

**Verse, Perversity, University**  
**Wallace Stevens and the Melodics of Crispin**

SIMON JARVIS

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Walter Benjamin once opined that the death penalty could be moral, but never its legitimation. The remark is evidently a paradox, because it is hard not to read it as justifying capital punishment in the very act of renouncing justification. Something of the same paradoxical structure attends attempts to say whether, and how, literature matters. Each new attempt to defend the value of literature may weaken, not strengthen, the object championed. When academics offer to say whether and how literature matters, they position themselves as literature's patrons. But the patron-client relationship is ambivalent. It corrodes and enfeebles even as it nurtures and protects. Legitimation of literature is less innocent than it thinks, because legitimation has a tendency to invade the very substance of what is being legitimated, and to destroy it from within. Might the very damaged and very precarious position which literature currently retains in academic life not be, at least in part, a result of its having been protected in the wrong way? My exploration of this question will take the form of a case study. I shall attempt to answer the question as to whether literature matters concretely, rather than abstractly, by asking whether and in what way a particular poem matters and has mattered. The poem in question is Wallace Stevens's 'The Comedian as the Letter C'. In evaluating it, I sketch an alternative approach of my

own to the question of literature's mattering, an approach in which poetics need not be subordinated to hermeneutics.<sup>1</sup>



Common to the careers of many important poets, I believe, is a moment when the poet develops a verse manner which cannot readily be fitted into the existing repertoire of available styles, a moment of breakthrough. We might identify as instances the severely ascetic model of blank verse which Wordsworth was able to come upon in 1797; the simultaneous archaism and innovation of Keats's *Endymion* in 1817; or the finely calibrated ugliness of Browning's *Sordello* in 1840. In each of these cases what is being unearthed is not simply a new style, but a new way altogether of thinking in verse: a new *verse sentence*, above all, in whose syntax, lexicon, punctuation, rhythms, tunes, pauses, echoes and clicks thoughts previously unimaginable may be called up. Wallace Stevens's *Harmonium* is distinguished by the poet's having opened up several new avenues of verse-thinking at once, as well as a further avenue which consists in the art of laying out those avenues in relation to each other. It is a work, therefore, which every literary critic ought to approach in trepidation.

The really new is hard to grasp. So it is often misidentified with something a little less new. This is one path taken by early commentary on Stevens's verse: to identify Stevens, whether admiringly or lamentingly, as an aesthete. John Gould Fletcher set Stevens above even Paul Valéry, remarking that 'of all the purely aesthetic artists of today, he wields the finest and most distinguished weapons of style', before going on to offer some advice: Stevens 'must either expand his range to take in more of human experience, or give up writing altogether'.<sup>2</sup> The exemplary exceptions to this rule of early misapplied praise and blame are two: Marianne Moore's outstanding essay (pp.

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<sup>1</sup> I am continuing in my own way the exploration of a question raised before me by Alan Filreis. Filreis asks 'why has not the critical response to Stevens put sound at the center of discussion?' and offers, as the first of six possible reasons, 'fear of mannerist reputation'. Filreis, 'Sound at an Impasse', in 'Wallace Stevens and the Less Legible Meanings of Sounds', special issue of *Wallace Stevens Journal*, 33.1 (2009), pp. 15-23, p. 15. See also, in the same issue, Beverly Maeder, 'Sound and Sensuous Awakening in *Harmonium*', pp. 24-43. Natalie Gerber in her 'Introduction', to the volume (pp. 3-14) gives a useful account of some recent work on Stevens and prosody.

<sup>2</sup> In Charles Doyle ed., *Wallace Stevens: The Critical Heritage* (London and New York: Routledge, 1997), pp. 46-47.

48-55), by a poet strong enough precisely to acknowledge the art-making distance between Stevens's handling of such materials and all the jumble lying around him—an acknowledgement which is concentrated in her fine oxymoron, that Stevens displays 'accurate gusto'—and, in a more elaborately legitimated vein, R.P. Blackmur's 'Examples of Wallace Stevens' (p 95-125).

Early critical reception can lastingly skew the way in which a poet's verse is understood. It is not so much that the early reception continues to be followed, as that it is forever being corrected and compensated for—both by readers and by poets themselves. Blackmur's essay inaugurates what one can think of as a counter-aesthetic strand in the reading of Stevens, even though Blackmur's own position cannot in fact be understood as merely hostile to aestheticism. He remarks that 'Somewhere between the realms of ornamental sound and representative statement, the words pause and balance, dissolve and resolve. This is the mood of Euphues, and presents a poem with fine parts controlled internally by little surds of feeling that save both the poem and its parts from preciousness' (p. 100). This brilliant response shows that Blackmur knew that 'ornament' can hardly be dismissed as a feature of verse. Yet earlier in the essay he had seemed to take a more directly purist line, noting that 'Mr. Stevens has a bad reputation among those who dislike the finicky, and a high one, unfortunately, among those who value the ornamental sounds of words but who see no purpose in developing sound from sense' (p. 96).

It is particularly this last kind of remark by Blackmur which offers a significant point of departure for what are perhaps the three most important readings of the mid to late twentieth century, those of Kermode, Vendler and Bloom. Blackmur's dispraise of mere ornament helps to ready Stevens for the pedagogic role awaiting him in the academy. 'Sheer' ornament, 'mere' sound—these are the childish toys which are to be put away. To dwell upon them, to enjoy them for their own sake, is perverse. These sounds must be put in the service of sense, or must at least enter into a combat or into an exchange with sense.

