances this union of man and environment: some birds join with the wind's male voice in a soprano-bass choir while others utter the name of their listener.

Unlike the scheme in "Sunday Morning," however, the radial

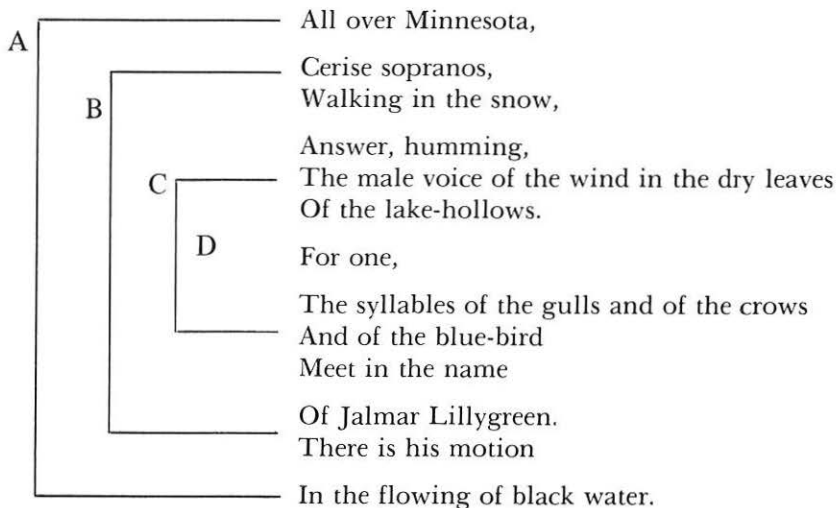


Figure 2. "All Over Minnesota."

structure here derives, at least partially, from empirical relation. The short length of D, first of all, allows the eye to see it as the central unit. But not so obvious is the way equivalence in syllabic verse-length links the components of the frames surrounding D:

Frame A....7 and 8

Frame B....5, 5 and 6, 5

Frame C....4, 10, 5 and 11, 5, 4

A one-syllable difference blurs the correspondence between the components of each frame. In C the eye is further eluded by the jumbling of linearly parallel verses so that those that are even (4 and 4, 5 and 5) or nearly so (10 and 11) will not immediately be seen as such. As in "Life Is Motion," we shall find that the words at their semantic level will make full sense through recognition of the empirical scheme and vice-versa. Again emerging as the main topic is the perception of the poet-speaker, whose mind is personified by Jalmar. Just as this Minnesota figure becomes one with his physical environment, so too does the poet-speaker unite with his, namely, the language on the page. Jalmar's motion is "in the flowing of

black water," and the motion of his creator's mind is in the flow of black print. For Stevens the mind co-inhabits the material reality it apprehends, whether this reality be a word or a world. "The soul," he submits in another poem, "... is composed / Of the external world" (*CP*, 51). The radial design of "All over Minnesota" is Stevens' peculiar way of saying that the mind, like a central fire, transforms everything into a resemblance of itself.

Jalmar listens to the syllables of birds and hears his name; and the speaker uses the syllables of the poem to suggest, first, that Jalmar is a central, radiating presence in the world he perceives and that, second, he himself composes—in both senses of the term—the world he portrays. "The mind of the poet," says Stevens, "describes itself as constantly in his poems as the mind of the sculptor describes itself in his forms..." (*NA*, 46).

Drawing a similar analogy from another visual art, he maintains that "the mind begets in resemblance as the painter begets in representation; that is to say, as the painter makes his world within a world..." (*NA*, 76). It is not surprising, then, that Stevens recognizes a close affinity between the structural principles of painting and those governing radial design, which is, after all, a spatial feature. He would be aware that in painting the eye forms its own kind of radial design, for in following the principle of compositional focus, it finds a center-point to which it relates everything else.¹¹ In "Valley Candle" (*CP*, 51) the beams of light do not order the chaos of the dark valley; the eye itself structures the scene, finding a point of light and inter-relating what surrounds it:

My candle burned alone in an immense valley.
Beams of the huge night converged upon it....

When the "Special Number" issue of *Others* appears in this year 1917, it is clear that Stevens is linking this center-point principle with radial design as a primary technique. While "Valley Candle," which here leads a group of five new lyrics,¹² does not itself show such a strategy, it precludes a remarkable example of it in the poem immediately following, "Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird" (*CP*, 92):

Among twenty snowy mountains,
The only moving thing
Was the eye of the blackbird.

