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ON POETIC DIFFICULTY: T.S. ELIOT vs WALLACE
STEVENS.

It may be inferred, from the title I have given to the present lecture, that I might want to resurrect old and now tiresome arguments and academic disquisitions about the inscription of High Modernism within the literary canon or within literary history. Indeed, the simple naming of two such canonical figures in Anglo-American Poetry as Eliot and Stevens, and even more, the antagonistic stance that the title shows, imply a series of previous moves on the part of the speaker that I am willing to acknowledge, only to a certain extent. The strategies along this inquisitorial course of evaluations, devaluations and revaluations are well-known to every student of Modernism. They begin with a positing of a certain mode of High Modernism, best exemplified in Eliot, Joyce, Pound, et al., as a central breaking point, and point of no return in Literature and Poetics, a literary revolution of such an extent and import, that subsequent literature feels entrapped in a sort of solipsism from which it is very difficult to get out. Modernism and Post-Modernism are thus the double moon-faces of the intellectual debate in which most of us are engaged at the present moment.

Nevertheless, the position about the names and natures of Modernism is still far from clear, and agreement has not been reached yet. We have a series of working oppositions within the discourse of Modernism that we could summarize as follows:

Modernism as a very special creation of Anglo-American Poetics, uniquely attached to a certain historical construct which is historically and

intellectually discernible in the theoretical discourse about "Modernity," "Modernität" or "La modernité." Central to this view is the belief of a certain historical and epistemological crisis at the beginning of the century which is the final step in the development of the "welstanchung" of the Enlightenment with its subsequent and well-known tenets like the idea of progress, even human progress, perfectibility, dehumanization of art, time and space as reasonable concepts, etc. etc. The air of "déjà vu" of these tenets doesn't prevent them from being used and misused in explaining the opacity and difficulty of Eliot and Pound's poetry. Moreover, this view is charged with a certain kind of Historical Necessity and Inevitability, as if the course of literature wouldn't have had the minimal opportunity but to progress along those lines. Modernism, holds such a view, was the only movement attuned to the wastings of World War I, the collapse of faith in social and economic institutions, the rise of Fascist and Communist totalitarianism, and the exposure of the structural weaknesses in the capitalist system. It is to be pointed out that a disaffection with civilization as it existed is a strong undercurrent which will reverse the view of the modernist as modern, in the sense in which modernism meant industrial capitalism, secularism, the break up of old communities, the emergence of new economic-social classes whose feeling for tradition consisted, if it existed at all, in the acquisition of its furnishings. (The example of the Fugitives and New Criticism with its radical opposition poetry-science is a good case in point and the very embodiment of this cultural concept of Modernism.)

Opposing this view of Modernism, we have such different discourses as Jameson's and Bloom's or Bornstein's in which, from different perspectives, the centrality and the specificity of High Modernism as such are being challenged, on the one

hand, from a basically epistemological perspective, as is the case of Jameson, and on the other, from a basically literary perspective, as in the case of Bloom and Bornstein whose predicaments are well-known. Modernism is not a radical point of departure but a following up of premises already present in romantic positionings about the working of the imagination and the duality positionings about the working of the imagination and the duality object and subject within the process of creativity.

Moreover, this antagonistic stance conceals a more basic duality: the questioning of tradition and of a tradition of a privileged British discourse which impinges upon and dominates a native and vernacular American discourse. There is a sense in which the reaction of American poets against Eliot and their adopting as a master narrative of his poetry that of Williams Carlos Williams, or Stevens, can be seen as a revolutionary distancing from colonial forms of privileged discourses, alien to a native experience of language, and more important, to a native experience of troping that language, which cannot silence or overwrite such examples as the "democratic poetic I" of Walt Whitman, or the self-reliant pronouncements and models of Emerson. Embedded in this question are interesting and problematic issues about the concept of Tradition itself, which we have no time to deal with now. Nevertheless I would like to emphasize this position, since the notion of a privileged form of discourse seems nowadays well-established, especially after Foucault's analysis of the strategies of power implicit in the given discourse of the community. In addition to that, the self-consciousness of the High Moderns, the "Making it New" of Ezra Pound, and notably the critical essays and editorial work of T.S.Eliot are commonly regarded as stages in a well-thought out plan for

"Modernising" literature, for foregrounding a certain way of writing, and of imposing to a certain extent their own points of view upon literature and its practitioners at a particular given moment in History whose High Priests they considered themselves to be. Their self-consciousness and, more important, their monolithic interpretations of History and Poetics, which excluded any marginal position, and consequently, any marginal poetic practice, seem to me central to understand in perspective the Modern Movement. How could we take otherwise the fact that two strangers, one born in Idaho and the other in St. Louis effected what has come to be known as the major revolution in British Poetic History? It seems to me that this perspective of a hegemonic, privileged discourse, imposed from the outside; the willingness to create a movement; and especially their sustained efforts at creating an adequate audience should be kept in mind when analysing their poetry.