Blackmur is responding here to what was, even by the time in which his essay appeared in *Hound and Horn* in 1932, already an extensive tradition of subtle appreciation, in an impressionist mode, of the crackle and rustle of Stevens's verse surface. Stevens, in this tradition, was an aristocratic, fastidious, finical, Frenchified,

aesthetical, dandy. For Mark van Doren Stevens's wit was 'tentative, perverse and superfine' (p. 40); for Paul Rosenfeld his nature is 'fastidious, aristocratic' (p. 73); for Gorham B. Munson, too, Stevens's vocabulary is 'fastidious', and the poet himself is the 'dandy' whom until now America has 'lacked' (p. 79); for Allen Tate, more presciently, his 'dandyism...is the perfect surface beneath which plays an intense Puritanism' (p. 83). The *New York Times Book Review*, sadly concluding that Stevens's 'very remarkable work . . . cannot endure' complained that '[t]he volume is a glittering edifice of icicles' and judged that 'the achievement is not poetry, it is a tour de force, a 'stunt' in the fantastic and bizarre' (p. 89). These impressions persisted: William Empson, whilst impressed by Stevens's 'long delicate rhythm based on straight singing lines', described him as a 'beau-linguist' (p. 371), 'trying on a new fancy dress' (p. 372).

Such responses sometimes reduce Stevens to the inventory of his motifs, in part because they are too ready to put him into a slot marked 'aestheticism'. Llewelyn Powys's 1924 essay in *The Dial*, 'The Thirteenth Way', is an unusual piece of prose in its own right, but makes such an identification as soon as it begins: 'Just as, in the 'nineties, golden quill in hand, Aubrey Beardsley, seated under a crucifix, traced with degenerate wax-white finger pictures that revealed a new world, a world exact, precise, and convincing, squeezed out, so to speak, between the attenuated crevices of a hypersensitive imagination, so in his poetry Mr. Wallace Stevens chips apertures in the commonplace and deftly constructs on the other side of the ramparts of the world, tier upon tier, pinnacle upon pinnacle, his own supersophisticated superterrestrial township of the mind' (p. 64). But Powys's hyper-impressionism is often merely approximately evocative, as where he suggests that '[L]istening to [Stevens's] poetry is like listening to the humming cadences of an inspired daddy longlegs akimbo in sunset light against the colored panes of a sanct window above a cathedral altar' (p. 65). For Alfred Kreymborg, Stevens is reared on 'aristocratic' traditions: 'Here is a cultivated man in the midst of the American mob, shrugging his shoulders at Mammon and indifferent to fame; a man of affairs lolling in railroad coaches en route to Florida, eating and drinking like a sybarite—and jotting down a note or two. But what notes these are. They are among the perfect things in any literature: perfect in sensation, color and sound, versification, whether in old or new

forms; perfect in language, the relation of phrase to phrase, vowel to vowel, consonant to consonant' (p. 85). Paul Rosenfeld's 1925 account in *Men Seen* begins thus: 'The playing of a Chinese orchestra. On a gong a bonze creates a copper din. The most amazing cacophony amid dissolving labials and silkiest sibilants. Quirks, booms, whistles, quavers. Lord, what instruments has he there? Small muffled drums? Plucked wires? The falsetto of an ecstatic eunuch? Upon deliberate examination it appears Stevens' matter is the perfectly grammatical arrangement of an English vocabulary not too abstract, Elizabethan, legal, with accidentals of alien terms and purely imitative sounds. But so novel and fantastic is the tintinnabulation of unusual words, and words unusually rhymed and arranged, that you nearly overlook the significations, and hear outlandish sharp and melting musics' (p. 72).

If one looks carefully at these early accounts of Stevens's first manners in *Harmonium*, one notices how complex they themselves are. They are attempting to cope with a difficult situation: that Stevens is not merely a virtuoso, but is several different kinds of virtuoso at once. They are expressing an appropriate wonder at the development of a manner containing many manners and for which the requisite critical implements simply are not yet available. The compressed impressionism of these responses might make them, perhaps, seem merely amateurish from the perspective of an academic literary criticism which was, right at that juncture, in the midst of professionalizing itself. Yet that impressionism also enables each of these critics in his or her own different way to offer a kind of astonished sketch of the new planet—and in such sketches, a sense of the tense complexity of the repertoire of Stevens's verse thinking as a whole can sometimes be preserved better than in a procedure which would start from 'readings' of the paraphrasable sense, and then show how sound is bound down to their service.