The blackbird of this first sketch bears an unmistakable likeness to the solitary candle. The settings of both are exemplary of how “poetry and painting alike create through composition” (NA, 163). The eye chooses a point out of an immense expanse as if it were selecting the center of a circle whose circumference was presumed instead of drawn. In terms of this point, the eye forms rather than registers the scene, finding through the center-point the north and south, the east and west of the world it sees. Stevens applies this center-point principle to radial design in order to unify all thirteen sections; but before we can study the specific terms of this application, we need to explore why the theme of unity is, in this poem, especially important.

Even after a reasonably careful reading, the mutual autonomy of the thirteen parts seems a more striking feature than their unity. Each section not only has a different setting but often a different topic. In the first way of looking at a concrete object, the subjective voice and eyes of the speaker assume an active role but do not dominate their objective counterpart, the blackbird. Other ways, however, portray less tranquil relationships within this subject-object polarity.

XI

He rode over Connecticut
In a glass coach.
Once, a fear pierced him,
In that he mistook
The shadow of his equipage
For blackbirds.

“He rode over Connecticut” (perhaps a play with “overrode”) in the sense that he traded physical presence for fantastic invention. Stevens will sometimes allow a persona to inflate the range of the imagination as if reality were subservient to it—riding in a glass coach, reaching “right up to the sun” (CP,

74), or thinking of a dangerous enemy as a “bug in the grass” (*CP*, 210)—and then, through explicit or tacit statement, will have the same wrongly minimized reality assert itself with its own brand of power. In this passage, the mere suggestion of reality’s shadow sufficiently exposes the vulnerability of the traveler’s glass world.

As much as this eleventh part differs from the first, Stevens nevertheless writes one poem, not thirteen. On the surface he does want to suggest that the speaker has merely gathered an odd number of loosely related impressions, but at deeper levels Stevens lays tightly fashioned structures. In XI, for example, he casts the theme of misemphasis within a third-person reference in order to maintain through all the pieces a single, consistently enlightened speaker. More than anything else, it is this speaker that enables the whole to say more than do the parts taken together as a whole. One sketch may be seen as emphasizing the objective pole, (VII, VIII, X, XI), another the subjective (II, III, V, VI, IX, XII), or still another the accord between both (I, IV, XIII), but individually they all work within a generally static framework, catching this polar interplay out of time and, as in a painting, depicting within it an *act* of the speaker. “Thirteen Ways” itself, on the other hand, stages his *action*, something involving process. The poem does not resemble a gallery with thirteen pictures as much as it does a motion-picture film with thirteen frames. And yet, we may ask, even if one recognizes that the whole poem reveals this action, what more is shown besides indefinite extension? The speaker moves in a generally additive progression, one in which the thirteenth part implies not so much a termination but just another fourteenth way. But at the same time, the pleasure this final part describes can operate as a goal of the speaker’s perception and so suggest that it is a purposeful as well as progressive action. As in “The Snow Man” and “The Emperor of Ice-Cream,” cold reality here refreshes without consoling and returns the speaker full circle to the snowy satisfaction of his first way—the emotional fulfillment of the end complementing the aspectual harmony of the beginning.

Seeing the pleasure of harmony as the poem's fundamental idea, we are able to appreciate Stevens' choice of "Among twenty snowy mountains" as the speaker's first statement. In no other part do object and subject come more closely together. Like the ink brush of a Sung artist, the speaker's voice approaches but does not reach impersonality. Here also the eye surveys the widest expanse and discerns the narrowest compass. Perhaps the speaker, having such keen notice, can catch his image in the blackbird's moving eye. At any rate, even though the blackbird may not mirror him in this way, the center-point principle enables it to reflect "the act of [his] mind" (*CP*, 240).

Unifying the whole poem, Stevens joins this same principle with radial design to show that the blackbird also mirrors the action, the process, of his mind. The radial structure centers as VII, a piece only a little different from XI: the "thin men of Haddam" are merely variants of the glass-coach rider—all idealists whose perceptual balance has slanted drastically toward the subjective. And yet unique in VII are subtle elements like the more immediate reference in the second person and the abrupt, vertical drop from the ethereal birds of gold to the fleshly and mundane blackbirds of Haddam (a Hartford suburb). Part of the speaker's voice modulates to an urgent pitch just audible beneath the stronger tones of his ironic, biblical phrasing. It is this fainter pitch, however, that leads us to a more important irony: where disharmony most affects the speaker and where he sees the greatest distance separating subject and object, there lies the "eye" of the radial design, a pattern that always comes to signify an ultimate accord between perceiver and perceived. In the central line of this central stanza, "see," with 165 syllables falling on each side, completes the radial symmetry of the poem. If we abstract this central line from its immediate context and apply it to the speaker's action through the entire poem we have

Do you not see how the blackbird...?

