

WALLACE STEVENS' *HARMONIUM* AND THE AUDACITY OF MODERNISM:

A CLAIMS MAN IN SEARCH OF WHAT WILL SUFFICE

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ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS

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In this paper, we review the principal elements of Stevens' first collection of poetry, *Harmonium*, and an argument is presented that (i) Stevens' career as a business executive and lawyer and his life as a poet are intimately related, not separate existences; and (ii) Stevens' life as a business executive and lawyer in the suretyship business directly influenced his approach as a poet insofar as that approach reflects his experience as a "claims man" as articulated by Stevens in an article written for an insurance journal. That approach reflects a pragmatic process focused on evaluating competing claims, and parallels Stevens' attempts to "find a satisfaction" and arrive at "what will suffice." It is argued that while these concepts suggest a high degree of success (satisfaction in a more complete and sweeping sense), the methodology outlined in Stevens' insurance article ultimately devolves to settlement of claims on the best terms available, and identification of salvage value (the value of an asset that has been reduced by injury or accident).

The paper also argues that Stevens, as a Modernist poet, takes on in *Harmonium* among the most significant questions faced in human life -- life, death, God, love, meaning, the role of the imagination -- and that he ultimately fails in an insightful

and admirable way. This result follows almost directly from the audacity of Modernism: the questions taken on are too large in comparison to the creative and analytical arsenal available to apply to them. In this sense, the Modernist scope of inquiry is simply “too big not to fail.” An analogy is drawn between the narrowed sense of “what will suffice” for Stevens (comparable to “salvage value” under his claims analysis) and the end result of the Modernist inquiry.

Acknowledgments and Dedication

I would like to take this opportunity to thank a number of people who have helped me tremendously, during the course of my life in general and in the development and finalization of this paper:

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Stevens was an admirer of Goethe, so I will close this dedication by wishing that the following from the second part of *Faust* apply to all of us:

„Wer immer strebend sich bemüht, / Den können wir erlösen.“

I. Introduction: The Unified Bifurcated Poet

Wallace Stevens is widely accepted as one of the premier American poets of the 20th Century, viewed as a Romantic Modernist who employed a complex, highly verbal, and highly semantic language intertwined often with a supple blank verse style. Some of his better-known poems seem to be paradigmatic cases of the “difficulty” of Modernist poetry: obscure in parts, perhaps overly verbal, using vocabulary not known even to English professors. Kermode cites, perhaps partly in jest, partly in admiration, Stevens’ “vatic obscurities” and his tendency to incorporate philosophical concepts in his poems as fostering a critical tendency to systematize his work, and in the process, “come quite close to making him a bore.” (Kermode xvii). At his best, Stevens combines creative intellectual playfulness with a ferocious willingness to look directly into the heart of human existence and do his best to comment; the comments are ultimately not fully satisfactory (and cannot be), but they parallel the not fully satisfactory fundamental structure of the life he observes. His approach shares the essential ambitions of Modernism cut with the pragmatism of the insurance executive: we seek access to the *Ding an sich*, but instead live in a world in which “sure obliteration” is the outcome and our access to reality is through the lens of experience, memory, and emotion. Stevens also emphasizes, almost to the point of preoccupation, the role of the intersection of human imagination and human experience, seeming to argue at times that the process of the creative interaction between the imagination and the world is our only satisfactory substitute for the

vastly more systematic religious propositions once held out as explanatory of our lives but now shown to modern people to be false, empty, and sad.

While Stevens' poetry might on the basis of the above description seem intimidating, cold and formal, and verging on non-worldly, it is central to an understanding of Stevens to appreciate his career as an insurance executive and lawyer. After failing in attempts to support himself as a writer and journalist after his studies at Harvard, Stevens seems to have capitulated to his father's insistence that Stevens become engaged in the practical world of business, attended law school and was admitted to practice in New York. Stevens' failed career as a writer was indeed a significant failure; he writes of not having enough to eat and of a feeling of total failure (Richardson, Vol 1 188). His father, who was also a lawyer and businessman in Reading, then a successful small city with an industrial base, had insisted to his sons that their duty included becoming engaged in the business world and generating sufficient income to support themselves and their family. After an unsuccessful start to his legal career, Stevens found a position with an insurance company initially in New York, and then spent the remainder of his life working in Hartford for what is now The Hartford, a leading multi-line insurance company. Stevens was promoted to the executive ranks and made a prosperous, if not baronial, living in the insurance business in which he remained active until his death at age 75 from stomach cancer at St. Francis Hospital in Hartford.

Stevens is sometimes portrayed as having led a "double life" in which his business colleagues were not even aware of his writing and his poetry peers

viewed him as not fully committed to poetry or, at any rate, more committed to money. Ezra Pound, who when asked by W.C. Williams to comment on an obituary of Stevens, suggested that he had not read Stevens' work and hadn't the time to do so, and had earlier made comments to the effect that Stevens could not be a serious poet because he did poetry part-time. John Berryman was also tough on Stevens in one of the "Dream Songs," fashioning a vision of Stevens, the "funny money-man," lifting up "among the actuaries, a grandee crow" and seeming to accuse Stevens of missing something, lacking a direct connection to the world, of posing an indirect and suffocating metaphysics that lacked the ability to wound: "What was it missing, then, at the man's heart/so that he does not wound?" Berryman though shows a sort of admiration for Stevens ("He mutter spiffy..."), concluding that Stevens was "brilliant... better than us; less wide" (Berryman, "So Long? Stevens," Dream Song 219).

This thesis will attempt to strike a middle ground between Stevens the rarefied metaphysical poet of the imagination and Stevens the pragmatic problem-solving executive and lawyer. This position suggests an integrated life, not a bifurcated one. This thesis will also pursue the ambitions of the poetry in *Harmonium* as a quintessentially Modernist work, full of ambitious (even presumptuous) forays into very deep water, followed by the inevitable dissatisfaction (a form of settlement). This thesis will also use Stevens' characterization of the insurance claims process as a model for the poetic process as reflected in *Harmonium*, applying a pragmatic problem-resolution process to arrive at a synthesis of the two extremes evident in his work. Just as Stevens

views the human world as the product of the interaction between the imagination and the given, we can view his poetry as the product of his sometimes high-toned drive toward sublimity and the pragmatic, problem-solving approach of the claims man. In each case, compromises must be made and the ultimate satisfaction available is less than complete, but it must and, in Stevens' view, does suffice. As Stevens put it in an interview with the *New York Times* in 1954, "I prefer to think I'm just a man, not a poet part time, business man the rest.... I don't divide my life, just go on living."

This thesis focuses on "Sunday Morning," the most significant of the poems in *Harmonium*, as an example of Stevens' combination of a high-toned approach coupled with a pragmatist's ultimate acceptance of a less than fully satisfactory resolution. Satisfaction, for Stevens, is an analogue of the legal doctrine of accord and satisfaction, which is a form of compromise following a contractual breach. We can view Stevens and Modernism as having extremely high expectations as to both what would be a fully satisfactory life and also what would constitute a satisfactory explanation of life. For Stevens, the world is full of material breaches, and the best we can hope for is a compromise solution, a finding of what will suffice. This thesis concludes that Stevens' ambition far outstrips his reach, and, as with Modernism in general, this failure is inherent in the Modernist agenda. However, the failure is admirable, leading to insight and beauty, just as human life, which leads to sure obliteration, can be viewed as a beautiful compromise.

II. A Brief Review of Stevens' Life and Career

A complete review of Stevens' life and career is beyond the scope of this paper, and has already been capably addressed in several sources, notably Richardson's two volume biography, Sharpe's briefer, literary biography, Brazeau's biography in the form of recollections by his contemporaries and more recently, Mariani's somewhat adulatory biography. Further, Filreis and Vendler have issued a large amount of critical analysis that focuses on Stevens' life and, for example, the effect of political and social issues on Stevens' work.

Two points are worth emphasizing for purposes of this paper. First, Stevens grew up in a post-Civil War America that was isolationist, jingoistic, racist and relatively well-ordered, and lived through both World Wars and the events typically associated with the coming of Modernism: the development of atomic weapons, the breakdown of some of the typical class structure of the United States, a greater degree of racial integration, the increase in and influence of immigration and the expansion of the influence of psychology and modern physics. His family was imbued with the Puritan work ethic, and focused on the virtues of industry, sobriety, and thrift. This set of commitments and obligations carried forward as a significant influence throughout Stevens' life, and seems to have been internalized through the influence of his father, who stressed repeatedly, almost incessantly, that Stevens had an obligation to make his way in the world financially and practically, that the world is a difficult and unforgiving place.

A related theme in Stevens' life is his search for safety and privacy in the context of what seems to have been a sterile marriage. It was no great

coincidence that he ended up working for insurance companies and compromising suretyship claims. He married the prettiest girl in Reading (so much so that her image was used on the minting of the U.S. dime coin), and withdrew to an icy, highly structured life in Hartford in what seems to have been an increasingly unhappy marriage. Hartford was, in a way, a successor to his hometown: safe, secure, private, and predictable, an equivalent of the actuarial world of insurance. Stevens tended to travel forth from Hartford for a more adventurous life, to New York or to Key West, and traveled to many parts of the United States on business, but never traveled internationally (except to Cuba) despite his interest in foreign locations evident in his poems, preferring to obtain art and postcards from friends who traveled abroad. At times, Stevens could be rude and abrupt with both business colleagues and literary acquaintances, although he is generally described as a polite if somewhat formal fellow, but with a fine sense of humor -- he was a big fan of Bob Hope.

Finally, Stevens observed later in his life that he was surprised at how little he had accomplished (Lentricchia 154, 156-57): “The few things that I have already done have merely been preliminary. I cannot believe that I have done anything of any real importance.” Clearly, here Stevens was focused on poetry, not law, business, or family life, as he adds that “thinking about poetry is, with me, an affair of weekends and holidays, a matter of walking to and from the office.” He added, “If Beethoven could look back on what he accomplished and say it was a collection of crumbs compared to what he had hoped to accomplish, where should I ever find a figure of speech adequate to size up the little that I

have done compared to that which I had once hoped to do.” Stevens mediates the claim by saying that at least he had led a “happy and well-kept life” and that in some ways he was better off dealing “with a mere sense of regret” (that he did not fully apply himself to poetry) rather than “some actual devastation” (if he had fully applied himself and still not accomplished his goals): “I am in the happy position of being able to say that I don’t know what would have happened if I had more time” (Letter to Thomas McGreevy, Feb. 17, 1950 in *Letters of Wallace Stevens* 669).

III. Stevens and Modernism

If we are right in calling Stevens poetry to be paradigmatic of Modernism, we had best first try to get clear on what that term means or might mean. Certainly, almost all critics refer to Stevens as a Modernist. The typical sort of explanation tends to follow the view ascribed to Virginia Wolfe that around 1910, world events, especially technological and scientific advances, rendered the previously prevailing worldview (some form of classicism or Romanticism) inadequate or antiquated. This narrative often focuses on industrialism and advances in physics (e.g., Einstein’s theories and quantum mechanics). Certainly the movement of what had previously been agricultural people (romanticized in some literature as bucolic but thoughtful shepherds and somehow non-alienated when, of course, they were often too focused on survival to develop what we would think of as alienation) into cities where they found jobs in an increasingly manufacturing economy turned the world around by extending lifespans, increasing the standard of living and ultimately the educational level of that

cohort of society. On a conceptual level, we can hardly overstate the effect of Einstein's *Annus Mirabilis* in 1905 in which he published four papers which set forth the framework for the theory of relativity and quantum mechanics. In particular, the unknown patent clerk in the course of these four papers established the concept of a "quantum" (thus giving rise to quantum mechanics) and rejected Newtonian concepts of absolute space and time, instead putting forward what has become known as the special theory of relativity (Isaacson 90-107). Oddly enough, this occurred just as Stevens was finishing law school and trying to establish himself in New York City.

