

Problems of the Past and Figures of Aging in Late and Early Wallace Stevens

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This paper reads a series of Wallace Stevens's late poems ("Vacancy in the Park," "The Irish Cliffs of Moher," and "The Rock") as well as his early poem "Sunday Morning" as figures of aging. These figures capture reflections on the past and poetic efforts to make it feel real precisely at a moment when the past poses existential and temporal problems, at a moment when life's circle seems to be closing. These late and early poems show that Stevens engages problems of the past and crafts figures of aging across his career, not just in a late or last phase. While the paper deploys the term "lateness" to describe Stevens's poetic ethos and style, in this case, the term does not invoke the myth of the artist who has attained "old-age style" but a varied sense of ending, a kind of modernist ambience and activity of thinking and feeling the imminence and immanence of a life's closing circle. Stevens's figures of aging, moreover, emit and inventory signs of detachment, emptiness, effervescence, dissipation, illusoriness, absurdity, and indifference but also affirmations of freedom, desire, and reverence. This affective inventory presents a "Wallace Stevens" who prompts us to ask (though he never provides an answer), "How might I age, grow older, draw near to my end otherwise?"

I continue to receive letters from people . . . I knew when I was a boy . . . This has been a really moving experience: to find that people one had long ago forgotten were still alive, one man 73, another 78 . . . But, also, this experience reveals the occasionally frightening aspect of the past, into which so many that we have known have disappeared, almost as if they had never been real. (Stevens, Letters 678)

Wallace Stevens explores myriad existential and temporal problems, especially in poems preoccupied with aging or drawing near the end of life. Elsewhere, I examine two of his winter lyrics—"The Snow Man" (1921, 1923) and "A Discovery of Thought" (1950)—and argue that they problematize how to think the future when "the wind whimpers oldly of old age" (Stevens, *Collected* 407). How to think a future, more specifically, that will not belong to the respective voices speaking these lyrics, a future to which they will not belong, a time to come that will present itself after the closure of their lives.¹ In this earlier work, I purposefully select poems composed decades apart—an early and a late poem—to illustrate that Stevens addresses aging and ending across his oeuvre, in more than a single style, not just in his late or last phase. In the present essay, I continue this work on Stevens's late and early poems, turning from his concern with the future to the peculiar challenges he sees the past posing to his poetic personae who are growing older and who sense the imminent closure of their lives.²

My study of Stevens thus confirms, at least in part, Edward Said's suggestive provocation to think of literary modernism as "a late-style phenomenon," that is, as "a movement of aging and ending" instead of "a movement of the new" (135). While Said's account of late style has come under considerable scrutiny, Ben Hutchinson's *Lateness and Modern European Literature* (2016) confirms the fruitfulness of this specific provocation by illustrating a compelling (even if problematic) resonance between the categories of lateness and modernism. Though he focuses on a wide epochal category (namely, the post-romantic), he argues that literature across this broad period "repeatedly defines itself through its responses to a sense of lateness," responses that strive for "legitimacy" (5), as modernist literature tends to do, by breaking from the past (18). Indeed, stylistic features like parataxis, montage, difficulty, and juxtaposition—which Theodor Adorno and Edward Said both associate with lateness in general—make up some "of the defining characteristics of modernist literature," a

¹ See Benjamin D. Hagen, "A Future Not My Own: Thinking Aging in Two of Stevens's Winter Lyrics." *Twentieth-Century Literature*, vol. 59, no. 3, Fall 2013, pp. 385-413.

² "I have had to do a good deal of looking back, which is a poor thing for anyone to do . . . I have the same sensation that everyone has as the circle begins to close" (Stevens, *Letters* 682).

resonance that again supports Said's earlier provocation (Hutchinson 262). Though Hutchinson is careful not to universalize this particular understanding of late style, his lengthy final section inventories the work of various male modernists—Paul Valéry, Thomas Mann, Ernst Bloch, Wyndham Lewis, T.S. Eliot, and Hermann Broch (among others). These writers are illustrative, he concludes, of a “modern European literature” that is not “an expression of the new and the young, but,” echoing Said, “of the late and the old” (330). This expression is constructivist; Hutchinson does not claim that these “periods *are* late” but “that they have repeatedly been *constructed*” and have constructed themselves as such (330).³

Preferring to tarry with the course of a particular poet (rather than to make claims about a general period, epoch, or style), I examine Stevens's work here as a means to elaborate his poetic conceptualization of obstacles that foil his personae's efforts to realize the past, that is, to establish the past's reality, to make it feel real. In the four poems I select here (three from *The Rock* [1954], one from *Harmonium* [1923]), lateness is not something the poet achieves (as in the traditional discourse on lateness); rather, Stevens's personae encounter or discover themselves *within* a lateness⁴ that stirs up a desire to establish where they have come from; to recall what they have done; to reflect, fix, and take comfort in incontrovertible proof that they have lived—even if they will not, perhaps, live much longer. The cruel irony of such labor is that Wallace Stevens

³ Much work remains to be done on the “lateness” of other modernists, including H.D., Marianne Moore, Stevie Smith, Laura (Riding) Jackson, Elizabeth Bowen, Jean Rhys, and others. As Gordon McMullan and Sam Smiles note, the pronoun commonly associated “with late style . . . is almost always . . . ‘he’” (4). “Why are late styles attributed to only a limited number of creative men and to few, if any women?” they later ask (11). Oddly, neither *Late Style and Its Discontents: Essays in Art, Literature, and Music* (2016) nor Hutchinson's book-length study of lateness and modern literature ameliorates this oversight. (To be fair, my study of Stevens does not, either.)