Does what? Acts as a center-point, as a compositional focus? It appears that such an elliptical question would have to be rhetorical, drawing our attention to the dual role the blackbird

plays, as that which the speaker sees and as that by which he sees himself. In IX, he says that

When the blackbird flew out of sight,
It marked the edge
Of one of many circles.

It marked the edge of an objective circle, the horizon, but also marked the center of the subjective circles the eye projected into the scenes it chose to see.¹³

The third poem of the *Others* group, "The Wind Shifts" (*CP*, 83), closely sequels "Thirteen Ways," but now the epistemological emphasis changes to a psychological one. In this last member of what is apparently a triad, the speaker views the irrational as a psychic force that paradoxically impels man to project order into the external world so that ultimately "the irrational is rational" (*CP*, 406). With 32 words on each side, "irrational" emerges as the central unit of the poem's radial design. But besides this pattern, one finds other ties with "Thirteen Ways." In its thirteen verses, we have four ways of looking at the irrational, the poem's actual topic, for which the shifting wind is only a metaphor. Like the wind, the rage within undergoes continual change, exerting its power with an invisible, intractable action. And again as in the previous lyric, it is the speaker who unifies all the ways of looking at something. The title could more overtly announce "This Is the Way Wind Shifts"—the whole poem, largely through the symmetry of the radial design, becomes a fifth way of seeing the "rage for order" (*CP*, 130), this time within the poet-speaker himself.¹⁴

1919

Radial design does not appear again until 1919, but in this year five new poems, including "Life Is Motion,"¹⁵ show examples of it: "Ploughing on Sunday," "Homunculus et La Belle Etoile," "The Indigo Glass in the Grass," and "Anecdote of the Jar"—these last four occurring with ten other pieces in *Poetry*, XV (Oct.), 1-11, under the title "Pecksniffiana." Of these, "Anecdote" and "Homunculus" mark the strongest advance in Stevens' conception of radial design.¹⁶

In "Anecdote" (*CP*, 76) Stevens chooses the stanza as the

basic unit of the radial pattern, surrounding the even middle section (having syllabic verse lengths running 8, 8, 8, 8) with two uneven parts (8, 8, 9, 4 and 8, 6, 8, 8). As in "Thirteen Ways" he places radial design in a drama where the speaker acts as the protagonist and reality the antagonist. In "Anecdote," however, the rhythm of the interaction is stressed. The radial design itself encodes this rhythm that rises out of chaos (8-8-9-4) to an order (8-8-8-8-) and then falls back to chaos (8-8-6-8). The governing idea of the piece lies in the apparent contradiction of the third phase, where chaos emerges in a scene dominated by the order of the jar. As a preparation for this third part, Stevens uses the eighth line to introduce the terms of the paradox: while order has the quality of something man erects, something permanent, solid and "tall," it also has the quality of something he enters briefly, "of a port in air," of that which can only momentarily avail the mind that creates it. Whether the speaker finds order in the dissolving aspect of a blackbird or the frozen form of a jar, he sees his act of discovery as one that distorts as well as creates, one that can never yield a solid, final port of total truth. When order is projected into the external world, it exists as part of the present at one moment and part of the past in the next, becoming then a "violent order" which the poet's connoisseur of chaos calls "a disorder" (*CP*, 215). In the first section the untouched aspect of reality reveals one version of chaos; the distorted aspect in the third betrays another. At the beginning the speaker structures reality; at the end he is about to restructure it.

Along with radial design, several other empirical devices heighten this cyclic sense of the end flowing into the beginning. The last line, for example, echos the first through duplication of meter and phrase. Stevens even arranges the rhyme scheme so that it will resound the undulation of chaos-to-order-to-chaos (Fig. 3).

In Figure 3 I depart from the conventional capitalization and spacing of the actual poem in order to schematize the rhyme chains that link the three sections together. The upper half of the diagram shows how the internal sequence of "-ROUND" finds its completion in the external component "GROUND,"

I placed a jar in Tennessee,
And ROUND it was, upon a hill.
It made the slovenly wilderness
SurROUND that hill.