Of course, in the first decade of the 20th Century, the profound effects of the urbanization of Europe and the United States and the revolution in science, technology and communication were incipient. Further, the First World War and the Russian Revolution then added to that conceptual conflagration by the 1920s a new sense of fundamental political change in certain places and the potential for fundamental political change elsewhere that would lead to a wholesale rejection of whatever the prevailing approach had been. If "make it new" was the battle cry of the Modernist, the warrior was of necessity reacting to the "old," and building off of it. This may, in part, be the sense of Jarrell's aphorism that "Romanticism holds in solution contradictory tendencies which, isolated and exaggerated in Modernism, look startlingly opposed both to each other and to the earlier stages of romanticism" ("The End of the Line," in *Poetry and the Age*).

Despite the prevalent use of the term, and its claimed contrast to Postmodernism, by the second decade of the 20th Century, Modernism had

“become the unstable name of a period in the beginning of a previous century, too distant to serve even as a figure for the grandparent.” In discussing “Modern” poetry, Longenbach makes the point that the Modernist movement started to seem antiquated as early as the 1940s, with Jarrell asking the question “Who would have believed that modernism would have collapsed so fast?” Jarrell is credited with the first use of the term “postmodernist” in 1947 (Longenbach, “Modern Poetry” in *The Cambridge Companion to Modernism* 99-127). Perhaps with the closing of the Second World War, the coming into Western consciousness the full scope of the Holocaust, and the dropping of the atomic bomb, it should not be surprising that a movement that originated in the early 20th Century should seem spent by the 1950s, and certainly seem quite desiccated by the early 21st Century.

On the other hand, and perhaps inherent in a paper pointing out highly praiseworthy elements of Stevens’ work, the claimed “collapse” of Modernism is objectionable, given the historic importance and ongoing attraction of Modernist poetry. Longenbach quite rightly focuses on the “ambition” of the great poems of the Modernist canon -- *The Tower*, *The Waste Land*, *The Cantos* -- which, “for better and for worse,” seem as ambitious as their romantic counterparts. (Longenbach, *Modern Poetry After Modernism* 113). While Longenbach perhaps correctly views Stevens as pursuing a more circumscribed course, a broad-ranging ambition is evident in *Harmonium*, strikingly so in “Sunday Morning,” for example. There are certainly a number of poems in *Harmonium* that evidence a much smaller-scale ambition, but modesty in scope is not one of Stevens’ overall characteristics. We might observe that Stevens’ ambition seems constrained not

so much by an unwillingness to take on enormous issues (e.g., life after death, aging, love, the nature of creativity) but perhaps by his own recognition that his reach exceeded his grasp.

Longenbach ultimately sees Stevens as a sort of “diminished poet,” as “attempting to satisfy the ‘will-to-believe’ in the midst of a skeptical age” and attempting to obtain the reader’s assent to a “supreme fiction,” “something to which we assent while knowing it to be untrue” (113). Longenbach insightfully points out that Stevens exhibits a form of “cautiousness,” an “inability to believe anything for certain for too long” and that cautiousness seems to some readers to evince a sort of evasiveness. Longenbach asserts that in a changing world, Stevens was “scrupulously aware of the imperatives of an historical world that will not allow us to languish in satisfaction.” Longenbach’s expression is itself ironic -- that one could languish in “satisfaction” seems odd unless it is the compromise accord and satisfaction of the suretyship lawyer, not a fulfilling and final satisfaction. For Stevens, and for Modernism as a general concept, there is no final, fulfilling satisfaction. As Stevens put it in a later poem (“The Well Dressed Man with a Beard”): “It can never be satisfied, the mind, never.” Thus, if Stevens’ Modernist approach is of necessity a high toned approach, we can see a constant struggle in Stevens between this search for a higher form of satisfaction (some sort of ultimate satisfaction, access to the *Ding an sich*, and an understanding of what really matters if there is no God) and, in a world characterized most significantly by change, the more cautious, circumscribed pursuit of “what will suffice,” the compromise solution, the end point of a

difficult negotiation after a dissatisfying event. This is the cautious, humble Stevens, not the audacious Stevens of “green brag” (but it should be noted that even that term is used ironically in “Comedian as the Letter C” as a hypothetical failed starting point for Crispin: “if Crispin is a profitless/Philosopher, beginning with green brag....”).

IV. Wallace Stevens, Claims Man

Stevens’ essay “Surety and Fidelity Claims” (CPP 796-99) appeared in March, 1938 in an insurance periodical after Stevens had established himself as a poet and an insurance executive, with the publication of *Harmonium*, *Ideas of Order*, and *The Man With the Blue Guitar* and his obtaining a secure position in Hartford. The article is Stevens’ exposition of his function as insurance “claims man” in at least two senses in his insurance work. First, Stevens was presented with claims under the company’s suretyship policies and was required to investigate those claims and determine how to settle them. Second, Stevens was involved in the design and pricing of suretyship contracts the company entered into with third parties. In each case, Stevens was called upon to examine a set of (actual or hypothetical) facts and reach conclusions as to how much risk the company faced, and how best to satisfy competing claims in a manner that protected the company’s economic position.

The article starts from a questionable premise that “people suppose” that “there is [only] so much human interest in selling Fuller brushes or sorting postcards in a post office” and that a comparable level of interest must be applicable to “handling fidelity and surety claims.” Both points seem implausible (unless read ironically) but Stevens emphasizes that, even though the

claims man deals in large sums of money, he never actually sees a dollar; in that regard, the claims man is much like a poet, synthesizing conceptual work product from experience, trying to make sense of what may seem to be a confusing stream of events. The claims man deals in claims expressed in papers and insurance contracts also expressed in papers. According to Stevens the “major activity of a fidelity and surety claims department lies, of course, in paying claims” but the function is more complex than merely issuing payment; the claims man must evaluate the claim by addressing four functional categories: determining (a) whether there has been a loss (and its extent); (b) whether the company is liable for it; (c) whether the payment would discharge the liability; and (d) whether “you are protecting whatever is available by way of salvage.” As Stevens put it in the 1954 *New York Times* interview, “[H]ere [at work] I deal with surety claims -- claims on surety bonds. Poetry and surety claims aren't as unlikely a combination as they may seem. There's nothing perfunctory about them for each case is different.” Further, each function is performed in “papers” and subject to the review of “eyes.” Each involves a process of shifting through experience to arrive at an assessment and a course of action.

Stevens reviews a variety of what appear to be hypothetical examples of claims to illustrate his position that “there is nothing cut or dried about any of these things” and then makes what may be his key point: “you adapt yourself to each case.” Despite the fact that many of his examples seem to involve dishonesty on the part of claimants or related parties, Stevens claims that “the danger from ignorance is far greater.” Here, he seems to refer to the claims

man's ignorance of how the facts fit the surety or fidelity contract; many of his examples involve development of additional facts that bear on the outcome. This emphasis on the "danger from ignorance" and a very specific focus on facts is evident also in Stevens' poetry. The pragmatic and iterative method outlined in the article is very similar to the pragmatic and skeptical approach generally evident in Stevens' poems in *Harmonium* and later poems.

"Le Monocle de Mon Oncle" illustrates the claims man's methodology in Stevens' poetry. For example, in stanza IX of the poem, the speaker states that "I quiz all sounds, all thoughts, all everything/For the music and manner of the paladins/To make oblation fit." To make his offering "fit," the speaker quizzes "all everything" as a claims man must do in evaluating the claim. The term "oblation" suggests an offering to the gods or part of a Christian mass, and thus "fit" would suggest an offering suitable to the deity. The next line of the poem confirms this and expands the point: "Where shall I find/Bravura adequate to this great hymn?" Thus, the object of the offering may be a deity itself as well as the poem (the hymn). But the offering must "fit" the deity and hymn, which may be taken to mean "be appropriate to" but also "be sufficient" (fit the need), ultimately "what will suffice." This suggests a highly pragmatic view: both that which will be appropriate and that which will meet minimum requirements, not necessarily grander expectations.

Longenbach devotes an entire chapter to "Surety and Fidelity Claims," and focuses primarily on the bifurcation of Stevens' life between insurance executive and poet (*Wallace Stevens: The Plain Sense of Things*, 105-119),

showing Stevens solidly in the camp of creative people (e.g., Williams, Ives) who maintained professional lives not just for the income but as pragmatic ballast. After all, how else to explain Stevens' continuing in his insurance position well past retirement age when he did not seem to need the money, or turning down a professorship of poetry at Harvard to avoid retirement? There is more importance to the article than just providing evidence of the integration of Stevens' insurance and writing activities. We might take Stevens' claim in an expanded sense that he is a "claims man" in his writing as well, a writer who makes claims and then evaluates them, or puts us in a position to evaluate them. Vendler makes the point that Stevens' early and middle work tends to be a poetry emphasizing hypotheses, analyzed via phrases containing but, if or or. (Vendler 105-106). Stevens could usefully be viewed as the poet of "as if."

The second and third elements of Stevens' claims process address the establishment of the liability and the determination whether a payment would extinguish the liability. Both elements are highly fact-specific and involve significant pragmatic judgment. The former step involves a careful review of what happened in the breach, as assessment of "things as they are." Using his best judgment, the claims man must then assess whether the factual circumstances so determined are likely to give rise to a company liability. This loss determination is not "cut and dried" but requires an experienced risk assessment. The latter step is just as challenging. If there is a likely liability, the claims man must assess whether a reasonable money payment will satisfy the liability and whether he has the means available to make such a payment. This step would

amount to an acceptance of the loss on the company's books and a decision to settle up and move on, comparable to what happens in "Sunday Morning."

The final step in the process after acceptance of the loss is the pursuit of salvage, which is the residual value available to the surety provider or insurer in the event of a paid claim. Stevens expresses some skepticism about the availability of material salvage value in most claims and suggest that the claims man is better off negotiating a lower settlement payment because there often will not be any residual or salvage value. Stevens emphasizes that the "possibility of recovering salvage frequently dictates the kind of papers to take when settling" and that it is "an essential part of the claim man's job to lay the foundation for the recovery of salvage" to the fullest extent possible. (*Collected Prose and Poetry*, 796-800).

When we combine Stevens' description of the claims man's iterative and fact-specific evaluation of claims with his emphasis on identification and preservation of salvage, we may begin to see something of Stevens' pragmatic approach. Stevens is not a purely pragmatic poet; his work strongly militates against that view. However, what we might call Stevens' transcendental idealism (which standing alone might devolve into a solipsism or Berkeleyan radical idealism) is mitigated by a very pragmatic and granular view of the world. Another perhaps useful way to look at both poetry and surety claims work is that they both may begin with loss that must be fully and painstakingly evaluated, and then we must focus on what's left (salvage). We may need to modify our expectations and accept a reduced form of performance (an "accord and

satisfaction”). And it is only through detailed evaluation that we can determine the value of what’s left and the veracity of the claims being made. Further, those claims and their evaluations become functions of the “papers” involved.