⁴ Though I distinguish my argument from Said's treatment of “late” music and literature in *On Late Style* (2006), his definition of lateness as “being at the end, fully conscious, full of memory, and also very (even preternaturally) aware of the present” still resonates with the sense that emerges in Stevens's poems (14). Though this definition cannot encompass all experiences we might call *late*, Said's notion of memorial fullness, at least in the case of late Beethoven and high modernism, appears to inspire some artists to return to the past: for instance, “to ancient myth or antique forms” (135). This relay between past and present is of interest to me here, though not necessarily in the ways Said envisions it.

perpetually casts doubt on the facticity of memories, sensations, beliefs, events, and human relationships. He speculates that our lives are (at best) warranted by a supreme fiction achieved in the perpetual sibling struggle of reality and imagination.⁵

In the following sections, I develop an inventory of “late” problems, linked respectively with my four poems, that confront Stevens’s personae when they attempt to turn to the past as a means to account for their lives as a whole: [1] a radical detachment from the past (“Vacancy in the Park” [1952, 1954]); [2] an evaporation of the past as a ground or warrant guaranteeing who or what one is or has been (“The Irish Cliffs of Moher” [1952, 1954]); [3] an overwhelming sense that the past is an illusion or a fictional account of what *never* happened (“The Rock” [1954]); and [4] an intrusion of invented or imagined pasts that powerfully affect a precarious present (“Sunday Morning” [1915, 1923]). As in my previous work, I attend to early and late poems to contest the presumption that lateness is a concern only of an author’s last works and also to emphasize that my aim is neither to construct nor to sentimentalize a narrative of decline, deterioration, or miraculous/heroic acclivity in old age.⁶ In this sense, I follow

⁵ “Soldier, there is a war between the mind / And sky, between thought and day and night” (*Collected* 351). Also cf. “The Nobel Rider and the Sound of Words” (*Collected* 643-65).

⁶ In recent years, it has become commonplace for critics and scholars to underscore the contingency of critical terms such as “lateness,” “late style,” and “old-age style.” Gordon McMullan and Sam Smiles begin their introduction to *Late Style and Its Discontents*, for instance, “For all the conceptual sophistication with which critics approach the so-called ‘late works’ of writers, artists, and composers, they rarely—surprisingly rarely, in truth—confront the evidence that the idea of late style, far from being a universal creative given, can be understood quite differently—as a critical and ideological construct, the product of a certain kind of critical wish fulfillment” (“Introduction” 1). In his contribution to the volume, Smiles gives a history of “various late-style discourses” that emerged “in the early twentieth century,” demonstrating that we should see late styles “not as critical absolutes but as by-products of different cultural contingencies” (29). “Seen in this light,” he concludes, “the credibility of late style as a coherent concept in aesthetics, with a wide application across art forms, cultures, and epochs” is in doubt (30). In his contribution, McMullan writes: “The trouble with this overarching, shared idea of late style is that it is defined . . . on terms that make it . . . a precursor of a certain kind of *modern* creativity” (37). By the time one reaches Robert Spencer’s later contribution, his concise statement, “Late style is contingent, not transcendent” seems to go without saying (232). In his “Afterword” to McMullan and Smiles’s collection, Hutchinson sees no need “to deny” the “discursive value” of lateness, but he agrees with the editors’ and contributors’ consensus that it is important “to encourage . . . a degree of lucidity as to our critical complicity in its construction” (238). Though I do not object to this repeated insistence on the contingency and historicity of terms like “lateness” or “late style,” I do wonder: Are any critical terms universal or transcendent? Can we agree that all critical terms entail contingencies?

one of several avenues encouraged by Stephen Katz and Erin Campbell—namely, moving past “the strategic uses to which” the works of older artists “have been put in popular narratives of peak-and-decline . . . across the life span” in order to study “how they beckon us to look intensely” into the form and material of late art “and behold in their historical dilemmas a deepening of our own questions about the arts of life and the passage of time” (116).

Though scholars give us plenty of cause to distrust terms such as lateness and late style, I retain a sense of the late in this essay not because the term captures a general experience shared by all older artists or because I wish to mark Stevens’s late work as stylistically exemplary of “a generally applicable, transhistorical, transcultural phenomenon” that he achieves in his older age (McMullan and Smiles, “Introduction” 11).⁷ I am interested, rather, in examining how Stevens theorizes the difficulties and pleasures that face his personae in “a kind of total grandeur at the end” (Stevens, *Collected* 434). Indeed, the poems I explicate here present figures and fragments of a contingent, incomplete modernist discourse of lateness. For me, this lateness—this varied sense of an ending—conveys the potentially recognizable yet variable ambience and activity of thinking and feeling oneself “at the end of the mind” or “on the edge of space,” imagining the imminence and immanence of life’s closure (Stevens, *Collected* 476, 477).⁸

⁷ Given the important correctives of so many scholars regarding widespread over-generalizations of late style (especially in fields such as art history), it is with some trepidation that I explore the problems of aging and ending in Stevens’s writings. My analyses might, on first blush, align too neatly with Kenneth Clark’s association of creativity in old age with “a sense of isolation, a feeling of holy rage, developing into . . . transcendental pessimism; a mistrust of reason, a belief in instinct” (21; qtd. in Hutcheon and Hutcheon 6). Stevens’s poems do explore these negative qualities, but they also show that the qualities are contingent to specific spaces and moments experienced across a life. Reading Stevens’s late work also resolves one of the antinomies of the old-age style scholarship that Linda Hutcheon and Michael Hutcheon critique. They see an unresolvable contradiction between the “aesthetic austerity . . . clarity or bareness” that some historians identify with late style and the difficulty and dissonance of lateness upon which Said’s account, following that of Adorno, insists (Hutcheon and Hutcheon 10). In Stevens’s last poems, however, one encounters a style that is exactly and simultaneously bare, austere, and difficult. This is not to say that his style should serve as a standard of a late style, of course, but Stevens does show us that the critical tensions and discrepancies Hutcheon and Hutcheon inventory are not always so unstable or contradictory after all.