The wilderness rose up to it,
And sprawled aROUND, no longer wild.
The jar was ROUND upon the
And tall and of a port in

It took dominion every-
The jar was gray and
It did not give of Bird or Bush,
Like nothing else in Tennessee.

GROUND
AIR.

↓
WHERE.
BARE.

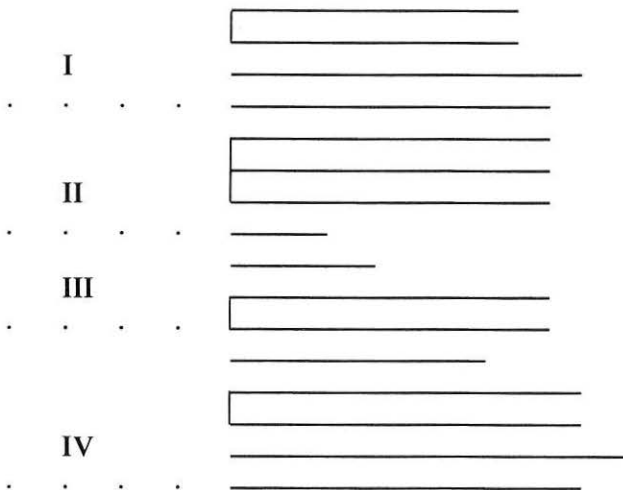
Figure 3. "Anecdote."

joining in its progress the first two stanzas. It is as if the symmetry suggested by “-ROUND” originated in the interior realm of the mind and then moved to its terminus in the external world. The empirical effect of “the jar was round upon the ground” is that of transitory concord: the eye sees the separation between internal and external components while the ear hears a single chime.¹⁷ After telling us that he achieved this rapport with reality, the speaker says that the jar was ephemeral, ubiquitous in effect, and sterile in nature. These three qualities are suggested by the same lines whose end-sounds create an external chain which, like the internal rhyme plan in the first part of the poem, serves both an empirical and semantic function, connecting the second stanza with the third and showing how closely these three qualities of externalized order imply one another. And yet sterility, the third quality, does not re-sound as the final note of “Anecdote,” for the alliteration of “BARE” with “Bird or Bush” joins—not accidentally—the barren jar with the fertile wilderness. The speaker does not unite the two in this way only to accentuate the contrast between them; he does not just drag out, in other words, the tired distinction between art and nature. He is hinting here at a profound resemblance. Since the jar, bird and bush are all progeny, they obliquely refer to their fecund sources. Whereas the jar itself is

In the sections surrounding the fifth and central stanza, a base of even lines set successively against a disarray of uneven ones translates the “young emerald, evening star” (line 2) into a typographical portrait (Fig. 4).

Figure 4 shows how Stevens “flickers” the first four sections of “Homunculus” (the speaker may be hinting at this effect in the second stanza, where he mentions that “the salty fishes / Arch in the sea like tree-branches, / Going in many directions / Up and down”). A simpler version of this device appears in the 1918 work, “In An Ancient, Solemn Manner” (*OP*, 11-12), another poem about the evening star, where Stevens works a glimmering effect into four triads by maintaining the same lengths in the first and third lines and varying the second: 11-9-3, 11-10-3, 11-7-3, 11-10-3. In “Homunculus,” the effect of a pulsating base of even lines suggests that the eye sees within *la belle étoile* a twinkling symmetry, “density” or “permanence.” The speaker’s first statement, bringing substance and light together in the “young emerald, evening star,” anticipates the last, which hardens the good light of the star into a gemmed solidity:

Figure 4.



It is a good light, then, for those
That know the ultimate Plato,
Tranquillizing with this jewel
The torments of confusion.