Another aspect of the application to poetry of Stevens’ observations on claims work relates to the motivation of the party putting forward the claim. As to claims work itself, Stevens spent his professional career as an evaluator of claims and could be viewed as speculating as to the motivations of those filing claims by mentioning that claims seem motivated by dishonesty or ignorance, which is perhaps supposition on his part. If we are right that the same analysis can apply to Stevens as poet who both makes claims and evaluates them, then perhaps his motivations in making claims (and perhaps ours too) could include some of the same factors: dishonesty and ignorance. We might functionally restate dishonesty as an inability or unwillingness to see things as they are. This ability to see things as they are is a key skill of the claims man, as well as a key goal of in Stevens’ poetry. If Stevens’ later poem “The Blue Guitar” identifies a “rhapsody of things as they are,” and if a key aspect of the guitarist is that he “does not play things as they are” (i.e., he transmutes them into something related but different), then the starting point is and must be “things as they are,” which the claims process shows to be not a bare statement of fact but the endpoint of a process of negotiation. Wittgenstein in the *Tractatus*, which itself is a Modernist classic of unprecedented audacity, takes the position that the “world is the totality of facts, not things” (proposition 1.1) and that “what is the case – a fact – is the existence of a state of affairs” (proposition 2) (Wittgenstein 7), and Stevens’ approach as claims man can

be viewed as consistent with that approach, except that Stevens' approach as claims man emphasizes the negotiability of things as they are. Reality viewed in this respect is the result of a multi-party negotiation in which all parties are disappointed and all parties must settle to a lesser or greater extent.

V. Accord and Satisfaction

Stevens' business responsibilities would have required a thorough knowledge of contract law, which underlies the entire area of suretyship transactions, and he would have applied those concepts in sorting out the suretyship transactions he faced. Thus, Stevens was likely familiar with the contract term "accord and satisfaction" and would likely have applied that concept to claims presented to him. The basic meaning of that term is the modification of a contractual obligation to reflect a party's breach of the obligation, in which the obligee (the party receiving the bargained-for performance, i.e., the receipt of what was bargained for) accepts an alternative (and typically lesser) form of performance in lieu of what was originally promised. Thus, a breach has occurred and the wronged party receives less in the transaction than s/he had planned for and legitimately expected.

The world of legal scholarship maintains a high-level summary (a "restatement") of contracts law, which is a combination of descriptive and normative provisions. The current version of this compendium (*The Restatement*

(*Second of Contracts*)¹ discusses the concept of “Accord and Satisfaction” under the general rubric of “Discharge by Assent or Alteration” and explains the doctrine concisely as follows:

§ 281. Accord and Satisfaction

(1) An accord is a contract under which an obligee promises to accept a stated performance in satisfaction of the obligor's existing duty.

Performance of the accord discharges the original duty.

(2) Until performance of the accord, the original duty is suspended unless there is such a breach of the accord by the obligor as discharges the new duty of the obligee to accept the performance in satisfaction. If there is such a breach, the obligee may enforce either the original duty or any duty under the accord.

(3) Breach of the accord by the obligee does not discharge the original duty, but the obligor may maintain a suit for specific performance of the accord, in addition to any claim for damages for partial breach.

Stevens was clearly aware of the existence of the Restatement documents, and even referenced the concept in “Re-statement of Romance,” a lonely piece written after *Harmonium*, recapitulating romance as a relationship between two people “alone,/So much alone, so deeply by ourselves,/So far beyond the casual solitudes.” There is no reference to love or desire or even respect in the fairly bloodless restatement, just solitude and loss, paralleling the bloodless nature of the Restatement document itself, which, as applied to human situations, necessarily omits the facts of the breach and the harm caused. There is much loss evident in Stevens’ “Re-statement”:

That night is only the background of our selves,
Supremely true each to its separate self,
In the pale light that each upon the other throws.

¹See <http://www.nylitigationfirm.com/files/restat.pdf> for access to the entire *Restatement*. It should be noted that this version of the Restatement (the second edition) was issued in 1979, and thus Stevens would have dealt with the original *Restatement of Contracts*.

Stevens then flips the image from the surrounding night to the “pale light” each of the couple throws upon the other -- little light, no heat. The poem combines the earlier observation that “in perceiving this I best perceive myself” followed by a stanza break with an isolated phrase “And you,” alone and dangling. Again, this is the consolation prize -- a striking breach followed by salvaging something of value from the breach: a loss of love but perhaps a gaining of self-knowledge in solitude.

Stevens’ use of legal terms in his poetry in general is surprisingly minimal. For example, Stevens used the word “justice” in his poetry only twice, and both times in what might be viewed as a derogatory sense.² Similarly, Stevens rarely used the term “accord” in his poems, but, when used, the term typically meant an initial agreement, not a modification (as in “accord and satisfaction”).

Stevens uses the term “satisfaction” three times in his poems. The key reference to the idea of accord and satisfaction is in “Of Modern Poetry,” which postdates *Harmonium*, but contains concepts common to his poetry, and posits a “poetry of the mind” in which the poet (and we, the “audience”) are “in the act of finding what will suffice.” The process of “finding” what will suffice parallels the poem’s later statement that “it must be the finding of a satisfaction.” In an everyday sense, a satisfaction may be nothing more than some pleasant aspect of life, not necessarily a grand or profound understanding. In effect, “what will suffice” is ultimately just that, “a satisfaction,” and Stevens takes here his pragmatic turn to express high-level concepts in natural terms (as at the close of

²All references to Stevens’ use of words are generated from the Online Concordance to Wallace Stevens’ Poetry, at <http://www.wallacestevens.com/concordance/WSdb.cgi>. As a result, the author of this paper has not individually searched these queries in Stevens’ texts.

“Sunday Morning”): a satisfaction may be “a man skating, a woman dancing, a woman/Combing.” The “finding” of what will suffice or of a satisfaction may be accidental, as in the finding of a newspaper in the park, or the casual observation of skating, dancing or combing. The other extreme in the sense of a “finding” is a formal conclusion by a decision-maker (such as a court or arbitrator) of a particular result, such as, for example, that an accord and satisfaction has occurred. In “Sunday Morning” and at the close of “Of Modern Poetry,” after conceptual build-up, we receive fairly sparse satisfaction, perhaps rather like what Elizabeth Park (in Hartford) had to offer to Stevens in the winter. This let-down dovetails with the concept of salvage value: there has been a material breach in the contract, and we have little choice but to accept a lesser (even debased) performance under the contract, and acceptance of the lesser performance extinguishes the performing party’s original obligation. We may be left with salvage value and little else; this is perhaps the minimal sense of “what will suffice.”

VI. “Sunday Morning”: A Journey from Complacency to an Unsatisfying Freedom

By many accounts, “Sunday Morning” is among the greatest of Stevens’ poems and, at the same time, illustrates a sort of solipsism and even a sort of hedonistic nihilism. Many critics take the poem to be an expression of Stevens’ “humanism” (or, as Stevens put it, “paganism”) in the face of a universe in which God (and the gods) are absent, or even dead (Winters, 431). “Sunday Morning” presents us with a female protagonist, an authoritative speaker and at least one

unidentified voice (in Stanza VIII). The geographic locus of the poem is unspecified. If “Sunday Morning” especially in the early stanzas evokes a form of intimate, delicate luxury with its references to the “complacencies” of the peignoir, “late coffee and oranges” and the “green freedom” of a (real or depicted) cockatoo on an antique or oriental rug, near a sunny chair, it soon devolves into an almost depressive dream state. While those luxury items “dissipate/The holy hush of ancient sacrifice” apparently briefly, the protagonist dreams “a little” and “feels the dark encroachment of that old catastrophe.” We might take this “old catastrophe” to be the crucifixion of Christ but it raises a tension between the view of that event as the necessary step to a saving resurrection (and, thus, not a catastrophe at all) and the thoroughgoing doubt raised through the New Testament of Christ’s divinity. The poem may give away immediately its lack of belief by reducing Christ’s ordeal to being merely a loss only with no redemption. Perhaps the old catastrophe is not (just) Christ’s death but human mortality as a general concept, or the Fall, and perhaps the reference is to a life without apparent meaning or action -- complacent, luxurious, too rarefied by half. It is striking that the encroachment of the “old catastrophe” occurs following the woman’s brief sleep. She briefly is able to shield herself from the “holy hush of ancient sacrifice” via her immediate surroundings, but as soon as she falls asleep, the underlying uncertainty and questions recur. Note also here the play on the holy day (Sunday) versus the rather empty and complacent sun-day spent in dozing luxury.

The first stanza focuses our attention on water. As the woman feels the encroachment of the issues raised in the poem, “a calm darkens among the water lights” and her observation of the luxurious items around her (“pungent oranges” and “bright, green wings”) seems to her like a procession of the dead, which the poem describes as “winding across wide water, without sound” and goes further to compare the day to “wide water, without sound.” The poem then puts forward an image of the sleeping woman’s dreaming of walking on water (“stilled for the passage of her dreaming feet/Over the seas....”) to Palestine. The use of the water image is significant suggesting the depth of the issue or of the speaker, and the silence conveys the seriousness of the issue and the absence of an external divine voice. The image clearly also evokes the Bible. Stevens often uses water images to refer to meaning or the conveying of meaning. The “fops of fancy” in “Monocle” “spontaneously water their gritty soils” and, later, water is an agent of death as the rotting winter rains will wash “the two of us” into rinds. Perhaps Stevens’ more significant use of a water image is in the post-*Harmonium* “The Idea of Order at Key West” in which the woman singer seems to gain insight from the “veritable ocean” and the “ever-hooded, tragic-gestured sea.” Ultimately, the sea is “portioned out” by the lights in the fishing boat. There is a sort of mute profundity about these images, and deep water seems an image for both life and ultimately death.

The second stanza tries to right the woman’s reactions by focusing her on the beauty and pleasures of this world (e.g., “comforts of the sun,” “pungent fruit,” “bright, green wings” and ultimately “any balm or beauty of the earth”).

Here we see Stevens' poetry of "finding what will suffice" and of "the finding of a satisfaction" in the details of the world, a process of recognition of a loss followed by a settlement. The things of the world from which she is to derive this satisfaction are "to be cherished like the thought of heaven." Note the poem's distancing at this key point: her substitution of the balms and beauty of the material world (such as they are) for the divine is not even the substitution of those things for heaven but for the "thought of heaven," just as Stevens' later poem is not about Key West directly, or even about order at Key West, but about the idea of order at Key West. There is not equivalent value in the transaction, but only a unilateral settlement or salvage value. The poem provides to her a hollow directional aphorism: "Divinity must live within herself." This aphorism reflects a view that is now fairly widely accepted, but in the 1920s was more radical. Perhaps the point is that what little divinity there is in the world is "within" us (cf., "the kingdom of God is within you") and not found in traditional Christian theology or any external dogma. We can see here the encroaching solipsistic risk: if each human is divine on his/her own terms, divinity becomes idiotic. The poem then provides a laundry list of feelings: "passions" of rain, "moods" in falling snow, "grievings" in loneliness, "unsubdued elations" when the forest blooms, "gusty emotions" on wet roads on autumn nights; ultimately "all pleasures and all pains, remembering/The bough of summer and the winter branch" constitute "the measures destined for her soul." One can see here the risk Stevens runs of falling into a sort of romantic solipsism, in which God and eternity have been swapped out for a litany of "feelings" experienced in a natural

world that are intended to suffice. In what sense can they be said to be the proper “measures” of her soul? They could be the means by which her soul should be measured (evaluated), or simply the means by which her soul operates in the world (i.e., the steps taken in the world) or perhaps the measures apportioned to her as a form of settlement value. The measures described here are not simply her feelings, but feelings coupled with concepts of youth and age as mediated through the seasons, thus derived from growth, change, memory, and context, presaging the later point in the poem that death (change) is the mother of beauty.