So far I have been trying to summarize the assumptions that are "hidden" behind my personal approach to the subject. And I emphasize the term hidden, because my approach is not determined by them, though necessarily they stand in the background. My point of departure has been a personal experience of the reading of the poetry of Eliot and Stevens. Paramount to this is the fact of my being a foreigner, and thus approaching their poetry from a continental, necessarily Spanish perspective which reads their tropes at a second remove from their original stance and for which the imaginative products that their languages creates are received from a certain set of expectations in which assumptions about cultural constructs such as American Literature or the British Literary tradition are operative. I mean to say by this that the introduction of the figure of Phlebas the Phoenician in The Waste Land is received from a

certain perspective to somebody born and well-acquainted with the historical construct of the Mediterranean, and the rhetorical figures that have accompanied its appearance in history. Conversely, taking a poem such as "An Ordinary Evening in New Haven" or "The Auroras of Autumn" by Stevens, conveys to me, a Spanish reader of American literature a different set of expectations about what America as an imaginative construct is and the referents subsumed in its discourse. There is for instance a certain whiteness which strikes the European reader as very American, a certain quality of light, which, of course, when you study American Literature, you come to associate with an Emersonian perspective, through such key terms as "transparency", the "whiteness" of the "Whale" etc. which are operative in the search of a symbolic language with which to penetrate nature, which runs a course in the American literature of the great Renaissance, in such great examples as Hawthorne, Melville, Emerson, and which only a New England early morning can show you how to comprehend.

Personal experience of reading these two poets, thus, is the first step of my reflections on them. What follows then, is not an analysis of their work, which I am in no position to produce, and which nevertheless in claiming to offer a parallel theoretical or explanatory discourse about the meaning of the poetry or more specifically about what their poetry is about would be essentially reductive, and consequently false or at least of no interest, since it will be a form of closure, but certain questions that arise directly from the experience of the poems and which I think can be related to the workings or strategies of address, of rhetoric going on in the poems themselves.

Let me posit two examples, which can be two

passages that are well-known to people familiar with Anglo-American literature. The first one is the opening of "The Fire Sermon" in Eliot's Waste Land:

The river's tent is broken; the last fingers
of leaf /
Clutch and sink into the wet bank. The wind
Crosses the brownland, unheard. The nymphs are
departed /
Sweet Thames, run softly, till I end my song.
The river bears no empty bottles, sandwich
papers, /
Silk handkerchiefs, cardboard boxes,
cigarette ends /
Or other testimony of summer nights. The
nymphs are departed. /
And their friends, the loitering heirs of City
directors; /
Departed, have left no addresses.
By the waters of Leman I sat down and wept...
Sweet Thames, run softly till I end my song,
Sweet Thames, run softly, for I speak not loud
or long. /
But at my back in a cold blast I hear
The rattle of the bones, and chuckle spread
from ear to ear /

A rat crept softly through the vegetation
Dragging its slimy belly on the bank
While I was fishing in the dull canal
On a winter evening round behind the gashouse
Musing upon the king my brother's wreck
And on the king my father's death before him.
White bodies naked on the low damp ground
And bones cast in a little low dry garret,
Rattled by the rat's foot only, year to year.
But at my back from time to time I hear
The sound of horns and motors, which shall
bring /
Sweeney to Mrs Porter in the spring.

Sweeney to Mrs Porter in the spring.
O the moon shone bright on Mrs. Porter
And on her daughter
They wash their feet in soda water
Et O ces vois d'enfants, chantant dans la
coupole!/
Twit, Twit, Twit
Jug, Jug, Jug,

Opposing this I could quote two such different
poems of Wallace Stevens as:

The house was quiet and the world was calm.
The reader became the book; and summer night

Was like the conscious being of the book.
The house was quiet and the world was calm.

The words were spoken as if there was no book,
Except that the reader leaned above the page,

Wanted to lean, wanted much most to be
The scholar to whom his book is true, to whom

The summer night is like a perfection of
thought./
The house was quiet because it had to be.

The quiet was part of the meaning, part of the
mind:/
The access of perfection to the page.

As the world was calm. The truth in a calm
world,/

In which there is no other meaning, itself
Is calm, itself is summer and night, itself
Is the reader leaning late and reading there

Farewell to an idea.... A cabin strands,
Deserted, on a beach. It is white,
As by a custom or according to

An ancestral theme or as a consequence
Of an infinite course. The flowers against the
wall/
Are white, a little dried, a kind of mark

Reminding, trying or duller, whether of winter
cloud/
Or of winter sky, from horizon to horizon
The wind is blowing the sand across the floor

Here being visible is being white,
Is being of the solid of white, the
accomplishment/
Of an extremist in an exercise...