In the most powerful Stevens criticism of the mid-century, it is this Stevens—the aristocratic, fastidious, finical, Frenchified, aesthetical, tintinnabulating dandy—who is to be sacrificed, so that other kinds of Stevens may survive. Moderate versions of this are offered by Kermode and Vendler, both of whom tend to prefer the later work, but the most drastic assault is mounted in Harold Bloom's *The Poems of Our Climate*.<sup>3</sup> It

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<sup>3</sup> Harold Bloom, *Wallace Stevens: The Poems of Our Climate* (Ithaca, NY and London: Cornell University Press, 1977).

is wholly characteristic of Bloom's engaging bravado to have called 'Sea Surface With Clouds' a 'very poor though popular poem'. But the reason given is interesting: in a direct echo of Blackmur's description of one kind of depreciator of Stevens, Bloom deplores the poem's 'finicky language' (p. 68). Bloom wants above all to set Stevens in the line of Emerson and Whitman back to Wordsworth, Keats and Shelley; and he especially insists that Stevens can have learnt nothing important from French verse (p. 72). Although Stevens evidently admired and read a great deal of late nineteenth-century French poetry, and although so much of the early Stevens reception regards this as a likely source for unexpected elements of his verse manner, these channels can be regarded by Bloom as only para-Oedipal: the serious romance is always in the native tongue. Stevens is thus to be made a properly American poet, and, importantly, not primarily a modern poet but primarily a Romantic poet. He must not be late. 'There is a revealingly bitter passage directed against Whitman's great *Lilacs* elegy, as if to tell us how far short of Whitman poor Crispin had ended: [...] That is to say, the malady indeed was belatedness. Whitman came early, or early enough; but Crispin-Stevens came later. The reader looks in vain for a transumption of this lateness into an ever-earliness, but that will not take place until *Ideas of Order* and afterward' (p. 82).

I shall concentrate on a single poem which has seemed to many readers to distil both the achievement and the peculiarity of *Harmonium*: 'The Comedian as the Letter C'. I am going to set to one side Stevens's own famous letter to Hi Simons about the poem,<sup>4</sup> a document which, although it has no self-evident or unquestionable authority in a case which concerns verse thinking, has sometimes blocked, instead of facilitating discussion of the whole problem—rather as Pope's celebrated remark about sound echoing sense has made it almost impossible to arrive at a true understanding of that poet's intensely melodious verse style. I am going to take my cue, instead, from the insights of Stevens's first readers. Their having written from a non-academic perspective, and without the need to balance accounts with Stevens's late work, is an asset as well as a handicap. In some respects it helps them to see *Harmonium*'s achievement straighter, to hear it more clearly. What I shall be investigating is the poem's 'melodics', a term I borrow from Boris Eikhenbaum's still untranslated study of *The Melodics of Russian Lyric Verse*, written in a freezing Petrograd flat during the

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<sup>4</sup> *Letters*, 350-52

Russian civil war a couple of years before Stevens first drafted 'The Comedian as the Letter C'.<sup>5</sup> For 'melodics' one could, perhaps, as well say 'rhythmics'; yet I prefer Eikhenbaum's term, because it reminds us that *pitch*, not duration or amplitude, is the most important factor in specifying stress in English. I borrow the word from Eikhenbaum, rather than an entire method, since I lack his confidence that poetics can become a science. Yet I also follow a central interest of his: an interest in *the verse sentence*, in the understanding that the role of intonation in verse phonotexts is simultaneously syntactical and rhythmic, and that a poetics of verse can gain much by considering the continual interrelations of these two regimes.



*The Comedian as the Letter C*, which Bloom says can be read 'either as the crown or as the exasperation of *Harmonium*',<sup>6</sup> concentrates everything in the first Stevens to which Bloom feels ambivalent. Its two final sections are magnificently rubbished by Bloom, a verdict which may follow from the heroic reading he has given of what precedes them: 'The American reality is sea and sky, the immensity of space, and like Emerson and Whitman, Crispin beheld and became that new man, the American' (p. 74). How could Bloom not dislike a sequel in which this new man, the American, appears promptly to settle down, have children, and give up poetry? For Vendler, more moderately, 'Stevens as ironist never fades entirely ... but the corrosive deflations of the *Comedian* are nowhere else so relentless.'<sup>7</sup> Kermode finely remarks of 'The Comedian' that 'This is in every sense a fantastic performance: it is a narrative of obscurely allegorical intent, harsh and dream-like; and its manner is a sustained nightmare of unexpected diction, so that one sometimes thinks of it less as a poem than as a remarkable physical feat'.<sup>8</sup> Yet he also regards it as a performance a little against Stevens's nature: later in his study he remarks that '[Stevens's] thoughts

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<sup>5</sup> Boris Eikhenbaum, 'Melodika Russkogo Liricheskogo Stikha', in *O Poezii* (Leningrad: Sovetskiy Pisatel', 1969), pp. 327–511.

<sup>6</sup> Bloom, p. 70.

<sup>7</sup> Vendler, Helen, *On Extended Wings: Wallace Stevens' Longer Poems*, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989), p. 52.

<sup>8</sup> Kermode, Frank, *Wallace Stevens* (London: Faber, 1989), p. 41.

tended to collect in pools, not to surge forward, as he had tried to make them in ‘The Comedian as the Letter C’ (p. 57).

The poem has not lacked defenders since. Nevertheless, it has generally retained the mildly demoted place which it was given by these influential critics at mid-century. Sometimes, indeed, it has fared worse: so committed a Stevensian as Eleanor Cook can write in a recent *Reader’s Guide* to Stevens that ‘The Comedian as the Letter C’ is ‘chiefly of interest for Stevens’ wry view in 1922 of his own artistic development’ (Cook, 46). The assimilation is complete: this astonishing poem, a poem which Bloom could still find ‘the most outrageous in modern poetry’ is awarded its chief value as a buttress to the creaking story of ‘artistic development’.