The third stanza sounds one of the two Yeatsian themes in the poem, that of the commingling of the blood (and talents) of the gods with those of mortals. The immediate comparison is between the Jove of Stevens’ stanza III and the Zeus of Yeats’ “Leda and the Swan.” Both gods seem uninterested in human affairs, with Zeus “indifferent” after his climax and Jove, possessed of a “mythy mind,” moving among humans as a preoccupied, “muttering” lord would walk among his deer (“hinds,” presaging the deer on the mountains at the end of the poem). In each case, the god seems to bring an imaginative and creative strength to humanity; here, Jove’s “mythy” mind should be viewed as itself the subject of myth, the result of myth and as generative of further myth among human recounting the myth. In each poem, somehow the commingling of godly and human blood leads to significant consequences, and perhaps an increase in human mental capacity that makes us somewhat god-like and, in Stevens’ version, gives us a self-awareness (“the very hinds discerned it, in a star....”) And the star reference in Stevens’ poem is also significant. The first gloss with the reference

to “virginal” blood would seem to be the star over Nazareth in the New Testament, and thus conflating the Jovian god with Christian theology but perhaps this star can simply serve as an image of insight and direction. Yeats leaves us with one of his rhetorical questions at the end of “Leda,” “Did she put on his knowledge with his power?” while Stevens plays out the fate of the enhanced human blood by asking three related questions: (a) “shall our blood fail?”; or (b) “shall it come to be the blood of paradise?” and (c) “shall the earth seem all of paradise that we shall know?” Stevens seems optimistic about this potential outcome, that the sky will be “friendlier” then, when our blood becomes the blood of paradise, in the sense of finding divinity within ourselves, while still a part of labor and pain (life on earth), the sky will be next in glory to “enduring love,” and not just a “dividing and indifferent blue.” Note the parallel to Zeus’ indifference in the Yeats poem. Stevens’ better world would somehow be humanized and not indifferent or populated with gods muttering among hinds.

The next three stanzas show the female protagonist troubling the apparent conclusions reached through the first three stanzas, and in the process engaging in a sort of negotiation similar to Stevens’ claims process. The natural world can provide contentment when things are easy, the future extends almost limitlessly before us in youth, and the birds fly over warm fields, but “when the birds are gone, and their warm fields/Return no more, where, then, is paradise?” We should take the question literally (“return no more”) and not just view the issue as relating to the changing of seasons but as relating to death as well. In stanza IV, Stevens claims that no metaphysical or spiritual locus “has endured/As

April's green endures; or will endure." But April's green endures only in a cyclical or periodic way, and Stevens then focuses on the woman's "remembrance of awakened birds,/Or her desire for June and evening, tipped/By the consummation of the swallow's wings." This phrase presages the ending of the poem. Here, the diminished compensation offered becomes more complex and nuanced. The natural world in itself, while initially satisfying, will not ultimately suffice; the redemptive features are the natural world overlaid by human memory and desire informed by experience; the interplay between creative human faculties and experience is key. This more nuanced view is the beginning of an articulation of what will suffice in a more meaningful, less reductionist way.

In stanza V, the female character, now the speaker, continues to trouble the idea of contentment; she needs something more, "some imperishable bliss." The authoritative speaker responds in a classic Stevens' aphorism: "Death is the mother of beauty; hence from her,/Alone, shall come the fulfillment to our dreams/And desires." The statement is challenging. If the female questioner seeks imperishable bliss with an eternal consciousness, she is asking too much, and she would of necessity be disappointed by the proffered response. Death, in a sense, does fulfill (end) all dreams and desires. The authoritative speaker seems to shove aside the obvious negatives to the approach suggested, by saying that death "strews the leaves of sure obliteration in our path," but in the process enables or facilitates sex and life: "The maidens taste/And stray impassioned in the littering leaves. This stanza's focus on ripening and then decaying fruit parallels stanza VIII of "Monocle" but here seems even sadder and increasingly depressive. The

consolations set against sure obliteration seem inadequate -- triumph ringing its “brassy” and temporary phrase, or “love/Whispered a little out of tenderness.”

Stanza VI seems to present a thought experiment as a way of proving that death is the mother of beauty. Consider, the stanza suggests, an immortal existence in which nothing dies and there is no change. The ripe fruit would never fall, the boughs would hang heavy with fruit on a permanent basis. In a sense, the process would be frozen and pointless, so why commence life without its fulfillment in death? The inhabitants of such an infinite life would seem to have the same hollow pastimes as mortals, playing “our insipid lutes,” but without benefit of death, which, through its boundaries, provides meaning. The stanza’s ending phrase repeating that “death is the mother of beauty, mystical” but further that “within her bosom” “we devise our earthly mothers waiting, sleeplessly” is obscure. The verb “devise” suggests creation of an object (e.g., devising a policy or a system), with the resulting noun being a “device.” There is also a legal sense of the verb as conveying property via a will. Perhaps Stevens intended the now obsolete sense of the verb as “imagining” or conceiving.” In any case, the sense here is of an intentional connection to our mothers, even suggesting an ongoing childhood. This result is not entirely intuitive, and seems to fly in the face of traditional Christian theology which suggests that eternity would be somehow a place of growth and increasing perfection.

Stanza VII provides the second Yeatsian theme, that of “supple and turbulent” men chanting “in orgy” on a summer morning³. Their chant is a “chant

³When “Sunday Morning” was first published in *Poetry*, Stevens’ capitulated to Harriet Monroe’s request that the poem conclude with this stanza, but the poem was revised to its intended, more compelling form when published in *Harmonium*.

of paradise/Out of their blood” relating to their experience of nature (trees and echoing hills). The ritual dance and chant in the sun enables the men to “know well the heavenly fellowship/Of men that perish and of summer morn.” These hardy humans would remind the reader of Yeats’ ongoing fondness for muscular fellows engaged in outdoors activity, hunting, riding, and interacting with dogs. It is challenging to take the men of stanza VII seriously as even symbols of some sort of Nietzschean brotherhood of *Übermenschen* ; they seem ridiculous with their dewy feet and naked “boisterous devotion” to the sun. We surely are not meant to imagine that this is Stevens’ answer to the woman’s request for imperishable bliss. Perhaps this stanza is now amounts to nothing more than a perhaps unintended ironic tweaking of the authoritative voice’s too self-confident position. If the initial portion of the poem shows an empty Sunday in a bourgeois life, this daisy chain of mountain men dancing in the sun is celebrating another form (another empty form, it seems) of sun-day.

Stanza VIII is as close as we will get to an attempt to provide a real answer to the woman’s request for some endless paradise. The proposed answer is announced by an unidentified voice which seems to be distinct from the authoritative voice (who has told us that death is the mother of beauty) since this pronouncement is quoted, not embedded in the text. The pronouncement seems flatly to deny the divinity of Christ but offers no coherent substitute meaning. There is a suggestion of intriguing alternative points in essentially a massive accord and satisfaction. It is only here, having denied Christ, that the poem itself offers some explanatory narrative. We live in an “old chaos of the sun” or “old

dependency of day and night” but there are positive traits more compelling than the pallid positives of stanza V. We live in “island solitude” (a planet spun off from the sun) and are independent; we are “unsponsored” and “free.” The next line is significant but hard to parse: we are “free, of that wide water....” The comma is important there, and it seems the poet is making two distinct claims: we are indeed free, and “of that wide water,” leading us back to stanza I and its references to wide water. The water image is of ongoing significance to Stevens, and this somehow conveys that we are “of” a form of meaning (like the portals in “Anecdote” or “Key West”). There is an echo of Genesis in the reference to water at the origin of life (“And the spirit of God moved upon the face of the waters.” Genesis 1:2.) Note also the contrast between the silent wide water, the empty (silent) sepulcher and the pronouncing human voice: mirroring “Key West,” humans are called upon to impose their own order and meaning on an otherwise silent and empty universe.

We next see a classic Stevens move in the turn from challenging, at times obscure, concepts back to a pragmatic, natural and experiential rendering of ideas, using the technique of the claims man -- deer walk upon our mountains, quail seem to be talking about us in their cries, sweet berries on their own ripen in the wilderness, foreshadowing the small satisfactions mentioned in “OF Modern Poetry.” This seems to be a form of paradise. Note here that Anglo-Saxon words predominate and the abstract Latin words become less important. We live in a beautiful, free if finite world. The last lines of the poem emphasize freedom and beauty in the images of birds gliding downward into the evening’s darkness on

their “extended wings.” Note the dramatic contrast between what seem to be shallow sun-days in the poem and the darkness at its end, which represents death but also a profound sense of inarticulated meaning. The “extended wings” of the birds suggest full exposure to living, in sharp contrast to the protected interior, complacent life of stanza I.

None of this is fully satisfactory as a response to the woman’s search for eternal principles, and the poem seems to come full circle to the dissatisfaction of its opening. The poem denies us an individual eternal life and resulting faith-based meaning, instead offering sure obliteration in an almost random setting, spun off from the sun, free and unsponsored, in which death is the source of meaning. The continuity offered is through the change process itself, in which nature continues life, and life generates beauty. We can see premonitions of Sartre’s ontological freedom initially put forward in *Being and Nothingness* (written in the early 1940s, at least 20 years after “Sunday Morning”) in which a limited sense of freedom is offered: a prisoner is free because s/he controls his/her personal reaction to the imprisonment. Thus, humans are conscious being existing in nature and, as a result, are free agents in a beautiful, but finite and limited, and ongoing natural world.

If this last stanza of the poem seems not satisfactory, we must at least appreciate the immense size and scale of the task Stevens has taken on. The paradigmatic issues of Modernism are front and center: God, meaning, death, love, nature, human expectations, and loss. If indeed the gods are dead, there is no divinity, and no immortal soul, Stevens has at least made a significant move

from the complacent world of pungent sensory pleasures in the bourgeois modern West in the first stanza of the poem to a more austere world of independence and radical freedom expressed in a natural environment in the final stanza, in which creatures are “spontaneous” and “casual.” The link between these two worlds is the “wide water” the woman in effect walks over to pursue her unquiet issues and recurs in the last stanza. In that respect, the woman is not complacent after all. Perhaps this almost relentless pursuit of the issue is the measure (intentional activity) destined for her soul, perhaps is the measure of the human soul: an unsatisfied intelligence ranging over broad significant issues (“wide water”). This approach presages the iterative creative process employed by the woman singer in “Key West.” We can usefully compare language from the first and last stanzas of “Sunday Morning” to see the development of Stevens’ ideas. The complacent world is one of objects and pleasures (peignoirs, oranges, cockatoos etc.) while the revealed world is one of island solitude, unsponsored and free, in which nature provides meaning to the humans who inhabit it temporarily, with humans’ understanding and reaction to that world all the while mediated by a restless human intelligence. There is a salvage value here, but, much as with the claims man, the transaction is not voluntary, and it remains to the claimant and the claims man to determine whether this compromise suffices, how much satisfaction is obtained, and whether any plausible remedy is available that would be more satisfactory.