The season changes. A cold wind chills the
beach./
The long lines of it grow longer, emptier,
A darkness gathers though it does not fall

And the whiteness grows less vivid on the
wall./
The man who is walking turns blankly on the
sand./
He observes how the north is always enlarging
the change, /

With its frigid brilliances, its blue-red
sweeps/
And gusts of great enkindlings, its polar
green, /
The color of ice and fire and solitude.

The reading of these examples leads me to a
series of observations. The first lines belong, as
you all know, to the Waste Land and I could have
chosen the beginning, "April is the cruelest month,

breeding lilacs out of the dead land, mixing memory and desire, stirring dull roots with spring rain. Winter keeps us warm...."etc. It is inevitable that we read them with the so called "Waste Land Ethos" in the back of our minds, and consequently with a certain feeling of awe towards one of the "accepted great poetical monuments" of our tradition. But in trying to liberate ourselves from that attitude, what is undeniable is that the reader feels the experience of reading something which is "difficult" and for whose appreciation he must master a set of techniques or of certain clues or secrets hidden in the poems. The opening passage from the "Fire Sermon," is within Eliot's poetics easy enough to comprehend. It opens with a declarative sentence which impinges upon the reader with the force of an image which has the hardness that Pound asked of imagistic and modern poetry: "the last fingers of leaf clutch and sink into the wet bank." The image of desolation which --we have been taught-- is the objective correlative of the Waste Land is being presented, "objectively" to us, through a perceptive and narrative eye which is able to tell us that the "wind crosses the brown land unheard." Then the note of desolation is introduced, "the nymphs are departed" and with it a personal tone that contrasts with the pretended "objectivity" of the image. More than that, it introduces us into the realm of the "literary" and the "mythological," taking us towards a form of a myth of origins, a melancholy nostalgia for the time when the nymphs were not departed, inscribing a duality of the here, desolated, versus, the then, complete, people by nymphs. Immediately afterwards the "Sweet Thames, run softly, till I end my song" emphasizes even more this recuperative, organic myth, with the reference to the famous epithalamion from where it is taken. Our not knowing the origin of the quotation and the referentiality which it introduces in the poem, need not deter the reader from experiencing the

cadence of a verse written long ago, whose diction is in full contrast with the "fingers of leaf which clutch." A full stop, and without a transition we are again into the demonic of London mass civilization, empty bottles, sandwich papers, and the final coda, as a way of reuniting the sensibility of the reader. And then again the already known inhabitants of the dreadful city, another image which is followed by the introduction of a first person, which breaks the continuity of the objective images of the poems, and introduces a personal "I" which makes us think of the prophet crying at Babylonia of the lost Jerusalem. Spenser again, and then Marvell. Rattle of bones, instead of winged chariots. Nevertheless, the same nostalgia for the lost nymphs of a precluded world. A sudden break, and again the force of the image, the underground image: the rat dragging its slimy belly behind the gashouse. A reference about the loss/death of the father, which is also a reference to The Tempest and to kingdoms lost and found, to be followed by naked bodies, dry garrets and rat's foot, Marvell again, a familiar person, Sweeney. A French verse, and a couple of onomatopoeic words.

The predominant rhetoric that Eliot uses throughout the poem is that derived from Imagist Aesthetics, that was formulated famously and succinctly in the well-known Pound article "A Few Dont's by an Imagist:" "direct treatment of the thing," "hardness of the image," "disappearance of the subject," etc. and which has been described and analyzed under the concept of negativity in such now familiar terms as de-formation, de-personalization, de-humanization and dissonance. T.S. Eliot's well-known phrase in this respect is the "dissonance of the destructive imagination." We have thus a poetic paradigm in which the first act of inscription is a perception/imagination which decomposes the whole of creation: a destructive process at the beginning of any act of creation.

This process operates along a double line: first a process of "entrealisierung" by which the imagination transforms reality into something unreal, a scenery of ruins, a waste land, the "unreal City" of Eliot, and a second phase or "entpersonlichung," through which it is attempted to neutralize the lyrical person, the "I" who sees and perceives, whose personal formulation we find in Eliot's theory of the objective correlative and of the necessary objectivity to conform to the contemporary waste land. Eliot's success is to have been able to produce a long poem out of a theory, like Imagism, which in his de-formation and deconstruction of reality, seems to point inevitably to the short poems, since in a rhetoric of juxtapositions, sudden and broken perceptions, without, in principle, any consistent and shared support of the poem --neither a lyrical person, nor a narrative line, nor any pretense at continuity-- it is very difficult to sustain theoretically a justification of a long poem. It is not surprising that he finds the possibility of doing so in a literary thematization of the city, which is one of the great discoveries of the "modern temper" as the locus classicus of fragmentation and disruptive perceptions. This has been analyzed in all its implications and I think we need not dwell on it any longer. Nevertheless I can't resist quoting Walter Benjamin whose essay on Baudelaire seems to me apposite and moreover the most clarifying example of what the literary invention and construction of the city owes to the modern aesthetic; that is the city as signifier and referent of modern defamiliarization. Thus Benjamin: "The greater the share of the shock factor in particular impressions, the more constantly consciousness has to alert as a screen against stimuli; the more efficiently it does so, the less to these impressions enter experience (erfahrung), tending to remain in the sphere of a certain hour in one's life (erlebnis.)" Perhaps the