What, when I have finished reading *The Comedian as the Letter C*, do I remember about it? Do I remember a narrative of the poet’s or artist’s spiritual development and its various clearly articulated and characterized stages and aspects? Not really—not unless I am already busy being a good schoolboy about it, not unless I have already set about marmorealizing it. The immediate aftermath is, rather, an after-hearing, a bewildered reeling at the verse manner introduced. It is most likely, perhaps, to consist of the slow decay in the brain of individual lines: ‘The green palmettoes in crepuscular ice’;<sup>9</sup> ‘Wrong as a divagation to Peking’ (p. 28); ‘Hence the reverberations in the words’ (p. 30); ‘Contained in their afflatus the reproach’ (p. 31); ‘The fabulous and its intrinsic verse’; ‘He gripped more closely the essential prose’ (p. 29); and, in the poem’s single most jousissant clickering, ‘Exchequering from piebald fisci unkeyed’ (p. 34).

How, though, can we interpret the poem’s phonotext, rather than just gaping in awe at it? A good starting-point here is the relation between line and design in the poem. The versification of long poems in particular is very often spoken of as though its value must essentially lie in reinforcement or illustration of the poet’s larger design. Because of the very facts of composition, however, such a result is most unlikely. The poet of a printed metrical long poem is both author (with a story, an argument, or a lesson to articulate) and verse-maker (someone who is to get out a certain number of lines of verse all falling within a certain set of constraints upon intonation contour,

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<sup>9</sup> Wallace Stevens, *Collected Poetry and Prose*, ed. by Frank Kermode and Joan Richardson (New York: The Library of America, 1997), p. 27.



syllabicity, and so on). There is no reason to assume either that these two different kinds of compositional factor must be in harmony with each other, nor that best results must ensue when they are. I have argued elsewhere, indeed, that successful long poems are a ‘war to the life’ between line and design, and therefore between two different kinds of thinking: the instrumental projects, designs, plans, narratives of the author of a book, on one hand, and the half-conscious or para-conscious thinking which is at work in verse-making, on the other.<sup>10</sup>

This view at least partly informs my wish to trace a different kind of trajectory from Romanticism to modernism than that which is sometimes offered. In the path I mean, the long poem is central, not peripheral, and the kind of long poem which is in particular central is that in which this war to the life between line and design is most conspicuously and most cacophonously being fought. The crucial tradition of long poems for this argument is that in which the verse surface by no means appears placidly to stand in the service of the poem’s story and design. On the contrary, it often seems, in such poems as though the story, the design, are, rather occasions for the generation of hitherto unforeseen achievements at the level of the verse line, the verse sentence, and the verse paragraph. The key Romantic poem here is Keats’s *Endymion*, which Stevens mentions several times in his correspondence,<sup>11</sup> and which I consider to have been for him an essential text. Keats’s own declaration, in a letter, that, in writing *Endymion*, it was his intention to fill four thousand lines with poetry,<sup>12</sup> is an essential clue to the significance of this work. It would be truer to say that *Endymion*’s story serves Keats’s versification than that the versification illustrates or ornaments the story. With Browning’s *Sordello*, and Swinburne’s *Tristram of Lyonesse*, it makes up a trilogy of long poems in which all those aspects which are supposedly the soul of a long poem—plot, argument, and so on—are to such an exacerbated extent striated by that saturation of attention to every prosodic device which is usually called ‘lyric’ that the putatively essential criterion of organic or articulated unity comes to

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<sup>10</sup> See my ‘The Melodics of Long Poems’, *Textual Practice* 24.4 (2010), pp. 607–22.

<sup>11</sup> *Letters*, ed. by Holly Stevens (London: Faber, 1966), pp. 28, 29, 110, 148.

<sup>12</sup> *The Letters of John Keats, 1814-1821*, ed. Hyder Edwards Rollins (2 vols, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1958), vol. 1, p. 170.

seem secondary. Put simply, it is in each case very hard indeed to follow the story, and yet at the same time this complaint seems in each case to miss the point.

It is no accident, I think, that each of these poems has to some extent hitherto resisted academic monumentalization. They are hard for approaches which depend primarily on hermeneutic depth to assimilate, because of their essential perversity: because of their fetishistic fixation on that verbal and intonational small change which ought, according to a hermeneutic approach, to be made to serve complexities of meaning, but which cannot convincingly be pressed into that service. In at least two cases, as in that of Crispin, the fact of early composition has allowed this failure on literary criticism's part to be legitimated by the canard of 'maturation', 'artistic development', a story which seems to me in each of these cases to get everything wrong. The poems are as thrilling for verse-addicts as they are repulsive to hermeneuts, because they refuse in their very musculature the usual diagram of the relation between a poem's parts and its whole, a poem's body and its organs. In poems like this, the line is not subordinated to the 'poem as a whole'. The 'poem as a whole'—always in fact only a moment—is just as much subordinated to the line. This is not one of the familiar paradoxes of mereology, but, I am claiming, a feature of this particular kind of long poem, the long poem most audibly animated and tormented by lyric.

Since what we are after here is not 'doing a reading' but interpreting some essential features of verse procedure, it will be good to take a reasonably extended chunk, in this case from the poem's second section.