VII. My Uncle’s Monocle, A Comedian and a Clavier as Glosses on “Sunday Morning”

Stevens' long poem "Le Monocle de mon Oncle" is one of the principal poems in *Harmonium*, and starts from a surprising and confusing vantage point, looking at the uncle who wears a monocle or at the world through the uncle's monocle. We might see the relationship between the speaker and the uncle as somehow avuncular, suggesting a kindly and even forgiving view of the subject matter, which, as it turns out, is not precisely the case. Vendler views the poem as a "death-in-life"—summed up in the death of love, of a young man turning old, turning himself into "a monocled avuncular sage" (*On Extended Wings* 58).

It is difficult not to view the poem as containing, as Kermode puts it, "an element of the exquisite's self-parody" (43). The poem is written in a sort of jaunty blank verse, with some rhyme, that almost sounds like a parody at times (see, for example, stanza. X):

The fops of fancy in their poems leave
Memorabilia of the mystic spouts
Spontaneously watering their gritty soil.

Our speaker, who must be the nephew, seems to disclaim being one of the "fops of fancy" but instead claims worker bee status (like a claims man): "I am a yeoman, as such fellows go." But the fops seem to serve a useful purpose by allowing the "mystic spouts" they access to water their gritty soil and thus perform a generative function that may produce fruit or new growth. The "spouts" seem akin to Stevens' portals, which turn up in *Harmonium* in, for example, "Peter Quince at the Clavier," in which the speaker describes beauty as "the fitful tracing of a portal," and the portal returns in the later Stevens as perhaps a connection to a different world, as in "The Idea of Order at Key West":

The maker's rage to order words of the sea,
 Words of the fragrant portals, dimly-starred,
 And of ourselves and of our origins,
 In ghostlier demarcations, keener sounds.

"Monocle" takes on the issue of aging and death. Kermode calls this a "great and obscure poem" (45), "the great poem of growing old, and of the sense of expiring sense" (41). A middle stanza (stanza VI) addresses "men at forty" who in painting lakes, find that the "ephemeral blues must merge for them in one/The basic slate, the universal hue." The bright colors used to present reality in youth are ephemeral, to be replaced mandatorily by one basic gray. The meditation also extends to the scope of love and its ally, sex. The poem states its core claim in stanza VIII: though it may be the view of a "dull scholar," our speaker beholds in love a "trivial trope" that reveals a "way of truth." Love "comes, it blooms, it bears its fruit and it dies." That is the key claim put bluntly: life is change, we perform our various functions and age out. Here lies the settlement opportunity; the trick to relating this poem to "Sunday Morning" is to try to see the beauty in the aphorism. According to "Monocle," at age forty, "our bloom is gone" and we are just the "fruit" of love. The stanza then foreshadows aging and death: "we" (the lovers but also all humans) are "two golden gourds distended on our vines," two once beautiful creatures of nature, now "splashed with frost/Distorted by hale fatness, turned grotesque." To revert to "Sunday Morning," if death is the mother of beauty, we can better see in "Monocle" the process of growth, change and ultimate decay that informs this process in which ultimately death awaits: "The laughing sky will see the two of us/Washed into

rinds by rotting winter rains.” Stanza IV had already made this connection between ripening fruit (“this luscious and impeccable fruit of life”), its decay (“Fall, it appears, of its own weight to earth”) and sex (Eve, offering “sweet” “acid juice”). Stanza IV almost bludgeons us with the link between ripening fruit and death: fruit, “like skulls, comes rotting back to ground.” Kermode even hears a little of the gravedigger scene from *Hamlet* (Kermode 44). Thus, there is clearcut and unavoidable loss presented here, with little clear redeeming settlement value, and the nephew is challenged to negotiate any positive settlement.

If the trivial trope is the notion that we, like fruit, come into ripeness, age and die, and fall to the ground, like skulls, or as skulls, is there a nontrivial trope? Perhaps the speaker is disparaging his own claim and thus the trivial trope is nontrivial. Here we see the “difficult argument” of the poem (Kermode 43). Stanza VII offers a “parable, in sense” that amounts to: “The honey of heaven may or may not come/But that of earth both comes and goes at once.” Life is spontaneous and its beauty is transitory, but there is beauty available on earth. The contrast between the dainty angels on mules and the guffawing, beer guzzling centurions immediately following in this stanza may illustrate that even if heavenly truth is presented to us, we are too busy drunkenly guffawing to recognize the truth even if presented. This criticism of the limited satisfactions of earthly life is repeated in stanza XI (“if sex were all”), and the speaker directs us to note the “unconscionable treachery of fate,” which is unconscionable perhaps because fate has and can have no conscience or because we lack the

consciousness to understand it. This treachery makes us emote in sex and life “without regard to that first, foremost law.” And what law is that? The trivial trope? The parable? Something else?

Kermode’s apparent admiration for the poem is balanced by Winters’ less wholly positive take when he states that “the poem is often obscure, and, perhaps because one cannot readily follow it, appears far less a unit” than “Sunday Morning.” (Winters 457). Winters does (appropriately) acknowledge the “extraordinary subtlety with which Stevens perceives the impingement of death” (456) and that the poem “displays a combination of bitterness, irony, and imperturbable elegance not unworthy of Ben Jonson” (457). Vendler fairly assesses “Monocle” when she views it as “more stylistically impure than the serener” “Sunday Morning” but “indispensable” as the “clue” to the latter poem. Vendler values the poem as coming “nearer to encompassing, however awkwardly, the whole of Stevens” (*On Extended Wings* 58).

Harmonium presents two additional poems that provide useful comments on the key proposition stated in “Sunday Morning,” that death is the mother of beauty. The longer of these (“The Comedian as the Letter C”) seems to be almost a mid-life self-evaluation by Stevens of his enterprise as a poet and a human in the world. The poem’s overall effect is an almost painful self-criticism and resignation to a bland and tedious everyday life. Vendler makes the very cogent point that *Harmonium* represents Stevens’ “resolute attempts to make himself into a ribald poet of boisterous devotion to the gaudy, the gusty, and the burly” which attempts she views as “a direct consequence of a depressing irony in respect to the

self he was born with and an equally depressing delusion about the extent to which that self could be changed” (*On Extended Wings* 52). Put another way, Stevens’ failure in New York as a writer and his acquiescence in his father’s ongoing insistence, strongly internalized by Stevens, that he become a conventionally successful businessman overhangs the poem.

Vendler wants to portray “Comedian” as a reaction to “Sunday Morning,” a recognition that the gods have been “dispelled in mid-air and dissolve like clouds” with no apparent replacement: “It is simply that they came to nothing.” (*On Extended Wings* 55, quoting Stevens). Vendler views this effort in “Comedian” as reflecting a “flight from the mournfulness” of “Sunday Morning” via a form of “heavy irony.” Vendler again correctly notes that Stevens (especially the *Harmonium* Stevens) “has no Nietzschean brio” with the result that his various claims tend to be “wistfully and even disbelievingly made” and reflect self-pity, anachronistic primitivism, or plain elegy.

Despite its imposing length, “Comedian” does not advance the ball much beyond “Sunday Morning” and “Monocle.” Continuing the trope of the ripening of fruit as a useful representation of the life journey and the passage of time, “Comedian” (at Stanza V) nicely points out “the world endowed, the plum hazily and beautifully bloomed by its poems” (Vendler 53):

The plum survives its poems. It may hang
In the sunshine placidly, colored by ground
Obliquities and mazily dewed and mauved
In bloom.

At the end of the process, though, in Vendler's view, "Comedian" represents Stevens' then worldview collapsing on itself, as "a tale of false attempts and real regrets" and asserts "an ironic benignity it cannot render without revulsion, refusing to acknowledge an asceticism it cannot hide." (*On Extended Wings* 54). Crispin travels a great deal but does little more than wash up on shore as a salaryman with his presumption replaced by a forced humility, a bit like the human who realizes that there is no god, and, as a form of solace, we are stuck with deer and various other animals and birds near the mountains. Crispin's form of settlement seems to be the cold comfort of a family life that is "clipped," ending in a cycle of "proving that what is proves is nothing" and asking dejectedly at the end of Stanza VI "what can all tis matter since/The relation comes, benignly, to its end?"

"Peter Quince" is a lesser effort written at about the same time as "Sunday Morning," and reinforces Stevens' focus on disappointment and settlement. Peter Quince, of course, is the playwright/actor in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. As with many Stevens' poems, the perspective of the poem shifts quite quickly from being that of Quince's expression of desire for "you" (apparently, a woman, possessing "blue-shadowed silk") to a reflection on music, and a reflection of the elders' desires for Susanna in the biblical story contained in the Book of Daniel. The last stanza is a tie-in to "Sunday Morning," "Monocle" and "Comedian" due to its focus on beauty and its nature. The poem (at Stanza IV) states that "beauty is momentary in the mind" and is a "fitful tracing of a portal" (recalling the portals of "Monocle" and "Key West") but that "in the flesh it is immortal." But

how can that be, given the lessons we been told about the ripening of gourds and their ultimate dropping? We are told that “the body dies; the body’s beauty lives” as do green gardens and maidens. We are back at the woman’s question in stanza IV of “Sunday Morning” -- when the birds and the warm fields are gone, “where then is paradise?” There, we are to be comforted to some extent by the fact that “April’s green endures; or will endure” (i.e., that spring recurs, even after we are dead) and that the woman has a “remembrance of awakened birds” or has an ongoing desire “for June and evening, tipped/By the consummation of the swallow’s wings.” This beauty is ultimately a mental event, preserved and enhanced by memory and expectation. Bloom sees the relationship as follows:

Beauty is immortal in the flesh because it provokes memory, that other mode of thought in poetry, or the only rival to rhetorical substitution, which thrusts or defends against memory. Memory in turn provokes desire, activating the will. The immortality of ‘the body’s beauty’ reduces thus to the persistence of the will, if only the will-to-representation. (*Poems of Our Climate* 36-37).

The process of change and the residual value after such change is explored in this poem -- of course, gardens, spring, birds, and the like die and their physical beauty is destined for sure obliteration but the ideas expressed via the imagination through poetry may be immortal, or may correspond to some immortal ideas accessible through an enhanced experience of the exercise of the imagination (a “tracing of a portal”).

VIII. When is a Jar Not Just a Jar, and Other Anecdotes: Further Limited Satisfactions

“Anecdote of the Jar” is another of the very well-known poems in *Harmonium* and seems to reflect a much simpler and more direct approach than the longer poems in that collection, such as “Monocle” or “Sunday Morning.” Unlike many of Stevens’ poems, “Anecdote” seems to proceed straightforwardly from the speaker’s point of view commencing with a clearcut action verb and an object (“I placed a jar in Tennessee.”). The vocabulary is also simple, and uses shorter words than the longer poems mentioned. The poem relates the action of the speaker (identified right away as an “I”) in placing this jar on a hill in Tennessee, surrounded by a “slovenly wilderness.” The placing of the jar on the top of the hill seems to organize the wilderness, causing it to rise up to the jar, and sprawl around, rendering it “no longer wild.” The organizing principle of the jar on the hill “took dominion everywhere.” The jar is presented as a human artifact, “gray and bare” and “round,” and, unlike the wilderness of Tennessee, the jar “did not give of bird or bush,/Like nothing else in Tennessee.” The jar takes (“takes dominion”) and the wilderness “gives.”