⁸ In *The Sense of an Ending* (1967), Kermode investigates various ways in which “the End” is not only “imminent” but “immanent”: “. . . it is not merely the remnant of time that has eschatological import”

By *figures* I do not mean merely that Stevens uses metaphorical and rhetorical language (which he certainly does). I refer more classically to how he shapes, even sculpts, momentary outbursts, postures, gestures, and atmospheres that might resonate (though, of course, they might not) with the experience or situation of an interlocutor, auditor, or reader.⁹ The late poems and early poem I select here confront us with a variety of late figures *vis-à-vis* the past, figures which emit signs of detachment, emptiness, effervescence, dissipation, illusoriness, absurdity, indifference but also affirmations of freedom, desire, and reverence. This figural and affective inventory presents a “Wallace Stevens” who is neither cold nor impersonally cerebral but, rather, a poet and a theorist who implores readers to join his personae in their meditative exercises. He prompts us to ask (without ever quite providing an answer), “How might I age, grow older, draw near to my end *otherwise?*”

VACANCY IN THE PARK

The first problem I inventory concerns a sense of detachment from the past, the disconcerting texture of a breach between one’s present activity and something that *has been*, which seems to press upon the present obscurely without returning, without ever feeling or appearing present at all. “Vacancy in the Park” captures this situation and sensation:

in theologies of apocalypse; moreover, “the whole of history, and *the progress of the individual life*, have it also, as a benefaction from the End, now immanent” (25, emphasis added). It is worth noting that Kermode’s “New Epilogue,” added to a later edition of these classic lectures, remarks being “struck by the ubiquity of Wallace Stevens” to his thinking at the time (195). “It is true that my head was full of Stevens at the time,” he writes, “so much so that my friend . . . described the book as a love letter to the poet” (195).

⁹ This is the meaning of “figure” that Roland Barthes adopts in *A Lover’s Discourse: Fragments* (1977), a strange book which dramatizes the “gesture[s]” of a solitary lover’s body and mind “caught in action,” flashes of their episodic struggle “in a kind of lunatic sport” (4). Barthes stages the lover—among other things—stupidly waiting by a phone that will never ring, stubbornly affirming a destructive relationship, feverishly laboring over a letter that they will never send, introspectively examining the integrity of their sanity or their reality, and so on, and so on. These portraits—alphabetized according to various topics (*s’abîmer*, *absence*, *adorable*, etc., ending with *vouloir-saisir* [the will to possess])—do not settle into a universal narrative or theory of love, for “each occasion . . . depend[s] on an (internal or external) accident” (6). Hence the alphabetical, arbitrary structure of his book captures moments, only some of which readers might recognize.

March . . . Someone has walked across the snow,
Someone looking for he knows not what.

It is like a boat that has pulled away
From a shore at night and disappeared.

It is like a guitar left on a table
By a woman, who has forgotten it.

It is like the feeling of a man
Come back to see a certain house.

The four winds blow through the rustic arbor
Under its mattresses of vines. (*Collected* 434-35)

Despite the ambiguity of the poem's first word (an indication of the season? an imperative to move forward?), the poem begins with a sense of progress or transition either from winter to spring or, more simply, from here to there. While the ellipses that follow might mark the footsteps of a marcher's progress, they also mark a lyrical vacancy, a near immediate interruption of speech with silence, the "being-there" of something "absent or departed," as Jacques Derrida might put it, both from the park and from the first line (5). Thus, the ellipses not only mark but halt the speaker's progress and preface the (non-)appearance of an unknown person ("[s]omeone") in the vacant footprints left in the snow's recording surface, traces of an epistemologically impoverished search ("looking for he knows not what"). These first lines lay the groundwork for a hope that the unknown person or thing might return, that some sort of substance or evidence or meaning of a past condition (grasses and grounds watered by melting snow, for instance) might reveal itself to the wanderer and fill in these vacancies.

The three similes that follow the opening couplet all figure an odd detachment from something that should be here, that should have come back, or that should have never been lost. The first two couplets refer to displaced objects, one floating away in the night without warning, the other slipping not only from memory but “left” absentmindedly on an indefinite “table” in an unspecified space (in a home? restaurant? concert hall?). This second figure, moreover, marks a double disappearance: both physical and mental, abandoned *and* forgotten. Though boats and guitars usually figure a sense of transport or transformation in Stevens’s work (as in “Farewell to Florida” [1936] and “The Man with the Blue Guitar” [1937]), they figure something precious, useful, valuable, and purposeful here. They are signs of mobile and/or creative lives now vacated, covered over, lost, and ineffective. They also signify a foreclosed (vacated?) future and a fatal slippage of the present into a past that does not anchor but seems to erase it. Putting that which may be *to come* under erasure, the poem sets up, in its third figure, “the feeling of a man / Come back to see a certain house”—an ironically *uncertain* experience which, through the lens of the previous two figures, suggests the unsettling affect of living *too late* to see or sing another shore, song, or spring. Too late to relive the memories or friendships associated with “a certain house.”

Here, from the long perspective of older age, Stevens thus conveys a sense of looking ahead to the recovery of something lost as an indefinite, obscured looking back—a gesture that calls to mind the theme and ethos of William Wordsworth’s *The Ruined Cottage* (1797-98). Wordsworth’s long narrative poem also problematizes the past, reimagining the contours of “naked walls” (line 31) and “a well / Half-choked” with “weeds” as signs, recognizable to the aged Armitage, of lives which are no longer present (lines 62-63). “I see around me here,” he confesses to the unnamed narrator, “Things which you cannot see” (67-68). Though this romantic poem suggests we can fill in these vacancies—though not without visionary struggle—Stevens’s late (much more succinct) modernist poem refuses such consolation. It excises narrative altogether and employs figures without clear tenors—“*It* is like . . .” (but what is “*It*”?)—which still intimate a susceptibility to ruin, the sting of crosswinds, and an

impenetrable enclosure of vines. Indeed, all three figures in “Vacancy” enact detachment from something thought “certain” (that is, specific, irreplaceable, unmistakable, but now irretrievable and irredeemable). Though the poem’s indefinite cast fails to observe these things either empirically or imaginatively, the lyrical traces of the boat, guitar, and house remain palpably co-extensive with a present vacancy.