So much for that. The affectionate emigrant found  
A new reality in parrot-squawks.  
Yet let that trifle pass. Now, as this odd  
Discoverer walked through the harbor streets  
Inspecting the cabildo, the façade  
Of the cathedral, making notes, he heard  
A rumbling, west of Mexico, it seemed,  
Approaching like a gasconade of drums.  
The white cabildo darkened, the façade,  
As sullen as the sky, was swallowed up  
In swift, successive shadows, dolefully.  
The rumbling broadened as it fell. The wind,

Tempestuous clarion, with heavy cry,  
Came bluntly thundering, more terrible  
Than the revenge of music on bassoons.  
Gesticulating lightning, mystical,  
Made pallid flitter. Crispin, here, took flight.  
An annotator has his scruples, too.  
He knelt in the cathedral with the rest,  
This connoisseur of elemental fate,  
Aware of exquisite thought. The storm was one  
Of many proclamations of the kind,  
Proclaiming something harsher than he learned  
From hearing signboards whimper in cold nights  
On seeing the midsummer artifice  
Of heat upon his pane. This was the span  
Of force, the quintessential fact, the note  
Of Vulcan, that a valet seeks to own,  
The thing that makes him envious in phrase.

And while the torrent on the roof still droned  
He felt the Andean breath. His mind was free  
And more than free, elate, intent, profound  
And studious of a self possessing him,  
That was not in him in the crusty town  
From which he sailed. Beyond him, westward, lay  
The mountainous ridges, purple balustrades,  
In which the thunder, lapsing in its clap,  
Let down gigantic quavers of its voice,  
For Crispin to vociferate again. (pp. 26-27).

One early reviewer of Stevens's verse, startled, perhaps, by the appearance of blank verse at all in such a place, declares (of another of the poems in this collection, 'The Worms at Heaven's Gate') that 'It is, of course, Miltonic blank verse'.<sup>13</sup> Nothing could well be more inaccurate as a characterization of Stevens's early blank verse manner. Contrast between the two is, in fact, a useful way of isolating some of the broader features of Stevens's mode. Any forty-line sequence of Milton's blank verse will have a higher total proportion of stressed syllables than any forty-line sequence of Stevens's. This follows above all from the contrast between Milton's and Stevens's

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<sup>13</sup> Cited in Doyle, p. 42.

*verse sentences*. Milton's are very often hypotactic: their many clauses require innocuous verbal small change such as 'now' or 'hee' to bear stress, on pain of syntactical collapse. This is also a feature of Milton's rhetoric: epic similes have prosodic as well as rhetorical consequences, because 'As' and 'so' are required to bear stress in order to keep the unwieldy comparison, in which tenor and vehicle are (like some vast articulated ocean-going vessel) often to be found many lines apart from each other, afloat. Stress is worked so hard in Milton because it is having to do so many different jobs at once: not merely metrical, but also semantic, syntactical, rhetorical, narrative, and even theological. The result is the intensely worked texture of the typical Miltonic line, in which the verse sentence becomes a force field in which the irresistible force of powerful syntactic propulsion—because we are so often waiting for the main verb or for the completion of a simile or of a thought—meets the immovable object of all those local functions which the complex patterns of stress are serving.

What we have before us is something as different as it could well be from that. The passage is quite remarkable for the overall lightness of its stress. Long experience of metrical analysis of all sorts of blank verse in English offers few passages indeed where so few stressed syllables appear in such a long sequence of heroic lines. Stevens appears particularly to have luxuriated in what was a central achievement of certain kinds of Romantic verse, the ability to float an entire heroic line across from left to right using only three stresses, or, in exceptional cases, two: ('His violence was for aggrandizement'; 'Of his aesthetic, his philosophy'). The effect, most likely half-conscious at most in all three poets, is central to the new blank verse manner which Wordsworth invents or discovers in 1797, but also, and still more virtuosically, to at least one couplet poem, Shelley's peerless *Julian and Maddalo*. In 'The Comedian as the Letter C', and in this passage of it, almost any ictic place can be treated as stress-optional, but the same does not apply in reverse: only seldom does Stevens allow a stress on a non-ictus. In this respect, in fact, he is as strict as Pope. In this passage of thirty-nine lines there are only two occasions on which a stress could be discovered at III, one at V, two at VII and three at IX. These figures offer roughly the same proportion of stresses on non-ictus as that found in two hundred lines of Pope's *Essay on Man*. When we put this together with the relative infrequency of stress on

ictus we have part of the makings of Stevens's incomparably airy line: light, elastic, rapid.

Here it is not going too far, perhaps, to point out as something like a signature tune of 'The Comedian as the Letter C' a quite particular melodic pattern, which we can find, in this passage, in its final line:

For Crispin to vociferate again.

and in two of its predecessors:

Inspecting the cabildo, the façade

He knelt in the cathedral with the rest.

In each of these lines there are only three stressed syllables, on two, six, and ten. This tune recurs often in this poem (to give a few instances: 'His grand pronunciamiento and devise' (p. 35); 'What counted was mythology of self' (p. 22); 'And general lexicographer of mute' (p. 22); 'The valet in the tempest was annulled' (p. 23); 'The ruses that were shattered by the large' (p. 24); 'In Yucatan, the Maya sonnetteers' (p. 24); 'How greatly had he grown in his demesne' (p. 25); 'And only, in the fables that he scrawled' (p. 25); 'That wakefulness or meditating sleep' (p. 27).) Most of these lines are also noticeable for what an earlier age would have called their 'elasticity': the line has no obvious place in it where we can make a pause or caesura, but arcs from left to right like a cleverly constructed suspension bridge with few obvious means of support.