special achievement of shock defense may be seen in its function of assigning to an incident a precise point in time in consciousness at the cost of the integrity of its contents. This would be a peak of achievement of the intellect; it would turn the incident into a moment that has been lived (erlebnis). Without reflection there would be nothing but the sudden start, usually the sensation of fright which according to Freud, confirms the failure of the shock defense. Baudelaire has portrayed this condition in a harsh image. He speaks of a duel in which the artist just before being beaten screams in fright. The duel is the creative process itself.

"The artist just before being beaten screams in fright" seems to me a very apt description of Eliot's poetics of the juxtaposition of the image in The Waste Land, especially now that we know how far the personal element of crisis enters into his poetry of objectivity.

We have no time to enter into a long controversy now regarding that which refer to the famous theory of objectivity and depersonalization. I will only say that though the personal different "I" and "we" that come into the poems, are not, of course, reflections of the subjectivity of the poet as all of us know by now; nevertheless, he cannot eliminate the category of the subject in the poem. We have, to a certain amount, a poetical person, a poetical fragmented I as an example of the modern poetical consciousness who experiences the shock treatment of the contemporary waste land. There is a sense in which we can talk of a structure operating in the poem through a depersonalized subjectivity which transforms reality through acts of conscience. We are again within the real of an autonomous subjectivity which, and this is important, takes for granted a language that can be originated in a given conscience, real or imagined.

This has been called "the late ceremony of critical innocence, the readerly imagination of a self." We can see thus, as the poem progresses the very thematization of the process of depersonalization of that poetic subjectivity, in a series of objects and images. The perceiving conscience sees itself facing an amorphous mass of materials, disconnected, fragmented, impossible to assimilate, and the consequent experience --the same as the reader experiences-- is an absolutely overwhelming one by the sheer mass of the accumulation of disconnected fragments, which produces a sense of the impossibility of arriving at any certitude or advancing in the cognitive process. Neil Hertz in The End of the Line describes thus the process:

The wish is for a moment of blockage, when an indefinite and disarrayed sequence is resolved (at whatever sacrifice) into a one-to-one confrontation, when numerical excess can be converted into that superogatory identification with the blocking agent that is the guarantor of the self's own integrity as an agent... although the moment of blockage might have been rendered as one of utter self-loss, it was, even before its recuperation as sublime exaltation, a confirmation of the unitary status of the self.

What is absent from Eliot's perspective is any consideration of the subject as constituted by a received language, and parallel to that, the implicit assumption in the power of language to portray, to create, to redeem, at least poetically, the alienation and dissonance of the modern world.

I want now to consider another aspect of Eliot's work, having always in mind what we have just said. Once agreed about the loss of values in the modern world and especially about the experience of disintegration and dissonance which

is the specific referent of being modern, he theorizes about the rendition of this experience in literary terms. And he sets himself with the "seriousness" of someone who believes that something can be done, to rewrite the British tradition of poetry and to promote the idea of difficulty in literature. Thus in his essay "On Metaphysical Poetry" of 1921, he writes his well-known apology for a "modernist poetry to meet modernist conditions:"

We can only say that it appears likely that poets in our civilization, as it exists at present, MUST BE DIFFICULT. Our civilization comprehends great variety and complexity, and this variety and complexity, playing upon a refined sensibility, must produce various and complex results. The poet must become more and more comprehensive, more allusive, more indirect, in order TO FORCE, TO DISLOCATE IF NECESSARY LANGUAGE INTO MEANING.

In Eliot's words we observe a series of implicit assumptions that I consider worth examining. First of all, the imposition of a certain difficulty. I say imposition, because the words of Eliot make that clear, "poets must be difficult." What is interesting, in the second place, is the positing of the difficulty, as it were, from the outside, as if there was a sort of historical necessity. There is no talk of the difficulties inherent in language, though there is a certain assumption that in modern times language has ceased to signify. Most interesting, from my point of view, is the fact that Eliot posits a parallel series, the historical series, civilization, as a significant referent and, consequently, makes the following equation: since civilization has become dislocated, language must become dislocated too, in order to signify by dislocation the loss of values of the world. By

making this equation between language and the world (whatever he means by that equation), he assumes that a certain meaning can be recuperated. We sense, underneath Eliot's lines a certain belief in a myth of origins, in a myth of writing as recapturing lost meanings in the fallen world of humans, a sense of transcendence, of going outside language to recapture a wholeness of vision, and an assumption of the generative power of "serious and difficult" literature.