Stevens’s inquiry into this mode of ghostly being flirts pessimistically with signs of departure as signs of one’s own imminent envelopment in absence. There will be no return, the speaker seems to convey, no re-presentation of, for instance, a “certain house” (a house from childhood? an old friend’s home?)—just a short time more of marching after an “It” without antecedent, even if only to continue stumbling elliptically through deepening tracks until this “[s]omeone” also becomes a “Vacancy in the Park.”

THE IRISH CLIFFS OF MOHER

“The Irish Cliffs of Moher” also enacts a search, though seemingly with a bit more direction, and broaches a second problem, thus intensifying detachment from the past into a sense of the past’s evaporation. The poem begins and asks, “Who is my father in this world, in this house, / At the spirit’s base?” (*Collected* 427). The speaker who speaks of *himself* (rather than an indefinite “Someone” [434]) positions himself at home, rooted in a way alien to “Vacancy.” Here we sense the sort of lateness Said identifies with high modernism in general: an intricate fusion of experimental form and syntax with various “return[s] or homecoming[s] to realms forgotten or left behind by the relentless advance of history” (135). But “Irish Cliffs” does not fit the mythological schemes of T.S. Eliot’s *The Waste Land* (1922) or James Joyce’s *Ulysses* (1922). Rather, following a poem titled “An Old Man Asleep” (1952, 1954), this lyrical effort to establish a genealogical anchor ultimately fails to secure a sense of the past as evidence of the self’s present—and presence. Indeed, the investigation of lineage indicates an absence, an unknown, a kind of vacancy at the very “base” of one’s own rootedness in “this world.” Though the speaker may be located in a certain space, houses and homes across *The Rock* tend to emit signs of deterioration,

use, and age. This context illuminates an unstated position of the speaker here—on the verge perhaps of becoming a spirit himself—and lends an urgency to his question, which he may not have much time to answer.

Despite this urgency, Stevens's persona almost immediately encounters an obstacle:

My father's father, his father's father, his—
Shadows like winds

Go back to a parent before thought, before speech,
At the head of the past.

They go to the cliffs of Moher rising out of the mist,
Above the real.

Rising out of present time and place, above
The wet, green grass. (427)

The dash interrupts a compound subject in genealogical regress (“My father’s father . . . his—”), evoking a totality that the speaker cannot grasp in full, cannot realize, and cannot even articulate. The dash cancels this subject and resets the sentence with a complex figure of non-substantiality, a dark metaphor and airy simile (these fathers are “[s]hadows like winds”) which the speaker attempts to locate in a proliferation of abstract prepositional phrases (“At the head of the past” and “Above the real”). He has, in short, quickly left “this house,” seeking an answer to this intimate vacancy elsewhere. The past—here understood as paternal procession and precession—is not merely before or ahead of the present; it is not a collection of lives which are no longer alive. Rather, it is—or is felt from the perspective of the present to be—a perpetual activity of effervescent disappearance. These fathers are always “rising out of the mist” as *mist* in an evaporative departure “above / The wet, green grass” (that is, the

material “real”). They exist or subsist paradoxically as the eradication or passing-away of an origin.

Though “Irish Cliffs” begins with more direction than “Vacancy,” this speaker poses a more disquieting problem of the past’s unrealizability (which it attempts but fails to resolve in a consolatory way): an irrevocable departure not only of *something* but of the warrant or source of *what one is* late in life and whence (and how far) one has come. The speaker insists that this world of grass and cliffs

is not landscape, full of somnambulations
Of poetry

And the sea. This is my father or, maybe,
It is as he was,

A likeness, one of the race of fathers: earth
And sea and air. (427)

Echoing “The Snow Man” and its refusal to figure “the sound of the wind” through “bare” branches as a sound of human “misery” (8), these lines initially reject a figurative connection between the cliffs and the speaker’s father(s). The word “landscape” (427) connotes a mediated perception of the real—through painting or a selective angle or position—which is designed (perhaps) to evoke aesthetic linguistic responses (as in Wordsworth and the romantic tradition). Such perception would amount to sleepwalking (“somnambulations / Of poetry”), moving through a partially perceived, recognized, and fabricated space where one sees and does not see what is and is not there. The speaker answers the question that begins the poem—*who is my father?*—by pointing to the literal interplay of moisture (condensation, evaporation) between grass and cliff. This interplay, he seems to insist, “*is my father*” (emphasis added). With urgency and yet without clear motivation, the speaker wants to make his paternal ghosts real

by solidifying them in the Irish cliffs, wresting them from the verge of a fabricated or imagined realm. If the cliffs can fill this paternal vacancy, then he has found tangible evidence that he has come *from* somewhere and that his present *is* connected actively to what has *been*—just as the sea, dew, and mist share common elements and contiguous substance.