On a facile reading of “Anecdote,” the placement of the jar by the speaker in the wilderness would appear to be a symbol for the organizing effect of human reason, imagination, and industry. Thus, the central claim could be that human reason and imagination enable humans to prevail over the wilderness and disorder of nature. Humans as artificers allow us to tame nature and impose order on wildness and randomness. There is even the feel of a Biblical prophet ascending a mountain to receive truth and impose order upon idolatry. Humans, of course, cannot fully overcome nature, evident by the fact that wild Tennessee seems to

continue to surround this hill, even after the jar's imposition of "discipline," unaffected by the jar beyond its local effect. The wilderness remains somehow "other," and may no longer be slovenly. Even that point is arguable; the wilderness likely remains slovenly outside the immediate area of effect of the jar in that it rises up to the hill and sprawls around it. But humans seem in control, at least to the extent of the area of the jar's influence.

Thus, we could view the poem as an allegory, in which the jar, or its production, stands for art or imagination (Weston 26). This is too easy, though, and Winters rightly takes on two early critics who interpret the poem in this straightforward manner (436). Winters correctly points out that the wilderness seems slovenly only after the imposition of the jar's "discipline": even though no longer wild, the wilderness "sprawled around" the hill and seems not orderly. Winters takes this as a criticism of the effect of human reason. The resulting non-wild or partially tamed wilderness is, according to Winters, "vulgar and sterile" and "the semblance of a deserted picnic ground" (437). Winters argues that the sterility is reflected in the last three lines: the jar was "gray and bare" and "did not give of bird or bush,/Line nothing else in Tennessee." Winters takes this poem to be "primarily an expression of the corrupting effect of the intellect upon natural beauty, and hence a purely romantic performance" overlaid "with disillusionment and a measure of disgust." There is no "neo-humanism" here but a sort of formal and distant dominance.

While there is force to Winters' points, his analysis omits some important considerations. A key omission is the fairly cryptic line in the poem that the jar is

“round upon the ground/And tall and of a port in air.” On its face, the line seems to add little to the discussion in the poem. Perhaps it tells us that the jar is well made, symmetrical and level. But what are we to make of the phrase “of a port in air”? We pointed out the odd-seeming reference in Stanza IX of “Monocle” of the “mystic spouts” somehow accessed by the “fops of fancy.” Both concepts suggest some sort of connection from one domain or area to another, through which or via which something, perhaps liquid, is conveyed. In “Monocle,” what is conveyed is a kind of water that waters gritty soil and thus is a generative substance. What should we take it to mean that the jar is “of a port in the air”? This same approach is evident in sixth stanza of “Key West,” and suggests a connection to the heavens or a realm of creativity. Perhaps it could be read that the jar is effectively such a portal, suggesting more than disillusionment upon a hill in Tennessee. In “Key West,” the speaker discusses the ordering power of lights from fishing boats on a dock in a seaside town overlooking the sea. The speaker asks, perhaps rhetorically, “why the glassy lights... mastered the night and portioned out the sea.” Here the lights fixed “emblazoned zones and fiery poles/Arranging, deepening, enchanting night.” Again, as in “Anecdote,” a human artifact orders nature but, again, only up to a point. The speaker remarks that the human “rage for order” is “blessed” and that the human “maker” has a rage to order “words of the sea.” The maker also has a rage to order “words of the fragrant portals, dimly starred” and words “of ourselves and of our origins, in ghostlier demarcations, keener sounds.” Note, however, the similarity of “Anecdote’s” “of a port in air” to “Key West’s” “of the fragrant portals, dimly

starred” and even to “Monocle’s” “mystic spouts.” In “Key West,” there is a suggestion of a profundity of the material being conveyed, relating to “ourselves” and “our origins” and a suggestion that those origins are “in ghostlier demarcations, keener sounds” or perhaps that the maker’s rage to order would transpose those words into “ghostlier demarcations” and “keener sounds.” We might suppose that the demarcation concept relates back to the lights “portioning out the sea” and the “keener sounds” might relate to the singing discussed earlier in the poem. The portal concept provides an analogy to assist in seeing how “what will suffice” may be something more than a unilateral, unfulfilling settlement. Access to this realm of keener sounds via the imagination may enable the disappointed party in the contractual breach to attain a more acceptable settlement of claims via access to a realm of imagination, not just to the process of trading off negotiation points.

A number of critics have struggled with “Anecdote,” and have usefully compared “Anecdote” to “Ode to a Grecian Urn” and observed that the former offers no helpful aphorism with which to decode life (“beauty is truth...”). There is an evident contrast between the structured European approach of Keats and the wilder, less structured America faced by Stevens. Stevens is viewed as focusing on power -- the power of the jar and presumably the power of humans, or reason. Righelato also struggles with Stevens’ use of the term “slovenly,” trying to make its use something of a positive by arguing that Stevens “converts the traditional meaning of the expression to a positive rather than a pejorative sense” (Righelato 1). The critic makes the point that “the Tennessee wilderness is less satisfactorily

assimilated by the power of the colonising consciousness: the jar may take ‘dominion’, but the wilderness is not internalised as an active source of creative power; it does not give its energy and fecundity to the jar.” There is a bleakness and unclosable gap between this human artifact and nature.

Other critics have reached a similar conclusion via a different approach.

Lentricchia

comes to the “grievous conclusion” that, like Pound’s *Cantos*, this poem (or, perhaps more properly the oppositional forces in it) simply will not “cohere” (143). The jar takes dominion; the wilderness gives (and it “gives of” nature and its creatures), but there seems no productive intersection of the two. We can perhaps retreat here to claiming that Stevens is just intentionally ambiguous, as Blackmur observes (197). Blackmur argues that Stevens’ form of intentional ambiguity is itself a claim about the world and its observers: “Any observation, as between the observer and what is observed, is the notation of an ambiguity.”

Another critic sees a comparable “essential ambiguity” in Stevens’ poem and Duchamp’s readymades, in particular, to his “Fountain”: the former places a jar on top of a hill, the latter places a urinal on its side on top of a pedestal.

(MacLeod 39). The critic also compares “Anecdote” to W.C. Williams’ “Red Wheelbarrow,” which is viewed as a “readymade-like” poem. Stevens’ poem seems more carefully crafted, and the critic admits this by stating that Stevens “is as much concerned... with ideas about the thing as with the thing itself.” (40).

One can argue that, for Stevens, and similar to Kant, the idea of the thing and the thing itself are very closely intertwined, if not even ultimately equivalent. There

is no direct access to the *Ding an sich*, and human understanding is mediated through perception and human faculties such as memory and imagination.

The argument reduces the poem to a statement about the poet's role in organizing a view of human reason and nature. This reduces the "allegory" to a form of meta-theoretical claim, i.e., that there is a limit to the organizing effect of reason and art, and no matter how successful, a slovenly sort of nature encroaches, surrounding human effort and waiting, hissing in the bushes, for the opportunity to retake ground given. There is an unavoidable, insurmountable "given." This approach is consistent with the humbler Stevens as claims man. That represents the "loss" in this poem: our efforts no matter how artful and symmetrical cannot overcome nature, and may only have a temporary effect. The salvage value could be that a nicely made jar is effective, up to a point, and the artist (an "artificer," as in "Key West") both crafts the jar and crafts the poem. There is mediation between artifact, its maker and the "given"; no one party to the relationship creates reality or controls it. While this might seem to be a loss (i.e., human reason and creativity cannot control reality), this mediated conflict is actually generative (e.g., the Tennessee wilderness "gives of" bird and bush, the jar takes and organizes). This ongoing mediated conflict relationship could be viewed as the salvage from this loss, to the extent it is a loss. This is, again, "what will suffice."

We may also be seeing some of Stevens' humor or irony here. The sort of jar that might have been placed on the hill could be a Mason jar into which one might pour moonshine. The moon is a favorite item of observation for Stevens,

mentioned at least several times in *Harmonium*. Playing out this image, it may be a form of intoxication (of the imagination) that mediates between human order and the wilderness. This approach reinforces the notion of the poem as an “anecdote,” perhaps told over one or two drinks, or perhaps the poem is the intoxicant. There are five “anecdotes” all told in *Harmonium*, and the collection even opens with one (“Earthly Anecdote”) which discusses the controlling effect of a firecat on the behavior of a number of bucks, again a sort of allegory of the role of passion or imagination in the otherwise orderly world. In that poem, the firecat “bristled in the way” of bucks that were “clattering” “over Oklahoma,” which is like Tennessee in wilderness status. However, “because of the firecat,” the clattering bucks were forced into a “swift, circular line” and were compelled first to the right and then to the left. Thus, the firecat organized the bucks in accordance with its will. This firecat “Anecdote” differs from the jar “Anecdote” in that the latter involves an artifact intermediary between the creature exercising its will as opposed to the firecat’s acting directly on the bucks. But they share a common structure: the exercise of will by a creature, human or firecat, with the latter likely serving as proxy for the poet, as in “Monocle,” who crafts “verses wild with motion, full of din/Loudened by cries, by clashes, quick and sure,” confronting a somewhat dumb, reactive nature (bucks or vines) and generating a temporary or limited order.

IX. Blackbirds, Snowmen and Ice Cream: More Salvage Value

Three well-known poems -- “Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird,” “The Snow- Man,” and “The Emperor of Ice-Cream” --fall into a group of poems

in *Harmonium* that are terse and not verbally complex. Those poems can profitably be viewed as dealing with the same set of claims as explored in the longer poems but expressed through the opposite end of the prism. Stevens' universe of concerns in the shorter poems is comparable to those pursued in the longer poems, but the approach is more schematic and less verbally discursive. In the longer poems, language presents a sort of wall of meaning and several approaches to the theme are taken; in these shorter poems, meaning is inferential and the approach tends to be glancing and indirect, like epigrams.

These three poems are of course not in blank verse, and only "Ice Cream" has some rhyme in it. In a way, all three poems deal with a sort of nothing, or an absence: "Snow Man" deals with human perception and the world, "Ice Cream" with death and human vanity, and "Blackbird" with death and the relational nature of knowledge.

As is typical of Stevens, "Blackbird" is not really about a blackbird, but about "looking" at a blackbird, and ways of looking at a blackbird. Thus, the poem is about the human relationship with, and perception of, the world, and in large part, of other humans. Kenner (78-79) has some fun with this by saying that "the blackbird is alien from the kingdom of traditional poetry, where he obtains a visa only as part of the company baked in a pie; and alien also from that sphere of feeling which Wordsworth denominated 'Nature.'" No sense sublime of something far more deeply interfused has its dwelling, so far as we intuit, in him." Thirteen is a peculiar number; Vendler calls it "eccentric," (85), some might call it unlucky. We are immediately tempted to ask, of the likely infinite number of

ways of looking at a blackbird, why these thirteen? Are these categories or some sort of types, or just thirteen more or less random instances? Finally, why a blackbird, which can be viewed as a symbol of death, or a carrion bird feeding on misfortune?