No wonder, then, that some years later, he was to discover a certain method to substantiate and to historicize his poetical practice. Not content with the sheer dislocated achievement of aggregation, disruption and negativity which constitutes The Waste Land, he discovers in Joyce's Ulysses, the possibility of a historical method which would redeem modernist writing from sheer reductionism, from accusations of mere babble and non-meaningful wholeness. Thus, in his influential article "Ulysses, Order and Myth," Eliot describes his methods and ambitions more than those of Joyce. It makes the book sound pretentiously full of cultural malaise and announces not only that the novel is dead but that Joyce has discovered the "mythical method" by which it is possible to create a continuous parallel between contemporaneity and antiquity. That Joyce uses that technique is obvious, though we know that it is only a grid and that books like Stuart Gilbert's were the consequence of one of the greatest jokes Joyce played upon us critics and readers. That the technique constitutes a scientific discovery might surprise readers of Spenser, Dante, or Milton. The claim to method is however preliminary to the larger extravagance by which Eliot goes on to make a cause and effect relationship between the writing method he describes --again, essentially his own-- and what he considers contemporary conditions: " It is simply a way of controlling, of ordering, of

giving a shape and significance to the immense panorama of futility and anarchy which is contemporary history." This describes his post-writing efforts at providing a scholarly grid to The Waste Land, in an attempt at necessary order.

Eliot thus appears to us as an example of writers who like to endow their own practices with historical inevitability and large consequence. This in turn promotes the notion that in their work the rest of us can recover meanings whose absence would otherwise yield to chaos or to the blandishments of meaningless pleasure. Most writers, most readers want to believe in such magnifications of literary method and literary meaning. The belief is essential to the notion that the writing and reading of literature have a culturally redemptive power. I am arguing that this belief cannot be sustained by the actual operations of language in literary texts. Writing that can be called literature tends, it seems to me, to be discernibly on edge about its own rhetorical status, especially when the rhetoric is conspicuously indebted to any of the great, historically rooted institutions, as in the theological-mythological-literary saturations of idiom in Paradise Lost, Ulysses or The Waste Land. Part of the excitement derives from the way such works resist as well as absorb the meanings which their adopted language makes available to them. Writers in the Emersonian tradition (Stevens) do not transform their difficulties with language into the cultural-historical heroics usually attributed to modernist writing.

Some of the tenets modernism proposes, belatedness, nostalgia, cultural burden and a distrust of language seem inherent to the human condition, but Eliot seems to imply that this is less important and less interesting than the evidence that for over a century the exacerbation

of these feelings in literature have been attributed by writers of acknowledged power and intelligence to an unprecedented break in cultural continuity and to a remission of some authorized principles behind language. As critic R. Poirier has said, literary modernism is the systematic pressing of the claim that many of the anxieties which Western Culture has often associated with the human condition have been immensely intensified by contemporary life. These anxieties were once manageable within habitual discourse, but under modern conditions, they imply, such talk has become increasingly meaningless. From this perspective we can say that "modernism happened" when reading got to be intimidating or at least threatened to become so for those who decided to bother with it at all. Thus modernism can be identified as a special kind of reading habit or reading necessity that springs from the fact of a necessary difficulty. Texts must be necessarily difficult so as to prove the power of literature as a privileged and exclusive form of discourse. By its difficulty it tries to reinvolve the connections, more or less severed by the growth of mass culture, between artist and audience. A select community of writer and reader must be created.

In Eliot's words we detect a self-defensive and protective issue. The passage wants to ascribe difficulty to social and historical causes only. It is an attempt to vulgarize the necessity for "difficulty," --now that we know about Eliot's personal difficulties and sexual deprivations. And Eliot's dictum became the bedrock of literary criticism. No one can object to difficulty, but the issue Eliot brings up is two-fold. First has to do with the KIND of relationship to difficulty that literature asks for and the kind of pleasure given or denied to that relationship.

Coming now to the Stevens poem quoted earlier,

it seems evident to me evident that it elicits a very different kind of response than the one we get from Eliot. We notice no experimenting with free forms or vers libre, and a decided absence of learned and scholarly referents; these would be the most conspicuous elements. More than that, I would say that to Eliot's rhetoric of juxtaposition, fragmentation--image following image in a nominal rhetorical move which does away with any space of transition or continuity-- we have in Stevens what I would call the trope of transition itself. The image of stasis itself with which the poem opens seems to be troped once and again into different versions of stasis and becoming as spaces of transition contained in the different forms of the verb "to be" and in the "as if" and "like" introduced in the poem as mood of possibility.