The speaker, however, does not deny that the jewel-star is an anthropomorphic projection. Like the blackbird and the jar, *la belle étoile* ultimately points back to its earthly creator, the homunculus being a green, miniature likeness emanating out of the light which a star emits, which an emerald reflects (note the pun of “reflecting” in line 19). The crucial fifth stanza—empirically suggesting no symmetry, no density, and semantically referring to night and silence—is the very section allowing that philosophers “can bring back thought”: they can conceive of an insubstantial, dark, and silent noumenal reality as well as perceive a phenomenal one. Paramount here is the speaker’s implied distinction between reality as sense-less concept and sensible percept. Reversing Plato’s famous allegory, he returns to the dark cave of thought to find the Absolute, the *idea* of reality. The way man conceives of an object—even within the post-Cartesian void of modern thought—determines the way he perceives it, the way he sees, hears, touches, structures, and invigorates it. Paradoxically, this total night in which the modern philosopher conceives of reality might, the speaker asserts, yield a perceived world that is

... a wanton,
Abundantly beautiful, eager,
Fecund,
From whose being by starlight, on sea-coast,
The innermost good of their seeking
Might come in the simplest of speech.

Recollecting “Homunculus” in 1936, Stevens tells Ronald Lane Latimer that the poem is based on the idea that “there is a center for every state of confusion,” a statement that now makes us think of the radial design, especially when in the same letter he says that the work “seems to have an early poem of order” (*L*, 306). In other poems, like “The Idea of Order at Key West” (*CP*, 128), his speaker states explicitly that the search

for order is an essentially religious endeavor. While "Homunculus" evinces less in this matter, it states clearly enough that a knowledge of the ultimate Plato fulfills the same basic human needs that the knowledge of God previously fulfilled. Like God, the ultimate Plato is a concept, not a percept; it is not *la belle étoile* but that which enables man to create and enjoy this jewel-star, finding thereby a release from confusion. In placing the idea of the object at the center and not the object itself, the speaker is in effect deifying ignorance; but in the later terms of Stevens' St. John, it is this "little ignorance that is everything, / The possible nest in the invisible tree" (*CP*, 437), this last metaphor betraying the same center-pursuing artist who in "Homunculus" plots the sunken image of the radial design.

We have at this point some clue to why Stevens uses the name of Dickens' character Pecksniff to entitle the group in which both "Anecdote" and "Homunculus" appear, for in each we find not only a certain preciousness but also an "hypocrisy" or irony which radial design helps to uncover. At least in these two works, the speaker wants to allow our expectation to extend as far as possible in one direction so that his total statement will, in reversing this direction, strike with a sharpened edge.

After "Pecksniffiana" radial design never advances. In fact, Stevens virtually drops it.¹⁸ That this pattern was discarded rather abruptly is as appropriate to Stevens' critique of perception as the other facts we have learned about it, the design being, after all, one more of "the evanescent symmetries / From that meticulous potter's thumb" (*CP*, 98). Any censure or vindication of radial design must take this dismissal into account with everything else. Did Stevens simply go as far as he wanted with the structure? Did the need to create "a larger poem for a larger audience" (*CP*, 465) gradually override a lesser need for what might have seemed a kind of private bravado? Or similarly, did the ideal of pure, unconceptualized poetry—pre-eminent at the venerated level of his early work—come to fade as something a little dishonest?¹⁹ For it was ideas that he loved, and it was ideas that he always wrote about. Why, he might have decided, should their terms be locked in the teleg-

raphy of something like radial design? Whatever questions one might ask, they should issue from an overview of Stevens' full career, since in no little way does his total verse represent a single poem about a single topic.

It would be easy to say that the voice in the very late poems like "A Discovery of Thought" (*OP*, 95) or "The Course of a Particular" (*OP*, 96) speaks with a firmer, deeper eloquence than what we hear in "Thirteen Ways" or "Homunculus" and that the late, exhausted Stevens, who discards virtuoso devices like radial design, calmly writes his greatest poetry. But to what extent are there two voices and two Stevenses? In "The Course of a Particular," the dry voice speaks of "an exertion that declines," referring not just to the immediate metaphor of the crying leaves but to a total effort, part of which is the silent metaphor of the radial design. What is perhaps most compelling about this life-long poem Stevens was always finishing is the way its speaker rejects what he has just created, the way he sees it, not as having been wrong, but as no longer serving a mind that will never stop. In another late poem, "To an Old Philosopher in Rome" (*CP*, 510-11), the memory of all structures that have been laid aside lends a sense of magnitude to a diminished scene, one in which the spareness of an ambered hospital room can enunciate a

Total grandeur of a total edifice,
Chosen by an inquisitor of structures
For himself.

¹During the thirties, Stevens relied increasingly upon syntactic (and so semantic) structures and apparently felt a waning enthusiasm for empirical expression. Several poems in *Ideas of Order* show the first evidence of this change. After this volume no new empirical structures appear, and a number of earlier ones are abandoned. See my unpublished dissertation (University of Michigan, 1970), "An Effect of Ease: Stanzaic Structure in the Early Poetry of Wallace Stevens," pp. 219-265 *passim*.