Stevens' blackbird is more complex than just a symbol of loss and the absence of caring; Stevens' blackbird seems to have human characteristics, such as being observant and mindful, subject to the vicissitudes of life and death, being in relationship, being capable of indirection, and of conveying mood. Thus, if "Blackbird" is about human observation, it may be also about human observation of humans, and thus showing the blackbird's traits as human traits. Stanza VIII discloses that the "I" of the poem knows "noble accents" and "lucid, inescapable rhythms" but the "I" also knows that the blackbird is "involved in what I know." "Involved" suggests a sort of unindicted wrongdoer status -- the blackbird is complicit, or an actual wrongdoer. Stanza VIII states that even the "bawds of euphony" (similar to "Monocle's" "fops of fancy") would "cry out sharply" at the sight of blackbirds "flying in a green light." As with the green cockatoo (as in "Sunday Morning"), green may stand for a sort of freedom, perhaps spring-like, fecund and lush, but also perhaps young and immature. Stanza XIII perhaps brings the poem to a conclusion, and thus should be given special weight, talking of a winter world in which "it was evening all afternoon," "it was snowing," and "it was going to snow," to keep on snowing. And the blackbird waits in the trees: "The blackbird sat/In the cedar limbs," calling to mind "Snow Man." The various stanzas of "Blackbird" present what seem to be exercises in relational dealing in

and with the world, with the blackbird being a key intermediary between the “I,” the world and others. What the blackbird sees is often the stripped down version of human interaction, and thus a form of salvage value.

If “Blackbird” is making claims about relational human knowledge, “Snow-Man” seems to make epistemological claims, or perhaps claims as to the preconditions of knowledge. The title centers on what is perhaps an amusing children’s entertainment or perhaps the “abominable” snowman, a more threatening figure. The poem itself is a fifteen-line, single, continuous sentence which sets forth a convoluted and complex series of related positive and negative claims, which can be expressed as a set of if/then statements:

(1) If the observer has a “mind of winter,” then the observer may be able to “regard the frost and the boughs” “of the pine trees crusted with snow”; and

(2) If the observer “has been cold a long time,” then the observer may “behold” the junipers “shagged with ice” and the spruces “rough in the distant glitter of the January sun”; and

(3) In either case, in doing (1) or (2), the observer can avoid thinking of any misery in the sound of the wind or of a few leaves, and:

(3A) That sound is the sound of the land, full of the same wind blowing in the same bare place;

(3B) The wind is blowing for the listener “who listens in the snow”; and

(4) Being nothing himself, the observer will behold (i) nothing that is not there; and (ii) the nothing that is.

Thus, it is a necessary but not sufficient condition to have a “mind of winter” to be able to regard the frost and boughs and see with specificity the details of the world before him without an overcoming emotional reaction (claim 1). We cannot help but think of the lonely Stevens, stoically sitting in Elizabeth Park or walking to work in the winter. To fully see those details, the observer must be cold for a long time, i.e., have observed in nature under difficult circumstances for a considerable period (claim 2). Having met those two conditions, the observer can fully observe without “misery” i.e., without overlaying human emotions or experience (claim 3). Claims 3A and 3B seem digressive, quasi-tautologies but perhaps discloses some degree of continuity and universality of the experience of all observers (the same cold wind blows in the same place for all observers). That wind is blowing “for” the observer who listens in the wind (i.e., has a mind of winter and has been cold for a long time); this seems to add the observer as part of the experience of the world; that is, this claim would tend to undercut a purely realist view of nature. Claim 4 bundles the first five claims into one perplexing conclusion. This austere, emptied out observer seems to be almost pure perception (“nothing himself”), and is then able to behold what is really there in perception (“nothing that is not there”) and also the “nothing that is.” We would be tempted to read that line as “the nothing that is there” to balance the statement as against the first part. It is not clear, however, that such an approach is appropriate. The state described in claim 4 is a sort of bare existential state, stripped of identity, consisting of a few key functions. This

state could be viewed as a sort of minimal salvage value, a minimal state to call an existence human.

The poem seems consciously to draw a distinction between the verbs “regard” and “behold” but reinforcement of the concepts is intended. One can view the process of “regarding” as being active, intentional, and durational, while “beholding” may be a more immediate, insightful even, registering a sense of significance. For example, the *OED* lists a variety of verb definitions for “regard,” but the predominant theme seems to be to look upon with a degree of intention, i.e., “with a particular attitude or feeling” or to consider, look upon as being something specified. Now it is true that one of the listed definitions of “behold” is “to regard with the mind, have regard to, attend to or consider,” which tends to muddy the analysis. And it is hard to see the distinction in usage between the “regard” in claim 1 and the “behold” in claim 2. But there is a distinct sense of a more purely observational vision to “behold”: “To receive the impression of (anything) through the eyes, to see: the ordinary current sense.” The sense that seems more appropriate to the poem (a sort of spontaneous seeing of a phenomenon) is not explicitly acknowledged by the *OED*. But the poem seems to suggest that the properly austere observer, purified or clarified into a position to see the world without regard to emotion or an overlay of human experience, is able to “behold” the world I.e., see and assess value) in a unique and perhaps insightful way, perhaps in the manner of the skilled and experienced claims man.

One noteworthy aspect of this process of reification of perception is that the specifics of experience are increasingly stripped out of the observer’s view.

The observer goes from a very specific set of empirical data (pine trees crusted with snow, junipers shagged with ice, spruces rough in the distant glitter of the January) to a more general set of sense experiences (the sound of the wind, the sound of a few leaves) to a set of concepts relating to sense experience (the proposition that the wind is the same wind blowing in the same place) to, finally, two purely conceptual categories that relate to experience: “nothing that is not there” and “the nothing that is.” This seems to be a reductive process that strips out all accidental characteristics away, and leaves just a bare-bones, schematic view of the world.

At least one strain of criticism of this poem views this process of perception set forth in “Snow Man” as Nietzschean, focusing on, for example, portions of *The Birth of Tragedy* stating that before man can become divine, the last mythologies must be stripped from the human (Leggett 188 discussing Bloom 63). There is also a phenomenological trope of the poem as well in which “the world is revealed in the sense of it held by a living consciousness” (Leggett 188 quoting Doggett 129). Leggett goes on to observe that “the spare form of the poem evidently invites us to fill in its blank spaces with our own conceptions” while at the same time “indirectly” warning us that “the only mind that could match up with it perfectly would be a blank mind free of preconceptions, which would then comprehend nothing.” In that view, the poem becomes, in a way similar to “Blackbird,” a poem about perspective and point of view. Meaningful perception requires an observer with a point of view or a perspective. This accords with Kant’s argument that a minimally human point of view must be able

to identify all of the observer's perceptions as his/her perceptions (see Critchley 28-29).

Another useful Nietzschean comparison is suggested by *Ecce Homo*, Nietzsche's last published work before his institutionalization. In the book, Nietzsche expresses his view that philosophy, which is akin to clearing out old value and judgment structures, "means living voluntarily among ice and high mountains--- seeking out everything strange and questionable in existence...", not dissimilar to the process outlined in "Snow Man," (674). As in "Snow Man," the situation is difficult but the rewards substantial: "The ice is near, the solitude tremendous---but how calmly all things lie in the light! How freely one breathes!" Further, Nietzsche views this exercise as one involving courage, like the snow-man's ability to bear the cold of winter without feeling emotion: "Every attainment, every step forward in knowledge, follows from courage, from hardness against oneself, from cleanliness in relation to oneself," again like the austere, characterless world of the snow observer.

In the closing of the poem, Stevens skillfully leaves the exact point ambiguous. We can certainly argue from the syntax that the comparison is between nothing that is not there (i.e., the observer beholds only reality, stripped of personality, emotion, or other human traits) and the nothing that is there (suggesting that the rest of human knowledge and consciousness is effectively an absence). Or perhaps we can read the line as written as the nothing that is, i.e., a form of negation that has some sort of positive ontological relevance. At this point, we could think of the poem as expressing the union of two sets (since (i)

and (ii) are joined by an “and”): nothing that is not that (a minimalist reality) and the “nothing” that exists (not necessarily present to be perceived by the snowman but something that he realizes through his experience of the stripped-down reality). In a way, that union could be the entirety of human experience. Doggett makes the point that this snow man is no man, and by showing what he would not do, the poem also suggests what humans would do (130).

If “Blackbird” and “Snow Man” are complexly inferential poems, “The Emperor of Ice Cream” is simpler and more direct. Ice cream is an even sillier (sweeter), more transitory “treat” than a snowman, and the notion that there could be an emperor of ice cream is a silly way to express objection to what itself turns out to be a silly proposition, not itself stated in the poem but there to be inferred: that there could be any ultimate, controlling human factor in the universe. Thus, the claim that the only emperor is the emperor of ice cream is consistent with death’s being the mother of all beauty and the growth, maturity and then rotting of the fruit in “Monocle.” The theme of change is set forth symbolically for us by the four characters in the poem: the roller of big cigars (the muscular, power male who is apparently asked to make ice cream in recognition of the death addressed in the poem), the wenches (who “dawdle in such dress as they are used to wear,” one would assume provocative), the boys (who always seem to follow the wenches, and are wrapping memorial flowers in not yesterday’s papers, but in last month’s) and then the dead woman (cold and dumb). The central event in “Ice Cream” is the death of this now “horny” old woman, suggesting the hardness of rigor mortis, and what seems to be her viewing (another form of “beholding”) in

her kitchen. There is not much honor here for the decedent -- if we let “be be the finale of seem,” what she is, is dead, cold, dumb, “horny” and missing knobs. The theme of vision and beholding is emphasized by the lamp affixing its beam, in what must surely be an intentional act to highlight the conclusion of the poem. In this poem, as in “Snow-Man,” we cut through appearances to get to a reality, and in “Ice Cream,” the reality is that not even the muscular, cigar-rolling alpha male has a claim to be anything more than emperor of the ice cream that he himself makes, and that only temporarily, until it melts or is consumed. Change is the real emperor here, and change takes our pathetic old lady’s embroidery, her only earthly occupation, and converts it to a funeral shroud. Thus is her accord and satisfaction, perhaps also providing a consolation prize to her mourners.

X. Imagination in *Harmonium*

Stevens is known as a poet of the imagination, continuing a tradition from Emerson and Wordsworth. We can see the key role of the imagination in key poems such as “Key West,” in which the woman singer is presented at the “maker of the song she sang,” that singing process, in which she is the “single artificer of the world/In which she sang” shows the generative role of the creative process in Stevens in producing and ordering the human world. The human world is based on an external reality but that reality is modified by the imagination into a fully human experience: “there was never a world for her/Except the one she sang and, singing, made.” This developed view was presented by Stevens in *Ideas of Order* in 1936, after the roughly 10-year essentially silent period following *Harmonium*, during which Stevens is said to have concentrated on his insurance career.

Similar approaches to the role of the imagination are presented in “The Man with the Blue Guitar” (1937) and such later poems as “Of Modern Poetry” and “Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction.”