Other alternatives can also be offered; to the rhetoric of accumulation Stevens offers a rhetoric of bareness and barrenness and to the anxiety that Eliot's poem induces, whether it is anxiety over the agonizing state of contemporary civilization or over the most immediate anxiety of the reader/writer at his inability to grasp a fixed meaning in the poem, Stevens offers a kind of contentedness around what is to be, avoiding any kind of transcendent significance or meaning. Nothing in the poem leads us out of the poem itself, of what those words, in troping, are doing. This question of bareness is something to which we will return later. All I want to do now is to call attention to these two very different answers to the experience of reading poems, which seem to illustrate what some critic has called the difference between a poetics of difficulty and a poetics of density. The apparent simplicity of diction in Stevens' poems does not deter us from feeling the radical poetical predicament that they inscribe. Radical in two main ways: a) as a radical poetics of seeing and perceiving the world which

finds one of its clearest examples in the poem "Anecdote of the Jar" and b) as a radical poetics of the perceiving subject, of the "lyrical I" or whatever we choose to call it. Nowhere does this seem to be more efficiently achieved than in the erasure of the self that takes place in the second line of the poem "the reader became the book" following which any sense of the human presence in the world is eradicated:

The Truth in a calm world
In which there is no other meaning, itself
Is calm, itself is summer and night.

Thus I will posit Eliot's difficulty versus Stevens's density. I have already quoted Eliot on necessary and self-conscious difficulty. By "density" I mean to describe a kind of writing which pretends to give a direct access to pleasure, but which becomes, on longer acquaintance, rather strange and imponderable. Shakespeare is a good example, Proust is another. Eliot's writing or Pound's are difficult; at first encounter they seem resistant, but with the help of notes and annotations you master the "difficulty" in a sense that you cannot master "density". The Joyce of "The Dead" is dense where an episode such as "Oxen of the Sun" is "difficult" drawing our attention to formal mechanisms which more than the information carried by them, statically communicate significance. This kind of difficulty, following Modernism's prestige has been privileged, and with it a treatment of literature as if it were really a communication of knowledge rather than a reach for it, whereas density leaves the reader and the critic alone, with no guides or grids to help him, since it is very often something that strikes the ear rather than the eye, something you hear happening to voices as they modify words or phrases which, at another point, seemed quite clear or casual. Density is usually accompanied not by the

extruding allusiveness of modernism but by the covert allusiveness of troping.

We saw in Elliot's view of difficulty, in the self-conscious manipulating of language a terminal confidence in the power of that language to effect some sort of change in the world, at least in the world of thought, in "the order of things," and at the same time, an accumulation of technical complexities, of traditional literary series within the poem as a form of filling the blankness of space of present civilization. Language as technology and language as filling the gaps of contemporary barrenness and of contemporary cultural crisis, as if language could create order out of chaos, as if it had in itself a repository of recuperable meanings, as if really the artist could create through his individual chaos some idea of order, lost somewhere in the course of human destiny. A myth of language and a myth of culture and origins. Stevens, on the contrary, following in this a very American tradition, inaugurated by Emerson, which sees language as a cultural construct, as another form of technology, another form of artificiality which stands between the reliant self and the world, doesn't seem to believe in the redemptive powers of poetic language outside of itself, that is to redeem the world or to make sense of the world in an age of crisis. For Stevens, "poetry is not dirty silence clarified/ but silence made still dirtier." If Elliot, and Joyce, for that matter, share the illusion that language can create, that the artist is a God reproducing that first act of origins, that first act of creation, for Stevens the favourite word is not creation but engendering, seeing poetic language as a transitional event, a transfer of already encoded materials within the life of a received, communal language that always stands within the self and nature and which not only constitutes the subject but tropes the subject. Stevens is never superficially historical. Instead

he finds the difficulties already present in the words he uses because the words have already been fashioned by beliefs, traditions and mythologies which also make the writing possible. He never evokes some cultural or historical crisis of the moment in order to give his essential complication the quite unnecessary license of historical necessity.

Works of literature often cannot come to terms even with themselves, they cannot heal the fissures they create, much less the ones we discover in our historical experience. "The actual order of things" on which the structure and rhetoric of a work may call for provisional support can become so strong that it is then impossible to disuse it even in the interests of human possibilities, which the writer wishes to endorse. Since human consciousness initiated a separation of the human mind from the flow of nature, how can expressions of that consciousness, especially in such a fabricated structure as literature, also in any way be expressions of that nature?. Analogously, how and why should an individual whose knowledge about himself or herself depends on communities of opinion, set out to resist or transform those communities? How does anyone's idea of self ever get into words when the act of writing itself always betrays its distance from the experiences the words propose to represent?