²To avoid ambiguity in his syllable counts, Stevens consistently observes the fewest demarcations phonetically possible. In the poems treated in this paper, *being* (the noun) is counted as one syllable, *emerald* as two, and *indecipherable* as five.

³Robert Pack notes the word count in *Wallace Stevens: An Approach to His Poetry and Thought* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1958), p. 69.

⁴The following abbreviations will refer to these works of Stevens:

CP: *The Collected Poems of Wallace Stevens* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1954)

L: *Letters of Wallace Stevens*, ed. Holly Stevens (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1966).

NA: *The Necessary Angel: Essays on Reality and the Imagination* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1951).

OP: *Opus Posthumous*, ed. Samuel French Morse (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1957).

Numerals following these letters indicate page numbers.

⁵Such an adventitious device would not be consistent with a poet who stresses the need of integrating form with substance. In a letter to Delmore Schwartz, Stevens says that "poetic form in its proper sense is a question of what appears within the poem itself" (L, 590). He expresses the same viewpoint in NA, 167-168 and OP, 226, 233.

⁶"Wallace Stevens," in *Fifteen Modern American Authors*, ed. Jackson R. Bryer (Durham, North Carolina: Duke University Press, 1969), p. 422.

⁷See Nelson Goodman, *Languages of Art* (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1968), pp. 7-8.

⁸Outside the verse itself, I can find no direct evidence that Stevens uses radial design. The history of the pattern must accordingly begin with a poem. His prose does show, however, a temperament to which radial design would be congenial. As early as his journal, kept from 1898 to 1912, his sensibility links abstraction with appreciation of the physical world. In a 1900 entry he writes that "the stars are clear and golden and geometrical and whatever else they try to be, I rather like that idea of geometrical—it's so confoundedly new!" (L, 48). And two years later, he reflects that "the sea is loveliest far in the abstract when the imagination can feed upon the idea of it" (L, 59).

That Stevens never divulges anything about radial design also stands fairly in character. It is true that in some areas he draws detailed explanations for editors and scholars but does not imply by this practice that his commentary would be helpful in every instance. Where he uses legerdemain, for example, a gloss would be self-defeating—as one actually is in a letter to Ronald Lane Latimer where Stevens discusses "The Comedian as the Letter C." He betrays something like chagrin right after he tells Latimer that the play on the sound of "c" in the poem forms the basis of its title: "If I had made that perfectly clear, susceptible readers might have read the poem with ears like elephants' listening for the play of this sound as people at a concert listen for the sounds indicating Till Eulenspiegel in Strauss' music. . . . I have the greatest dislike for explanations. As soon as people are perfectly sure of a poem they are just as likely as not to have no further interest in it; it loses whatever potency it had. Consequently, if you refer to the role of the letter C in this poem, do, please, refer to it as your own explanation and not as mine, although it is mine." (L, 294)

⁹Five Stanzas actually appear in *Poetry*, VII (Nov. 1915), 81-83. It is clear from Stevens' June 23rd letter (*L*, 183-184) that Ms. Monroe wished to add the seventh stanza as a conclusion.

¹⁰This poem is the first sketch of "Primordia," a nine-piece work appearing in *Soil*, I (Jan.), 76-78.

¹¹Cf. Ronald Sukenick, *Wallace Stevens: Musing the Obscure* (New York: New York University Press, 1967), pp. 73-74.

¹²The issue, appearing in December, shows the following order: "Valley Candle," "Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird," "The Wind Shifts," "Meditation," and "Gray Room" (pp. 25-28). The last two pieces do not manifest any direct implication with radial design (but see below, note 13) and do not appear in any subsequent publication of Stevens.

¹³In "Meditation," the fourth piece of the *Others* group, the speaker apostrophizes the imagination as "Prince," warning him against unwittingly becoming a figurehead. This same voice declares that a one-sided emphasis upon objective patterns leads to ennui:

What is it that I think of, truly?
The lines of blackberry bushes,
The design of leaves—
Neither sky nor earth
Express themselves before me...(lines 6-10).

An interesting contrast to this yawning voice is heard in the 1923 poem "Stars at Tallapoosa." Here an invigorated speaker, amidst a midnight setting where all the lines of the external world have disappeared, delights in finding the figurations of his mind appearing like "a sheaf of brilliant arrows" (*CP*, 72) among the stars.