But the “maybe,” set off by commas, follows and unsettles this declarative hope, turning father and cliff alike into “[l]ikeness[es]”—less substantial, less secure, less certain, and more vacant than *thisnesses*. Figuration slips back into the poem here as the very structure of generational relation—the present is like the past; the cliffs areas the speaker’s father was. The speaker can say to either cliff or father: “I have come from you.” Thus, while the poem seems to affirm a general or universal continuity between things past and present, the force and specificity of the statement, “This is my father,” evaporates into a reluctantly figurative identification of the speaker’s lineage with the solitude and spaciousness of “The Irish Cliffs of Moher,” a solitude populated with the ghostly signs of a deep past: the “earth / And sea and air” that have outlived the speaker’s fathers and which remind him that so much time (geological, genealogical, and biographical) has passed. In this sense, Stevens’s poem anticipates the extended metaphor at the very center of Sylvia Plath’s “Morning Song” from *Ariel* (1965): “I am no more your mother / Than the cloud that distils a mirror to reflect its own slow / Effacement at the wind’s hand” (1). A curious figure of maternal linkage, separation, creation, and departure. And aging.

THE ROCK—SEVENTY YEARS LATER

The first several lines of Stevens’s “The Rock” (1954) constitute his aging personae’s most direct and intensely pessimistic engagement with the past. Even the title of its first section, “Seventy Years Later,” seems to swing a hammer blow of dejected meditation. “Later than what?” we might ask. After what? Birth? Childhood? Departure from the family home? There is no reason to assume the speaker here is exactly seventy years old (Stevens himself was

older than seventy when he wrote the poem), but the first section sets out to prove that such answers to this question do not really matter:

It is an illusion that we were ever alive,
Lived in the houses of mothers, arranged ourselves
By our own motions in a freedom of air.

Regard the freedom of seventy years ago.
It is no longer air. The houses still stand,
Though they are rigid in rigid emptiness.

Even our shadows, their shadows, no longer remain.
The lives these lived in the mind are at an end.
They never were . . . (Stevens, *Collected* 445)

The first things one might note here are the repetition and return from “Vacancy” of the obscure “It is” and the use of plural personal pronouns (“we,” “ourselves,” “our”). These features generalize and universalize, respectively, the indefinite concerns of “Vacancy” and the personal concerns of “The Irish Cliffs.” “It” now implies an antecedent (unlike the “It” of “Vacancy”): life, being alive, vitality. But life here refers to all human life: not *my* life or *my* father or someone but all lives, “mothers,” and “houses.” Indeed, Stevens sweeps the houses of “Vacancy” and “The Irish Cliffs” (which stood in, respectively, for a lost past and a vulnerable present) into a darker past that evacuates and suffocates the present even of its shadows and sounds (the poem continues, “The sounds of the guitar / Were not and are not”). The strangely redundant description of material buildings which appear to survive time’s passage—“rigid in [their] rigid emptiness”—seems to head off efforts either to figure or to literalize evidence that one has actually lived a life, played music, and “arranged motions.” Whereas materiality gave some semblance of comfort, though not much, in “The Irish Cliffs,” here the real itself is already empty, non-populated,

and unable to bear witness that one has been *here*, rooted *here* for an entire life. Even the insubstantialities (shadows, winds) and vacancies that condition our engagements with a ghostly past “no longer remain.” The speaker has been stripped of these traces, too. We have been stripped of them, the speaker insists, we who stand with him and occupy his point of view, “Seventy Years Later,” gazing (with horror? with austerity?) at the disappearances of these shadows from here and now *and* from there and then.

What sense can we make of this committed refusal of the speaker to recognize his life—so late in his life—and the lives of others? Helen Vendler and other critics agree that Stevens’s pessimism here is unparalleled and unmatched in his oeuvre,¹⁰ but few critics have noted that the radical dejection of these lines turns upon the problem of freedom. Life “is no longer air”; at a time when it is harder to move his aging body and when new obstacles emerge at an increasing pace to slow down his mind and to speed him toward his end, the speaker asserts that life was never air, that he has (that we all have) always retroactively fabricated the freedom to move, breathe, and live. Determinant and determining obstacles have always obstructed free play and free choice, and now freedom itself seems, “Seventy Years Later,” to have only ever been a retrojected and imagined effect. We have never been free; we were always destined to arrive here. What the speaker may have believed to have been his past—his life and the lives of others understood as developing wholes—was never present, never lived at all, merely dreamt. And it gets worse: These lines convey a revelation that the whole landscape of objects and subjects and durations with which the speaker has aged (houses, shadows, freedoms, mothers, childhoods, years) is “at an end” not only of their passage but of the very mistaken idea that they ever *were* passing. In these lines, lateness becomes

¹⁰ James Longenbach, for instance, reads “The Rock” in the context of Stevens’s late correspondence with his Cuban friend José Rodríguez Feo. Stevens encouraged the younger man to “leave his world of books and live all he could while he could,” advice stemming, Longenbach argues, from Stevens’s retrospective view of “what seemed to him a skeleton’s life” (296). “There is no bleaker instance of [this] pain,” he continues, “than ‘Seventy Years Later,’ the opening movement of ‘The Rock’” (296). Vendler, too, analyzes the opening movement of “The Rock” and argues that “Stevens’s unqualified assertions at the beginning of this poem are the most extreme he has ever made, doing violence to life, his own above all” (*Last Looks* 44). She picks up on a quickening as the poem progresses, however, toward a “heady immersion of recovered sensation” (45).

a viewpoint not only from which to think but, perhaps more important, to feel that which is to come (namely, non-existence itself) not as an exception or interruption or end at all but as the very rule of whatever there is (or is not). I was “[n]ever alive,” the speaker realizes (the only insight, it seems, that feels real). We were never alive. The death to come is not a loss but a continuation.

Yet, the ellipses in the middle of the ninth line, which Stevens’s earlier poems have taught us to read as a functional silence, signal a potential turn or shift in the poem’s deeply pessimistic tone and logic. The shift here, however, is not readily apparent:

They never were . . . The sounds of the guitar

Were not and are not. Absurd. The words spoken

Were not and are not. It is not to be believed.