I don't think I'm in a position to answer those questions raised by a reading of Stevens's poetry. But I think we can go on a little further exploring some responses to the density of his poetry.

Wallace Stevens's is a poetry of autumnal and wintry landscapes: we have the example of the Auroras, to which we could add a massive list which will include "An Ordinary Evening in New Heaven,"

"Page from a Tale," etc. Barrenness and desolation are troped once and again into his poetry. Bareness except of objects and the world of the "there is", with no cultural aggregations or layers of meaningful meanings, such as the cabin standing in the beach in the loneliness of the Auroras, a certain light falling over it, like in a painting by Edward Hopper. Now, this discovery of the blankness of space as the metaphorical image of the abyss of non-meaning has been considered as one of the quintessential creations and literalizations of European High Modernism, from The Magic Mountain to Women in Love, and in the case of Eliot, is accompanied by a consequent horror vacui which fabricates a rhetoric of fulfillment, of replenishing it with words, rhythms, cyclical times and mythical orders. In Stevens this is not so: he lets it stand as it is, in itself. That is the cabin, that is the world. "The house was quiet and the world was calm." As for the cultural blankness or bareness of America, he tends to see it as a cultural opportunity when it is not an image of more personal deprivations. When negatively conceived, the denuded landscapes of American writing are frequently an image not of cultural bareness at all, but of creative-sexual impotence. (Remember what we said about engendering). Barrenness and sterility is not a cultural problem. He, along with other American writers such as Frost tends to locate the problem of literary production mostly in language rather than in historical circumstance, in the obscure origins of language, and in the mysteries of its transmissions and transformations.

It springs from the feeling that the bequest of language carries with it certain inducements that are not distinguishable from obligations. There is nothing sacred on the far side of language except the desire that the words should exist. The desire itself will atrophy if its inheritors leave

language in the forms in which they have received it, or even if they rest content for long with any new forms they may have given it. "Speech is not dirty silence clarified. It is silence made still dirtier."

Thus literature generates its substance, its excitements, its rethoric, and its plots often with the implicit intention, paradoxically, to get free of them and to restore itself to some preferred state of naturalness, authenticity and simplicity, a space of simplicity, of the "there is" again, which is conspicuous in Stevens poetry. The implication is that if this could exist in an uncorrupted state, then literature itself would be unnecessary... literature implicitly idealizes that condition of barrenness, that thinness of social and cultural circumstance which according to Henry James and other observers was supposed to be the special plight of American writers. Stevens, bareness is salutary: with barrenness the true self will emerge:

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 birth of sight leads us to another constant of Stevens's poetry: its visuality which I will confront with Eliot's discursiveness, though we could find many other examples of visibility and transparency in other high modernist European writers. The world, the universe is seen as an enigma, as a spectacle and as otherness in which the disappearance of man is adumbrated, a world of

appearances. This from "A Postcard from the Volcano"

Children picking up our bones
Will never know that these were once
As quick as foxes on the hill;

.....

Finally, as I see it, Stevens' poetry seem to me to trope the possibility of a world seen/without a self and to propose different versions of this image without too much anguish, though without much chance of eradicating the self through language.

Of course, this is not new: the most familiar instance of this is the one we all know from the Judeo-Christian tradition. Obliteration of the self in order to have access to a superior order of being. The non-being of the mystics, the way up and down and the meanderings of Eliot in The Four Quartets. There's always in them a recuperative mood. This implies a sort of allegiance to narrative continuity, to a myth of origins and ends and with respect to language an anchor on logocentrism.

From the modern perspective, the great ancestor in this process of erasure of the self from the universe, in this imagining the works without any kind of redemptive power is Nietzsche in the well-known passage of "On Truth and Lie in an Extra-Moral Sense":

In some remote corner of the universe, poured out and glittering in innumerable solar systems, there once was a star on which clever animals invented knowledge. That was the haughtiest and most mendacious minute of "world history" --yet only a minute. After nature had drawn a few breaths the star grew cold, and the clever animals had to die.

One might invent such a fable and still not have illustrated sufficiently how wretched, how shadowy and flighty, how aimless and arbitrary, the human intellect appears in nature. There have been eternities when it did not exist; and when it is done for again, nothing will have happened. For this intellect has no further mission that would lead beyond human life. It is human, rather, and only its owner and producer gives it such importance, as if the world pivoted around it. But if we could communicate with the mosquito, then we would learn that it floats through the air with the same self-importance, feeling within itself the flying center of the world. There is nothing in nature so despicable or insignificant that it cannot immediately be blown up like a bag by a slight breath of this power of knowledge; and just as every porter wants an admirer, the proudest human being, the philosopher, thinks that he sees the eyes of the universe telescopically focused from all sides on his actions and thoughts.