Of course, the mere diagram doesn't by itself give the melody: each of these instances differs subtly from the others by virtue of its differing syntactical shape, and a scansion of Stevens is only the preliminary to a study of his verse sentences, in both their syntactic and lexical aspects. There is, as with Shelley's *Julian* and as with Wordsworth, a marked asceticism with respect to syntactical inversion. It is implied to be a part of elegance not to have to resort to squeezing the word order to make it fit the tune. The sentences are rarely hypotactic: the longer ones tend much more often to be paratactic, as in Wordsworth, accreting clauses by addition—additions

which, however, are much less often than in Wordsworth qualifications of the initial thought but which tend, rather, to be illustrations and amplifications of it. At the same time, however, as Eleanor Cook notes, Stevens alternates, in 'The Comedian', between long sentences of many lines and one-liners.<sup>14</sup> The moments at which Stevens makes a single line of verse coincide with a single sentence of his narrative make an essential feature of his manner. 'Crispin was washed away by magnitude.' (p. 22) 'Here was no help before reality.' (p. 24) 'What was this gusty, gaudy panoply? / Out of what swift destruction did it spring?' (p. 24) 'But let the rabbit run, the cock declaim.' (p. 32) 'The words of things entangle and confuse.' (p. 33) 'So may the relation of each man be clipped.' (p. 37) Sometimes these single line sentences are stacked up in a sequence of one-liners, as in the series of rhetorical questions which breaks out in section 5, 'A Nice Shady Home': 'What is one man among so many men? / What are so many men in such a world? / Can one man think one thing and think it long? / Can one man be one thing and be it long?' (p. 33) Equally characteristic, though, are phrases which, while not whole sentences, initiate and complete within a single line a single contained thought. At the same time, although there is frequent run-on at the line-end, this very often coincides with a phrasal division or a division in the sense. Although these are often left formally unmarked by punctuation, the line-break's bisection of syntax is seldom violent in the way that it so often is in Keats and Browning. No blank verse predecessor or contemporary of Stevens brings these features together in so marked, even mannered, a way. It becomes an implied insistence on the reconcilability of the criterion of prose sense and that of melodious utterance.

One way of interpreting this, I think, is to see it as a renewal of an element which remained essential to some, but not all, Romantic verse-writing. As I have argued elsewhere, Wordsworth's blank verse technique needs to be seen not primarily as a reaction against, say, Pope and Johnson, but as an exacerbation of one of their criteria—that verse should at least be capable of being good prose before it can be good verse—at the expense of other criteria—for example, nobility of diction.<sup>15</sup> It is

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<sup>14</sup> Eleanor Cook, *Wallace Stevens: A Reader's Guide* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2007), p. 47.

<sup>15</sup> Simon Jarvis, 'Wordsworth', in *The Cambridge Companion to English Poets*, ed. by Claude Rawson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), pp. 294-96.

very striking indeed how seldom pre-Romantic English poets are mentioned in discussion of Stevens, but one way of interpreting the verse manner of ‘The Comedian’ is to see it as foregrounding an element of buried and concealed Augustanism which had in any case been retained within Wordsworth and Shelley—accounting for what Donald Davie called ‘Shelley’s urbanity’.<sup>16</sup> Stevens’s recourse to this manner is understated and discriminating, but it is essential not only, and most obviously, to a poem like *Crispin* which often brushes upon mock, but also to a poem such as ‘Sunday Morning’ which has been ubiquitously read as a continuation of a manner which is for some reason called ‘high’ Romantic. ‘Jove in the clouds had his inhuman birth’ is a line which perfectly suspends, in fact, the ultimately nugatory opposition ‘Augustan/Romantic’.

Elegance, indisputable command of the medium, has in this way been built into the poem’s metrico-rhythmic architecture. This is the essential basis for the immense risks which it then takes at the level of lexicon and thought. If I have just described the poem’s supporting melodic substructure as a continuation and even a purification of a manner developed by Wordsworth and Shelley, every rift of this is then loaded with lexical ore in a way which has, rather, learnt from Keats and Browning. Remarkable in both the latter is not merely the sheer range of the lexicon, but also the way in which verse once more becomes, as it had been at the beginning of the seventeenth century, but had almost never been in the long eighteenth, the motor of lexical invention. Stevens’s coinages are closer in kind to Shakespeare’s than to Joyce’s because of their intimate and necessary connection with verse melody: they give the appearance of being as strongly motivated by melodic, as by thematic, necessities. As in *Endymion*, archaism and innovation are in ‘The Comedian as the Letter C’ twins, not opposites. One instance can perhaps stand for all: the line ‘Arointing his dreams with fugal requiems?’ (p. 33) is simultaneously an archaism (because of its conscious borrowing of a word famously attested only in *Macbeth*, and used ever afterward only by writers who have found it in *Macbeth*) and at the same time the opposite of an archaism, in that it arrogates to itself the right to turn this

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<sup>16</sup> Donald Davie, *Purity of Diction in English Verse* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1967) pp. 133-59.

*hapax* into part of its own verbal equipment, by using it as a transitive verb with the object ‘dreams’.