The meeting at noon at the edge of the field seems like

An invention, an embrace between one desperate clod

And another in a fantastic consciousness,

In a queer assertion of humanity. (445)

Though much scholarship reads the lines that immediately follow the ellipses as amplifications of the preceding and repeated pronouncements (“Were not and are not”), the sharp, interspersed sentences (“Absurd”; “It is not to be believed”) could simultaneously be read as contrapuntal reactions against the nihilistic emptiness that Stevens hollows out here. In other words, these short sentences respond to the poem’s aged dejection, slipping in through the quiet of the ellipses, as if the poem begins to react against itself to affirm (rather than discount or ameliorate) this elusive, illusory, and delusional past. The remainder of “Seventy Years Later” examines a specific yet indefinite memory of a “meeting at noon at the edge of the field,” which now only “*seems* like / An invention” (emphasis added). Testing out its early pessimistic claims, the flurry

of figures with which Part I ends suggests that the speaker is reassessing and even reimagining his relation to this past. (Is he free to do so *at last*? To learn, “Seventy Years Later,” to live finally?) The intimate “embrace” he remembers “between one desperate clod / And another” may indeed be nothing but a fiction. It may have never happened, but it nonetheless constitutes “a queer assertion of humanity.” In this “gross universe,” the poem’s very existence insists there are creatures—human “clods”—who remember one another, invent importance, and queerly call something from nothing through the clunky mechanics of fantasy and imagination (*Collected* 445).

Even if this speaker cannot experience the reality of his long life, even if the intimate memory is a constructed “theorem,” its sensuousness might nevertheless be worth retaining,

As if nothingness contained a métier,
A vital assumption, an impermanence
In its permanent cold, an illusion so desired

That the green leaves came and covered the high rock,
That the lilacs came and bloomed, like a blindness cleaned,
Exclaiming bright sight, as it was satisfied,

In a birth of sight. The blooming and the musk
Were being alive, an incessant being alive,
A particular of being, that gross universe. (445)

These complex lines do not fully turn against the poem’s early argument—that the past is an illusion, that we are all ruled by nothingness—yet they problematize its argument, insisting that the very illusoriness of the past and present makes possible the sensuous hauntings that press so strangely, so obliquely upon us as movements and slippages of “impermanence” in the permanently indifferent universe. Vendler reads these lines as evidence of a

“counter-structure” that resists the paralysis and horror of aging’s imminent end (*Last Looks* 42). I agree but extend this claim, for though critics usually recognize in Stevens’s obscurity a theoretico-poetic effort of affirmation, they often read this effort as an heroic (thus consolatory) resolution of the mind and the world, reality and the imagination.¹¹ And yet in suggesting an impermanent, sensuous, yet still relatively bleak negotiation with nothingness, “The Rock” does not resolve these binary oppositions at all but, rather, releases the aged poet from a desire to establish or to realize a verifiable relation—a substantial, material one—between past and present. Moreover, “Seventy Years Later” does not even aim to affirm or redeem individual freedom as the ground of an aged subject looking back, for it ends by accepting that one has always already been a fiction. The poem intimates, then, that there is a *sensual* relation and relay—a play—between a past that can never return (and, if it does, is probably a fiction) and the precarious here and now. But it also suggests that we can learn to enjoy, to take pleasure in, perhaps even to love this play. The “blooming and the musk”—the growth and the scent of the leaves and lilacs—“[w]ere being [in itself] alive” and *are still* “incessant[ly] being alive” (Stevens, *Collected* 445). They bestow a “bright sight” that might teach the speaker (and us?) to smell or to see—as the listener of “The Snow Man” beholds—“the nothing that is” (8) and potentially to learn to affirm or invent the “métier”—the worth or utility—of “nothingness” (445).

SUNDAY MORNING

These explorations of the past in Stevens’s late poetry recall one of his earliest extended meditations, “Sunday Morning.” In my final reading, which turns from *The Rock* to *Harmonium* (from last to first), I show how the tonal, formal, and thematic dynamics of the poem prefigure the efforts of Stevens’s last phase,

¹¹ Kathleen Woodward reads “what is important” in “The Rock” as “the conclusion that the world is [itself] the source of tranquility and that the satisfactions of tranquility are at last so easily arrived at” (128). Charles Berger is less convinced than Woodward by what he reads as the poem’s “high, consolatory rhetoric” (157) that attempts to reverse its initial glances back at “the external signs and scenes of his early life,” which now “appear dead” (148). Joseph Carroll argues that Stevens “seeks to invest ‘illusion’ with ontological validity,” despite the early lines that “[stand] amazed at the ghastly unreality of the past” (315).

practicing a lateness by broaching and holding open a relay between a past that was never present (a life of belief, practice, and devotion) and a susceptible, vulnerable here and now.

This approach to “Sunday Morning” contests the long reception of the poem as an effort to overthrow, abandon, or find a substitute for religion. J. Hillis Miller, for instance, praises the poem’s purportedly “eloquent description of the moment when gods dissolve” and humankind “sings the creative hymns of a new culture” (222). Robert Rehder rearticulates this praise for the poem as “a hymn to the earth’s beauty . . . without existential anguish, comfortable with its doubts and uncertainties” (30). “Stevens,” he writes, echoing Freud, “understands that religion is a denial of reality and an act of wish-fulfillment” (30).