In Nietzsche's quote, spatial images abound, images of miniaturization, expansion, telescoping. What they suggest is plain enough: man, especially what Nietzsche calls the intellect of man, is no more significant in relation to the cosmos than is a mosquito in relation to the air in which it floats. Each is solipsistically assured that it is the center of the world. Now when writing arrives at such intransigence readers often succumb to an anxiety peculiar to the arnoldian aspect of Anglo-American literary culture peculiar to Eliot. They start worrying about the dangers of modernist or radical or uncompromising rhetoric. Is not civilization itself imperiled by this rethoric?

I would propose that there is a very American line of response to Nietzsche's predicament: not anxiety by exhilaration. Against the apocalyptic transcendent tones of mort european responses, more

specifically in this case, Eliot's response, Stevens's poetry, following a very Emersonian line imagines self-obliteration itself and responds by troping it and by examining what this troping can do to us. There is a sense in which Stevens's poetry asks us to get excited by the prospect of the end of man, the extinction not only of a generic species but of our invention of the human. We are asked to get excited about a future which will be brought about by our own extinction; we are asked to do this by a rhetoric which is itself, along with its cultural vestiges, also to become extinct. Those animals which have before called themselves human will in some new form have become immune to this style of persuasion, immune to style itself, deaf to any language shaped by the pressures of discarded historical reality, including notions about nature and proper uses of the body. What we have before us, then, is evidence that human beings can exercise a capacity to wish themselves radically OTHER than what they are, to wish themselves evacuated from "the arrangements of knowledge."

In the poetry of Stevens there is a frequent reduction of self-hood to the so called First or Primary Idea. Barrenness or bareness, so called-reduced circumstances, exist for him less in a time (historical) sequence, with implications of escape and rebirth, than in space, space to be explored and contemplated, space in which the human figure more or less disappears. Very often the inactivation of the will is not seen necessarily as a deprivation. The will does not exhibit even that self-regarding fear which needs to be overcome if one is to have access to the sublime. Beginning tentatively in his first volume Harmonium, Stevens concerns himself with the process by which we encounter or imagine some elemental reality. Twenty years later, in 1942, he called this reality the First Idea which he describes thus in a letter

about Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction: "If you take the varnish and dirt of generations off a picture, you see it in its first idea. If you think about the world without its varnish and dirt, you are a thinker of the first idea." In this regard, consider also the section of the poem "It Must be Abstract!"

How clean the sun when seen in its idea,
Washed in the remotest cleanliness of a heaven
That has expelled us and our images...

The death of one God is the death of all
Let purple Phoebus lie in umber harvest,
Let Phoebus slumber and die in autumn umber,

Phoebus is dead, ephebe. But Phoebus was
A name for something that never could be
named./

There was a project for the sun and is.

There is a project for the sun. The sun
Must bear no name, gold flourisher, but be
In the difficulty of what it is to be.

We are invited to wonder whether behind the phenomenal facts, there is nothing. "The sun must bear no name." Yet the poet, himself an ephebe once, is unable to follow his own dictum and he proceeds to give his own name to the sun. It is somewhat suggested that the genesis of gods is simply an irresistible consequence of the human compulsion to use words. The difficulty of what it is to be is not resolved by poetry as in Eliot, it is created by poetry. Poetry prevents us from seeing what it is to be.

To reduce anything to a First Idea is not then to arrive at "nothing," or at "the thing" itself, since the very idea of the thing itself is a great poetic invention, a trope pretending not to be one.

It is to arrive at another fabrication, at the fiction that any word can lay claim to being the "first" or before anything else. (In the beginning was the word). There is always for the poet, as Stevens imagines him, an unsatisfiable aspiration, the dream of an impossible possibility, to see something without having to name it, without having to think about it, to see it with no dependence of the human will, without having to recreate it, to see it as would a Transparent Eyeball, with no sense of its independence of the human will.

Stevens's poems suggest the longing to have an intercourse with things, cleaner, or more real than any permitted by language, which in turn is part of the poet's wry joke on himself and on the reader, who is to some extent always the imagined product of the poet's language.

As I see it, Stevens's poetry offers us states of transition within this mood of self-eradication and his rhetorical moves in his poetry tend to induce a sense of drift and exploratory meandering, as one feeling dissolves into another or both are held together in suspended animation.

One must have a mind of winter
To regard the frost and the boughs
Of the pine-trees crusted with snow;

And have been cold a long time
To behold the junipers shagged with ice,
The spruces rough in the distant glitter

Of the January sun; and not to think
Of any misery in the sound of wind,
In the sound of a few leaves,

Which is the sound of the land
Full of the same wind
That is blowing in the same bare place

For the listener, who listens in the snow,
And, nothing himself, beholds
Nothing that is not here and nothing that is