¹⁴With respect to the type of radial design found in "The Wind Shifts," I can find no substantial reason for Stevens' choice of a number like 32. I rest a tenuous speculation, however, on what could be a theme of completion. Thus in "Life Is Motion," the central unit "stump" perfects 11 and 19 by changing these prime numbers into the composite figures, 12 and 20. The blackbird perfects 165 in a similar way. On a semantic level, the direct object of the central unit "see" becomes something like "how the blackbird [acts as a center-point]"; but empirically the four-syllable object completes 165, since 169 is the square of 13. The numbers of "The Wind Shifts" might have been chosen in order to establish still another link with "Thirteen Ways." The completed figure, 33, could work with the five ways of looking at the irrational so that in their product of 165 they can reflect the preceding poem. As extravagant and private as this kind of Platonistic number juggling may seem, it could still have been attractive, at least for a time, to an artist for whom "Narcissism itself is merely an evidence of the operation of the principle that we expect to find pleasure in resemblances" (*NA*, 80).

¹⁵It appears with "Earthy Anecdote" in *Others*, V (July), 14. From the standpoint of this paper, however, a more important placement occurs in the final, 1931 version of *Harmonium* (and consequently in *The Collected Poems*), where "Life Is Motion" precedes "The Wind Shifts."

¹⁶"Ploughing on Sunday" (*CP*, 20) and "The Indigo Glass in the Grass" (*OP*, 22) do not show much that is very new. In "Ploughing on Sunday" Stevens uses word and phrase repetition to form a frame-within-frame effect

around lines 10 and 11. A more obvious appeal to the eye occurs in "The Indigo Glass," where the verses steadily increase in length up to the central line and then taper off in the second half of the poem.

¹⁷Semantic interplay between two rhyme components is fairly common in the early Stevens. He especially likes to rhyme a word suggesting the imagination with one representing reality: "guitars"-*"catarrhs"* (CP, 10, 12), "seem"-*"ice-cream"* (CP, 64), "cock"-*"rock"* (CP, 82), "guitar"-*"are"* (often in "The Man with the Blue Guitar," CP, 196, particularly in the first sections). Similarly, the identical rhyme "hill"-*"hill"* in "Anecdote" may suggest the idea of reality without the mind, as "night"-*"night"* does in "Sonatina to Hans Christian" (CP, 109).

"Anecdote" is the first poem of Stevens to rhyme an end-word with sounds within a line in order to suggest the Cartesian model of an internal and external world. But afterwards the same scheme appears in "The Ordinary Women" (1922), "Sea Surface Full of Clouds" (1924), "Sailing after Lunch" (1935), and "Farewell to Florida" (1936). Of these works, "Sailing after Lunch" (CP, 120), in its last two stanzas, manifests the strongest instance of the device.

¹⁸Radial design does appear a few years later but with none of the earlier flourish. A frame-within-frame scheme interconnects the stanzas of a 1922 work having the prodigious title "Frogs Eat Butterflies. Snakes Eat Frogs. Hogs Eat Snakes. Men Eat Hogs" (CP, 78). Here empirical association is quite weak: the last word of the first stanza rhymes with the last in the fifth; in the second stanza the first two words and the very last appear in the same positions of the fourth section. In a 1923 poem, "The Jack-Rabbit" (CP, 50), Stevens uses "buzzard," a symbol of death, as the central unit (38 syllables on each side). As far as I can detect, radial design does not occur again in subsequent poems.

¹⁹In 1935 Stevens admits to Latimer that during the *Harmonium* period he liked "the idea of images and images alone, or images and the music of verse together... *pure poetry*, as it was called" (L, 288). But in the same letter he also states that to interpret any *Harmonium* poem as being entirely without meaning is "ridiculously wrong."

This paper owes an enormous debt to many people. I especially thank three. Scott Tillinghast was instrumental in the discovery of radial design in "Thirteen Ways." Originally I had miscounted the syllables and designated the juncture between "see" and "how" (VII) as the central unit. Tillinghast not only caught my error in the syllable count but also suggested "see" as the central unit. I extend my deepest appreciation to Ms. Elizabeth Meese and Ms. Julie Jensen. Every page owes much to their painstaking efforts with the early drafts of this paper, often in matters of content as much as style.

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