Though most readers of the poem agree with Miller and Rehder on its purpose, many are not as convinced by its execution. Harold Bloom, for instance, agrees that the poem attempts to affirm “a world where no spirit lingers” (34-35), but he nevertheless finds the “affirmations . . . quite derivative” of “Wordsworth, Keats, Tennyson, [and] Whitman” (29). For this reason, Mutlu Konuk Blasing argues that the poem “remains nostalgic” (90). Other critics claim that the poem reinscribes that which it seeks to overthrow. Janet McCann argues that the poem’s final stanza makes its solutions “[appear] artificial and contrived” (10), while Beverly Maeder insists that “we find Stevens mining the old theological metaphors even as he tries to debunk them . . . leav[ing] the hierarchies” the poem desires to level “intact” (24). David R. Jarraway, who wrote *the* book on Stevens and belief, argues that, while the poem “promises to mend orthodoxy’s institutional rift between flesh and air” (34), “the orgiastic ring” of pseudo-sunworshippers in stanza VII “ultimately eventuates in a transcendence” that the poem had initially resisted and attacked (35). Joseph Carroll is perhaps the harshest critic of the poem, approaching it as a “self-assured” work whose “existential heroism . . . does not rise above the level of bravado, and in attempting to close the gap between spiritual passion and a ‘devotion’ to sensual pleasure, [Stevens] comes very close to self-parody” (54). The poem that emerges from this reception, then, is a thoroughly heroic,

even if fraught and unconvincing, battle with an inapplicable and, perhaps, undesirable past, a “Christian ethos centered in the passion of Jesus” (Jarraway 34).

My reading begins with and hopes to develop Vendler’s account of the poem, a far more sober and generous reading that senses “no Nietzschean brio” in its “prophecies” and believes its consolatory, substitutive gestures to be “wistfully and even disbelievingly made” (*On Extended* 55). Indeed, from the start Stevens uses little energy to break or overthrow anything. Rather, he coordinates the conditions of a daydream, a somnambulation—anticipating “The Irish Cliffs of Moher” and many of his late poems of sleep and silence—that expresses the reality of having already been broken from an irredeemably old, fabricated, and illusory past:

Complacencies of the peignoir, and late
 Coffee and oranges in a sunny chair,
 And the green freedom of a cockatoo
 Upon a rug mingle to dissipate
 The holy hush of ancient sacrifice.
 She dreams a little, and she feels the dark
 Encroachment of that old catastrophe,
 As a calm darkens among water-lights.
 The pungent oranges and bright, green wings
 Seem things in some procession of the dead,
 Winding across wide water, without sound.
 The day is like wide water, without sound,
 Stilled for the passing of her dreaming feet
 Over the seas, to silent Palestine,
 Dominion of the blood and sepulcher. (Stevens, *Collected* 53)

Here Stevens arranges a scene of reverence’s debauched double: the laziness of a late morning. But as soon as the mingling and repeating objects—coffee,

peignoir, oranges, chair, bird-branded rug—“dissipate / ‘The holy hush,” the hush responds and presses back upon the woman dozing here (“she feels the dark / Encroachment of that old catastrophe”). A history she has not lived, that she cannot verify, that was, just a moment ago, *indifferent* to her, suddenly makes a difference in a daydream that stills the present with a tone of somber remembrance. These solid objects take on a figurative content and form a “procession” that she joins as one object among many. The serene insistence on quietude (“hush,” “calm,” “without sound,” “without sound,” “stilled,” “silent Palestine”) nevertheless prompts movements, passings, and relays between this “green freedom” of a lazy Sunday morning and the lingering, living myth of “the blood and sepulcher.” What past is this? How might this woman respond to or negotiate with that which suddenly—without reason, without warning, and without goodwill—seems to make so much difference?

Stanzas II and VI—the first an emotional ascent, the latter a descent—open with rhetorical questions that ridicule this past before prescribing limits meant to stay the woman’s sleepwalking. Stanza II ridicules the practice of paying homage to “the dead” and divine; the latter stanza asks, mockingly, “Is there no change of death in paradise? / Does ripe fruit never fall? Or do the boughs / Hang always heavy in that perfect sky[?]” (55). As if incited by the matters of the first stanza, a voice awakens in the second and provokes, “What is divinity if it can come / Only in silent shadows and in dreams” (53)? Anticipating Stevens’s late engagements with the past, this antagonist seems to challenge (and here I paraphrase), “Is not your relation to these old lies insubstantial? A false play of ghosts and fairytales?” But the effort to render this religious past insubstantial, irretrievable, false—much like this voice’s later efforts to ridicule the inanity of an eternal paradise “[u]nchanging, yet so like our perishing earth” (55)—seems to miss the point. Yes, “the measures destined for [one’s] soul”—passions, moods, grievings, elations, emotions, pleasures, and pains—comprise the self, but they also leave one vulnerable to and enable one to sense and to linger with unexpected darkenings and encroachings (54).

Later in life, Stevens learns the lesson that he prefigures here: that the insubstantiality and irretrievability of one’s “father’s father” (*Collected* 427)—

here an unrealizable faith—becomes a problem of one’s own past, too. The sleepwalking woman who incites these railings against gods and paradise also demonstrates, by doing so, the intensities of these histories, these old, dying myths, for prompting her to go, to resist, and to sense among these unexpected encounters that which might surprise her with pleasure. In this sense, it is not death that is “the mother of beauty” (55)—not the fact that “ripe fruit” will “fall”—but rather that fruit ripens at all, that it ages, and that the contours by which it does so are—sensually, potently—many and variable (55).