This twinned archaism-innovation is the key to another of the poem’s essential genetic relationships, that to nonsense verse of Lewis Carroll’s kind. ‘Silentious porpoises’, for example, can hardly fail to remind us of Carroll, and the same can be said of ‘this wig of things, this nincompated pedagogue’. In ‘Jabberwocky’ too an essential part of the joke, often missed, lies in Carroll’s metrico-rhythmic skill, his recognition that certain resonant tunes of Victorian verse have become melodic clichés. The line ‘And the mome raths outgrabe’ is at once melancholy and hilarious not merely, and perhaps not even primarily, because of its invented nonsense words but because we know its tune despite not knowing what the words mean. Yet in Stevens’s ‘Comedian’ this proximity to Carroll is only one colour. There are moments of audible hilarity, to my mind, in the ‘Comedian’ too, but they come at moments of an almost perfect undecidability of tone. Let us consider the poem’s very opening from this point of view.

Nota: man is the intelligence of his soil,  
The sovereign ghost. As such, the Socrates  
Of snails, musician of pears, principium  
And lex. Sed quaeritur: is this same wig  
Of things, this nincompated pedagogue,  
Preceptor to the sea? Crispin at sea  
Created, in his day, a touch of doubt.  
An eye most apt in gelatines and jupes,  
Berries of villages, a barber’s eye,  
An eye of land, of simple salad-beds,  
Of honest quilts, the eye of Crispin, hung  
On porpoises, instead of apricots,  
And on silentious porpoises, whose snouts  
Dibbled in waves that were mustachios,  
Inscrutable hair in an inscrutable world. (p. 22)

For all the Carrollian brio of the whole passage and of the penultimate line in particular, it is the last line here which I can never, when I am listening to the poem, get past without breaking into audible laughter—provided only that it is read in deadly earnest.



This, at last, brings us up against a still more elusive difficulty, that of mode and genre. One of the things which has made the greatest American critics, and especially Bloom, uneasy about this poem, I think, is its proximity to mock. Because one of the classic achievements of mock is to broker a settlement between heroic poetry and modernity, it can also feel like a way of avoiding modernity or a way of defending oneself against it—perhaps also, then, a way of avoiding America or defending oneself against it? Bloom senses that the poem's apparent content in its first four sections—the poet's transition from Europe to America and from the beautiful to the sublime—is not merely negated in the poem's own last two sections, but that it is negated throughout by the poem's verse mode, and by its uneasy relationship to mock in particular. Vendler hears in the poem ironic deflations more corrosive than in any other part of the poet's authorship—and they are not taken to be to its credit.

I think, in fact, that there is a structural connection between this problem over mode, the problem of mock, and the other problem which we have been much more extensively considering, the problem over sound, over the wrong attachment to sound 'for its own sake', and the failure to bind that perverse attachment down properly to its job of illustrating, enacting or amplifying sense. The lyrically striated long poem has in fact an inherent tendency to mock its heroes because the near-priority of line over design makes it seem as though the composition and therefore the real action are in truth really driven not by any fictive personage but by tunes, echoes, clicks and phonemes: the comedian as, in fact, the letter C. Crispin brinks on risibility less because there is anything comical about his story than because he is only imperfectly its hero—just as, indeed, the most immaculate performances of art are never 'all my own work' but are elicited from a historical medium of accumulated collective labour which bears me up. This accounts for the deep unsatisfactoriness of any approach to this poem which takes paraphrase as fundamental and phonotext as ornament. It would be truer to say that the *story* is 'ornamental'. The story provides a pretext, an occasion, an excuse for the astonishing new achievement of the prosodic intelligence which the poem represents. Once extracted and delivered to us in prose it

is not much more remarkable than that article in *The Dial* by Paul Rosenfeld which Louis Martz convincingly showed to be an important source for the poem.<sup>17</sup>



One of the most remarkable features of *Harmonium's* melodic repertoire is its refusal of an apparently unavoidable choice: the choice between metrical and non-metrical verse. Stevens refuses this choice not simply, as many had done and would continue to do, by allowing the ghost of metre to peep out from behind apparently free verse, nor simply by loosening up metrical verse at the edges so that it might become relatively speaking freer—although both these approaches were and would continue to be part of Stevens's repertoire. Where other poets would be preoccupied with constructing the appearance or the reality of a distinctively singular approach to the crisis of metre, Stevens chooses to excel in all modes at once. Achieved singularity, this plurality implies, is not to be secured by acts of stylistic will: my voice becomes distinctively individual only in so far as it is unreservedly relinquished into the medium I work in. Above all, Stevens makes a central place for verse which is not merely metrical but which is virtuosically and determinedly and markedly so. 'Sunday Morning', 'Le Monocle de Mon Oncle', and, most extendedly, 'The Comedian as the Letter C', come flanked, interspersed, and perhaps even defended by numbers of shorter less metrical or non-metrical compositions. Stevens's 'crisp salad' picked 'from the garbage of the past',<sup>18</sup> that is, is also a trap for attention and an armamentarium of devices. One of its central purposes is to provide cover from decoys and small-arms fire under which the main battle tank, the so-called iambic pentameter, may come forward—undamaged if not unchanged.