Stevens’ prose work addresses the role of the imagination at length, but the prose work considerably postdates *Harmonium*. In “Imagination as Value,” Stevens takes pains to distinguish what he views as the proper understanding of the imagination from what he views as the “romantic” version of the faculty (something akin to “fancy”). For Stevens, imagination is “the liberty of the mind” and that liberty is exercised, in essence, in the creation of the world experienced by the human subject (*Complete Poetry and Prose* 727-28). As Stevens puts it, “the imagination is the power that enables us to perceive the normal in the abnormal, the opposite of chaos in chaos” (737). To use other terms, imagination enables us to synthesize experience and categorize it. Stevens is admittedly no philosopher and his explanation of the role of the imagination in his prose writing tends to be only somewhat helpful. His attempted philosophical writings (notably, “A Collect of Philosophy,” (850-867)) are derivative, tend to obscurity and are now rarely cited. Critchley calls them “thin gruel indeed” (49) and “frankly disappointing” (31). Stevens there draws a rather hackneyed distinction between philosophy and poetry, trying to view poetry not merely as an exercise in thought or reason, but also imagination at work.

Stevens’ mature approach to the issue may be viewed as underlying “Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction” but is evident even on an incipient level in *Harmonium*. For example, in “A High-Toned Old Christian Woman” in

Harmonium, the opening position anticipates the later poem: “Poetry is the supreme fiction, madame.” However, *Harmonium* expresses this view only obliquely. “A High-Toned Christian Woman” seems to be a debate between an authoritative voice (comparable to the voice in “Sunday Morning”) and the old woman; the old woman, presumably a widow, is aligned with “the moral law” and the authoritative voice with the “opposing law;” this latter approach may be comparable to the world view put forward in “Sunday Morning” as an alternative to the Christian world being rejected. Somehow this “supreme fiction” is brought forward by “disaffected flagellants, well-stuffed/Smacking their muzzy bellies in parade.” This “bawdiness, unpurged by epitaph” (which recalls the “bawds of euphony” in “Blackbird”) may generate “novelties of the sublime” from what must be poets (“disaffected flagellants”), generating a “jovial hullabaloo among the spheres.” Thus, poetry prevails over the old woman’s “moral law” which seems, like her, old and widowed. This process is apparently the process of the imagination. How poetry fully overcomes the old moral law is not pursued, and seems largely overstated. Similarly, in “To the One of Fictive Music,” the speaker appeals to a musician to “give back to us what once you gave:/The imagination that we spurned and crave.”

Several other poems in *Harmonium* can usefully be viewed as dealing with the role of the imagination in human life. For example, the poem “Gubbinal” is typically taken as contrasting the world view of the unimaginative, in which the world is ugly and the people sad, versus the world of the imaginative person, in which, we have to presume, the world is not ugly and the people not

sad, or are so with lesser frequency. It seems, however, unlikely that Stevens intended such a facile and mechanical distinction between the world of imagination in which beauty and happiness reign and the unimaginative world, ugly and sad. And how does the title relate to the poem? “Gubbinal” refers to fish fragments of some sort, or miscellaneous odds and ends, so the title comments on the poem itself as consisting perhaps of fragments of a malodorous argument. The better view of the reality facing is that we, using the imagination, must reassemble these unappealing fragments into a whole, into a life. The singsong “have it your way/is just as you say” makes the unimaginative point sound juvenile, but on some level, the ostensibly narrow-minded and nasty viewpoint has some merit. The world of both the imaginative and unimaginative *is* for some significant part of the time ugly and those folks sad. We cannot take seriously the notion that imaginative people live in an entirely different world (happy and beautiful) than that of the unimaginative (sad and ugly). Surely Stevens did not, and he is the author of the aphorism “death is the mother of beauty” and the view that the endpoint of human life is “sure obliteration.”

Another element of the world presented in “Gubbinal” is the idea that we have some degree of choice as to how to address reality (“have it your way”). In a later poem (“Anything is Beautiful If You Say It Is”), Stevens reinforces the role of choice in structuring the world and the idea that the world is in parts (i.e., “gubbinal”), requiring some sort of synthetic organization through the imagination to arrive at meaning. However, there is a clear conflict in Stevens between this rather optimistic view, emphasizing the synthetic and generative

power of the imagination, and the stripped down realism of poems such as “Snow Man,” in which no amount of imagination seems capable of affecting an almost characterless world, in which all living creatures die, and are swept over by a cleansing winter.

“Disillusionment of Ten O’Clock” is a starting point in considering what a world without imagination would look like. There, houses are haunted by “white night gowns,” like the snow in “Snow Man” and perhaps the sort of night clothes we might expect Stevens’ wife to wear in their rather distant and cold marriage. There is no color here (green, purple, yellow, blue) and there is no “strangeness” or idiosyncratic designs. People will not dream of unusual or imaginative things (“baboons and periwinkles”); perhaps they do not dream at all. However, a drunk old sailor is inserted as the image of the imagination, “asleep in his boots,” and dreaming of catching tigers in “red weather.” For Stevens, vivid colors are symbols of freedom and imaginative life; recall the “green freedom” of the cockatoo in “Sunday Morning.” Compare the dull world of men at forty in “Monocle” in which the “ephemeral blues” must merge into a gray, “the basic slate, the universal hue.” We can perhaps wonder why the creative party must be a drunk, passed out in the corner. There is an analogy drawn in “Monocle” between the loss of imaginative faculty and the loss of potency; when writers about love (“amorists”) age (“grow bald”), then amours “shrink” (like a sex organ) into written introspection, sounding like unimaginative academic work (“the compass and curriculum of introspective exiles”).

In “The Plot Against the Giant,” we see three attempts to take on a giant, made by three girls. While each girl seems to have a chance of affecting the giant (a symbol of the brute, unimaginative force in the world, a “yokel” who comes “maundering”), the third girl will “whisper/Heavenly labials in a world of gutturals” and thereby “undo” him. Note that for Stevens that the world of the imagination intersects both the verbal and poetic world and the sexual world (“heavenly labials”) as it seems to do for “amorists” prior to the attainment of age forty in “Monocle” or in the various references to the “bawdiness” of poets. Here, in “The Plot Against the Giant,” the girl undoes the giant not just with sex but with language (labials and gutturals), thus again binding love, sex and language as in “Monocle.”

The long and in many respects unsatisfying “Comedian” consists of six long parts, and appears to memorialize a trip by Crispin, a stand-in for Stevens. The trip reported in the poem perhaps parallels Stevens’ cruise with his wife (which engendered their only child), also reflected in “Sea Surface of Clouds.” The starting point of the first stanza is “The World without Imagination,” in which the speaker begins with several aphoristic claims: “man is the intelligence of his soil,/The sovereign ghost” and, as such, “the Socrates of snails” and “the musician of pears.” We could perhaps restate the point as: a person is an organic spirit, tied to the earth, who likely presumes too much and is condemned to cross-examining a miniscule world or trying to express a routine natural process as music. Crispin adds a level of grandiosity to the claim: “Principium and lex” -- principle and law. At this point, Crispin’s aphorism begins to sound similar to the

view that man is the measure of all things, attributed to Protagoras. That ponderous view is significantly modified by an encounter with Triton, the sea-god, and then the lead-in aphorism is stripped down in stanza IV to “his soil is man’s intelligence,” which revised aphorism is lauded as “That’s better,” and as a “laconic phrase... that’s worth crossing seas to find.” This more grounded approach reduces humans to a part of a natural world (as a “yeoman”), comparable to a claims man, rather than as the lord and arbiter of that world. If the first stanza of “Comedian” shows the world without imagination, then the remainder of the poem may be intended to show the effects of the world with imagination, in which we reduce grandiose claims to a more balanced, integrated view of humans living in the world. In that respect, the odd title perhaps is intended to show a reductive process in which grandiose concepts of reason are reduced to more organized, practical concepts or even symbols. The closing of the poem shows the compromising Stevens (the finder of small satisfactions in everyday life) winning out over the grandiose Stevens of the “green brag” who presumes to perceive the *Ding an sich*. It must be noted, though, the “Comedian” is not especially successful, and in some ways may mark a cul de sac for Stevens from which he does not emerge for as much as a decade. If the Crispin of Stanza VI (“And Daughters with Curls”) is the alter-ego of Stevens retreating to his insurance man life in Hartford post *Harmonium*, it is unclear how the imagination figures prominently in that life, other than perhaps sub rosa or as a nagging voice that reasserts itself over time.

XI. Conclusion

The early Stevens reflected in *Harmonium*, the supposedly inward-facing Stevens, is the same poet as the later Stevens, the supposedly more outward-facing Stevens, and the Modernist themes explored in *Harmonium* -- identity and meaning in a godless world, the role of poetry and the imagination in such a world, the nature of human interaction with the world, love between humans in such a world -- are the same as explored by Stevens in his later work. That is the essential meaning of Stevens' announced wish to have his collected poems called *The Whole Harmonium*. Similarly, while Stevens led two lives as business executive and poet, that bifurcated existence reflects a unity of approach and concerns.

One way of looking at that unity is through the lens of Stevens the claims man, as expressed in an article he wrote for an insurance journal later in his insurance career, effectively expressing his function as an insurance executive as that of a claims man, addressing and evaluating claims presented to the company when things go wrong -- a breach of contract, a failure of performance, fraud, any manner of negligence or intentional wrongdoing. Stevens, as claims man, must determine and evaluate the facts, size up the parties in the transaction, assess the liability and potential remedy and determine what form of action is appropriate. Note that he can do little or nothing to avoid the breach, the loss suffered; the best he can do is limit the damage and focus on salvage value.

Similarly, the doctrine of accord and satisfaction from contract law is another related model we can use to think about Stevens' work. The doctrine addresses the breach of an otherwise enforceable contract that on its face obligates

one party to perform some act for the other. While the non-breaching party could sue to enforce the contract, that party has come to realize that there is no effective remedy that will make the recipient whole for the breach. This may be because the performing party is incapable of full performance or full performance is perhaps impractical, or for personal reasons the recipient does not wish to contest the matter further. Instead, the recipient accepts lesser performance and moves on. Stevens may intend at times a high-toned version of performance (“what will suffice” in a grand sense, such as access to the *Ding an sich*), but instead he is reduced to accepting the lesser performance offered by an accord and satisfaction, or may even be reduced to accepting salvage value. This tension informs a sort of negotiation between the claims man, claimant and the world that will ultimately result in a valuable settlement.

This paper also argues that this problem of unsatisfactory performance, that “what will suffice” may be salvage value only, is inherent in the nature of the Modernist project. The issues taken on by Modernists are simply too big and their tools to address those issues simply too modest, to result in anything other than a rewarding and invigorating failure. The project is simply too big not to fail. But the failure is a compelling one, and one that leads to insight and beauty. As with Eliot, Pound, Yeats and Beckett, the work may not lead us to the Truth or the Sublime, but may show us little glimpses of ordinary-course truth, aided by what amounts to a functional, workaday imagination and an almost willful refusal to give up, even in the face of inherent failure. This is the realm of the artificer

and claims man; the trick for the artificer is to devise an accord and satisfaction that is as significantly satisfactory as possible.

The next step in this analysis, beyond the scope of this paper, is to turn the approach outlined above to Stevens' concept of the "major man," put forward most prominently in "Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction." Stevens went out of his way to say that this man "in his old coat/His slouching pantaloons" is not based on Nietzsche's *Übermensch*, but instead is a separate idea, of "Logos and logic, crystal hypothesis, Incipit and a form to speak the word." How would this major man deal with the compromises of the claims man, with the world of salvage value and often unhappy accord and (not full) satisfaction? Perhaps over time, the major man might look more like the claims man, like Stevens himself -- the workaday executive finding satisfactions in everyday life in Elizabeth Park -- than the supple and turbulent fellows in "Sunday Morning."

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