The other stanzas of the poem (III, IV, V, and VII) continue its dialogic movements between the woman and her antagonist. This latter voice continues to bombard her with arguments: the gods never existed (III), paradise does not exist (IV), death gives value to life (V), her only hope of paradise is a quasi-pagan “devotion to the sun” and a “heavenly fellowship / Of men that perish and of a summer morn” (56). Yet all this rings hollow as a response to the stillness of stanza I. The woman’s contentment “when wakened birds . . . test the reality / Of misty fields, by their sweet questionings” and her “need of some imperishable bliss” both provoke and withstand her antagonist (54, 55). Indeed, in one response to the heated question, “where, then, is paradise?” (54), it is as if the respondent misses that he is on the verge of a thesis more profound than his “ring of men / [Who] chant in orgy” (55):

There is not any haunt of prophecy,
 Nor any old chimera of the grave,
 Neither the golden underground, nor isle
 Melodious, where spirits gat them home,
 Nor visionary south, nor cloudy palm
 Remote on heaven’s hill, that has endured
 As April’s green endures; or will endure
 Like her remembrance of awakened birds,
 Or her desire for June and evening, tipped
 By the consummation of the swallow’s wings. (54)

There is no “golden underground” to console ephemeral, fleeting creatures, yet, seemingly without noticing, the voice here argues that only that which passes (and ages) can endure. Only ephemera like “April’s green,” “awakened birds,” and a “desire for June” can comprise paradises. But they do not comprise them simply because they *will* pass one day, for this would merely affirm what the penultimate stanza attempts to affirm (a human paradise built on a solidarity in mortality). Rather, that which will pass comprises paradise because it is already in the midst of aging, passing into/through and thus engaging a vast livingness. In an effort to critique this woman’s somnambulations and questionings, these lines affirm her experience in stanza I. Because she, too, passes, it is possible to engage that “old catastrophe,” to feel it even without belief, to think a relation to it even if it is a fiction, to enfold it into her life and in doing so to change it into a reverence akin to the “remembrance of awakened birds.”

Though not explicitly about growing older, “Sunday Morning” nevertheless expresses in its voices and in the muttering among these voices a relation between an unbelievable past (as in “The Rock”) and one’s own passing and aging. This looking back—though no doubt different from the late and last poems in tone, focus, and word count—nevertheless prepares Stevens for his stoical backward glances, his bare persistence in later poems. Perhaps this is nowhere clearer than in the final stanza of “Sunday Morning”:

She hears, upon that water without sound,
 A voice that cries, “The tomb in Palestine
 Is not the porch of spirits lingering.
 It is the grave of Jesus, where he lay.”
 We live in an old chaos of the sun,
 Or old dependency of day and night,
 Or island solitude, unsponsored, free,
 Of that wide water, inescapable.
 Deer walk upon our mountains, and the quail
 Whistle about us their spontaneous cries;

Sweet berries ripen in the wilderness;
 And, in the isolation of the sky,
 At evening, casual flocks of pigeons make
 Ambiguous undulations as they sink,
 Downward to darkness, on extended wings. (56)

Though the poem's false images of the new have rarely been embraced enthusiastically, this stanza almost always receives praise. The echoes of Milton, Hopkins, Keats, and others have been investigated by many scholars.¹² Indeed, they show that the poem itself *is* an attempt to engage poetically with a vast, living past.

To this collective praise, I will add three points. First, the voice that cries to the woman here at the end is not a voice of chastisement or challenge. The message is the reward of her daydreaming, a vision unhindered by the consolations and diatribes of the other, aggressive voices. Second, the woman still lives in “an old chaos of the sun,” in “old dependency” on the material and environmental realities that press upon her “day or night.” Third, she may learn to live an “island solitude,” cut off from the “wide water” across which she sleepwalks earlier. However, the final sentence captures an “isolation” populated by the sensuous traces of life forms who walk, whistle, ripen, and undulate. Though these impressions offer no final answer to the poem's questions, they nevertheless persist in holding open the late problem of the past. What relation might the woman (might we?) have to a present, “unsponsored” life that is inescapably and hauntingly contiguous with “old catastrophe[s]” (whether fictions or not), with other histories, pasts, and ghosts passing through these present portals? The deer, birds, and beasts of Stevens's closing stanza serve as ambiguous signs of such encounters, swarms of palpably absent presences to which this aging poet will remain susceptible—too old, it would

¹² Harold Bloom reads “Sunday Morning,” “with all its Wordsworthian, Keatsian, and even repressedly Whitmanian touches,” as “Stevens’ most Tennysonian poem” (27). Eleanor Cook’s extended reading of the poem places it in an even larger context, sounding out further resonances with Coleridge (102), Grey (104), Milton (104-109), and even Virgil (110-11).

seem, for religion, not old enough to be unmoved by its allure or its promise. “Sunday Morning” does not turn against old fictions, does not seek to replace the dead past with new pagan ceremonies. Rather, it enacts and affirms the secular and spiritual agony of lateness. It affirms being touched by the unrealizable; it affirms encounters with the ghosts of myths and memories. In this sense, the early Stevens of *Harmonium* already anticipates the figures of aging and problems of the past we find in his late and last writings.

In this essay, I have analyzed four Wallace Stevens poems, arguing that they present figures of aging and ending. They are not metaphoric figures, per se, but postures and gestures that strive to capture a moment of struggle or rapture or contentment with aging and ending. Earlier in this essay, I also referred to these poems and their figures as exercises, and my analyses continuously suggest that their personae enact or embody feelings or frustrations or pleasures that we might learn to recognize as our own. As exercises, then, I think Stevens’s late (and early) poems beckon us to try their figures out, to approach them as open postures into which we, too, might imaginatively step and sense, however exactly or imperfectly, variants of lateness, even of a late sublimity. This frame might encourage us to situate Stevens’s modernism in a long poetic as well as philosophical tradition that includes Epictetus’s ancient exercise, which drew Michel Foucault’s attention near the end of his own life, of meditating on the here and now as if it were the end, and reflecting on how one wishes to make one’s end, and what one wants to be doing when one is taken (Foucault, *The Hermeneutics* 479). Though beyond the purview of my analysis here, perhaps studying Stevens’s poetic treatment of lateness remains fruitful for the way we readers might come to experiment with senses and styles of aging and ending that touch our lives, to try out experiments and exercises that have a long history: a history at home within as well as long before and well after the decades most associated of literary modernism.

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