I borrow that military metaphor from Mandelstam, who writes in his 'Conversation about Dante' of the Italian poet's 'communiques, as it were, from the battlefield' of poetry.<sup>19</sup> But a more proximate connection with a poet some of whose

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<sup>17</sup> Martz, Louis L., "From the Journal of Crispin": An Early Version of "The Comedian as the Letter C"; in *Wallace Stevens: A Celebration*, ed. by Frank Doggett and Robert Buttel (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1980), pp. 3-45.

<sup>18</sup> Stevens, *Letters*, p. 232.

<sup>19</sup> Osip Mandelstam, 'Conversation about Dante', in *Collected Critical Prose and Letters*, ed. by Jane Gary Harris, trans. by Jane Gary Harris and Constance Link (London: Collins Harvill, 1991), pp. 397-442, p. 402.

work Stevens undoubtedly knew is provided by a public lecture which Stéphane Mallarmé delivered in Oxford and Cambridge in 1894, 'La Musique et les Lettres'. Mallarmé adopted the position of one making a report, to an interested English audience, upon the state of letters in his nation. It had been timely to invite him to come, he confirmed, because

J'apporte en effet des nouvelles. Les plus surprenantes. Même cas ne se vit encore.  
—On a touché au vers.

Les gouvernements changent; toujours la prosodie reste intacte: soit que, dans les révolutions, elle passe inaperçue ou que l'attentat ne s'impose pas avec l'opinion que ce dogme dernier puisse varier.<sup>20</sup>

In a companion essay, 'Crise de vers', Mallarmé compared metre to the veil of the temple—new developments in the verse line were, he wrote, 'une inquiétude du voile dans le temple avec des plis significatifs et un peu sa déchirure' (pp. 204-5)—and described the leading French art-verse line, the alexandrine, as 'la cadence nationale; dont l'emploi, ainsi que celui du drapeau, doit demeurer exceptionnel' (pp. 207). Mallarmé's comparisons of a verse line to a sacred veil and to a national flag are serious. He understands verse, and in particular this particular line, the alexandrine, as a quite exceptionally durable long-term achievement of a culture and of a polity. Verse is a political seismograph. Only in the severest case might this veil begin to tremble and tear. Mallarmé's view, and ultimately his own verse practice, is an attempt to stand still in the middle of an earthquake: neither to cheer on the iconoclasts nor to fight them off.

Stevens is in this particular respect, I want to suggest, the successor of Mallarmé: in his perfect suspension of the question of modernity. 'Modernity' is an immense chimera, of which, while it has never been possible to specify, not merely when or where it might have begun, not merely what it might be, but even what kind of thing or idea or half-thing, half-idea it might be or have been, there have at the same time been made religions, both of its supposed irreversibility, inevitability, and desirability, on the one hand, and of its supposed catastrophes, declines and disasters, on the

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<sup>20</sup> Stéphane Mallarmé, *Œuvres complètes*, 2 vols, ed. by Bertrand Marchal (Paris: Gallimard, 1998-2003), vol. ii., p. 64.

other. It is that nothing at all which it has become an article of faith to approve or deplore. Verse which wishes to subserve some one or other of these faiths is at the mercy of its own programme. Stevens suspends this bad choice, not at the level of opinion or project, but at that of his verse line—a line which is no more late and belated than it is wide-eyed and ever-early. What it is, is continuous work and play on new sounds, tunes, rhythms, sentences, words, and thoughts: through its transformative recollection of the old ones.



Verse writing is itself a mode of thinking, but one whose most important work is often done unconsciously, or para-consciously, or half-consciously, as well as consciously. It often pays attention to features of language and paralinguage which have usually, in the main western traditions, been thought irrelevant or positively to thinking: to the verbal small change of little clicks, echoes, tunes, and rhythms. It looks perverse: looks as if it is fixated on, invests unreasonable affect in, merely contingent or accidental features of language. Yet just this apparent perversity can constitute a repertoire of thinking proper to given modes and traditions of verse.

This must be taken into account when we think about what kind of place verse might have in the university. The almost intolerable weight which the category of ‘poetry’ has placed on verse—whether as a privileged bearer of the truth or as a privileged ideological mechanism for concealing it—has deformed verse, even as critics have attempted to protect or assail its place as a long-term tradition of thinking and feeling somewhat insulated from temporary vicissitudes. The result is that ‘poetry’ has come to feel almost infinitely biddable to any legitimatory purposes whatever. Its study is therefore almost infinitely vulnerable to the current programme of the liquidation of those spaces in public culture whose purposes are not at the immediate beck and call either of finance capital or of the short-term priorities of the political class. Vulnerable, because the very attempt to legitimate and protect the study of verse—to explain why it is good for the economy, or useful to public morals, or subversive of or sustaining to capitalism—is just what is most likely to convert the whole field into a playground for auditors. Whether poetry matters is a question for its possible patrons. But the sounding matter of verse, its cuts, stops, melodies and

turns, keeps on summoning, with and against all such protectors, the stubborn voice of the unruly dead.

Wallace Stevens (2 October 1879 – 2 August 1955) was an American modernist poet and businessman. One ought not to hoard culture. It should be adapted and infused into society as a leaven. Liberality of culture does not mean illiberality of its benefits. Journal entry (20 June 1899); as published in *Souvenirs and Prophecies: the Young Wallace Stevens* (1977) edited by Holly Stevens, Ch. 3. A diary is more or less the work of a man of clay whose hands are clumsy and in whose eyes there is no light.