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*The University of Montana*

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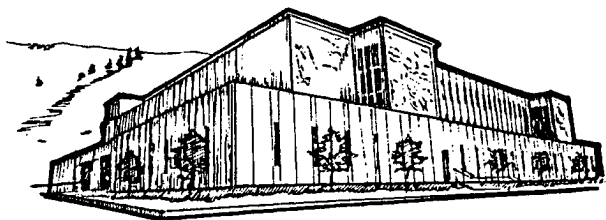
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**Endless Elaborations:  
Anticlosure in Wallace Stevens'  
"An Ordinary Evening in New Haven"**


**By**

**Gary Mike Cronin**

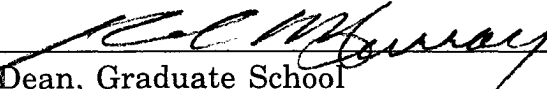
**B.A., Carroll College-Helena, Montana, 1978**

Presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements  
for the degree of  
Master of Arts in English Literature  
University of Montana  
1994

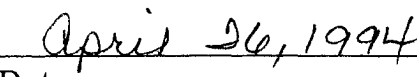
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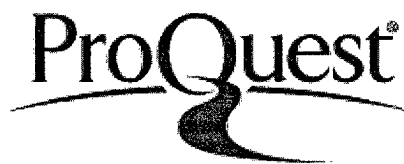


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Endless Elaborations: Anticlosure in Wallace Stevens' "An Ordinary Evening in New Haven" (77)

Director: William Bevis



The long poem "An Ordinary Evening in New Haven" is read as an interlacing series of reiterated qualifications on the quale of the ordinary, which refuses thematic and structural closure. The problem is to discover how the poem avoids final and static resolution of its sections and as a whole.

The examination focuses on the poet's three major concerns within the poem: the real world as lived by people, the poet's own imaginative response to reality, and his expression of that response as a meditative poem. The method of examination mirrors Steven's phenomenological approach, and employs close reading, hermeneutics and reader response. The three concerns are viewed in light of the poem's continual and insistent qualification of thematic material, especially through metaphor, epiphany, tone and the relationship between mind and matter. Furthermore, the examination looks at how the poet interlaces and modifies his qualifications to create a reiterative serial form which invests the poem with an insistent forward momentum, and helps subvert the temporary closures developed within and among the sections. Also, the examination revealed how Stevens subverts poetic elements which ordinarily help achieve or sustain closure: word choice, falling rhythm, aphorism, and temporal unity.

This study concludes that the poet created an open form within which he used poetic elements to explore his thematic material in a way that denies final closure. In this way, the poet perpetuated an endless elaboration on the relationship between reality and his fictive power to recreate reality.

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## Introduction

*As soon as we have the thing before our  
eyes, and in our hearts an ear for the word,  
thinking prospers.*

*Poetry, Language, Thought*  
Martin Heidegger

*I have no wish to arrive at a conclusion.  
Sometimes I believe in the imagination for a  
long time and then, without reasoning about  
it, turn to reality and believe in that and  
that alone. Both of these project themselves  
endlessly and I want them to do just that.*

*Letters*  
Wallace Stevens

*It can never be satisfied, the mind, never.*  
“The Well Dressed Man with a Beard”  
Wallace Stevens

*You plunge into stories without beginning  
or end: you'd make a terrible witness.*  
*Le Nausee*  
Jean-Paul Sartre

The first tercet of Wallace Stevens' meditation, “An Ordinary Evening in New Haven,” sets the poem's thesis and its *modus operandi*:

The eye's plain version is a thing apart,  
The vulgate of experience. Of this,  
A few words, an and yet, and yet, and yet—

He will try to “get as close to the ordinary, the commonplace, and the ugly as it is possible for a poet to get” (*Letters*, 636). And to do so he will employ an “and yet, and yet and yet”; that is, he will roll his meditation over and over in a seemingly endless series of assertions, qualifications, and



antitheses.

The result in 31 cantos is a refusal to be any more than temporarily satisfied with his estimations about reality. This is because the mind of a modern man living without gods can never be satisfied; reality is a function of momentary understandings which Stevens expresses as poems. A poem is "the cry of its occasion" (XII, 1), but an occasion does not persist in reality as a thing, and cannot be made of bronze, Stevens' symbol for intellectual stasis and thus an understanding of reality which is obsolete as soon as it becomes bronzed. Therefore, an understanding of reality must be reiterated as the poet "re-creates,/Searches a possible for its possibilities."

How, then, does a poet convey this need for "and yet"?

Instead of creating episodes whose consequences lead to a concentrated end possessing universal conclusions, the modern writer may deal with contingencies that require interim conclusions wrought by a continuous phenomenology of perspective.

Wallace Stevens then will ruminate and carry forward the Romantic debate of what to do with reality, for as Shelley said, "to be a poet is to apprehend the...good which exists in the relation, subsisting, first between existence and perception, and secondly between perception and expression" (*A Defense of Poetry*, Spencer, 347). Unlike Shelley, however, Stevens will deliberately refuse to sustain any conclusion, except the one to persist in antithesis. He will stubbornly reject closing his meditations and his poem.

In this study, I will read "An Ordinary Evening" as an interlacing series of reiterated qualifications that meditate on the quale of the ordinary, and refuse thematic and structural closure. I will read the poem as though Stevens' act of writing is directed at the objects of his concern: the real world lived by people, his own imaginative response to reality, and his

expression of that response as a meditative poem. Furthermore, I will consider the poem in its parts and what they do, rather than by its whole and what it might mean. Finally, I will attempt to experience myself the poem's recreation of the consciousness of the poet/narrator, and to report that experience. Thus the approach will mirror Stevens' phenomenology, and will employ techniques of close reading, hermeneutics, and reader response that will allow me to describe this profoundly rich, broad and diverse poem.

In Chapter One, I will look at the poem's continual and insistent qualifications of thematic material, and discuss the use of recurrent themes, Stevens' use of metaphor, epiphany, some matters of tone, and the relationships between mind and matter. Here I can elaborate on how his peculiar use of thematic material virtually prohibits the snapping shut of closure's lid.

In Chapter Two, I will show how Stevens interlaces and modifies his qualifications and reiterations to create the poem's macro-structure. Here I will discuss how the overall form itself and a variety of substructures contribute to the refusal of integrity, an integrity that normally signals a return to or creation of stasis and stability. I will show how these formal considerations create a poetic momentum that rolls the poem onward with a sense of perpetualness. This sense is prefigured in the 1919 lyric, "Place of the Solitaires":

And, most, of the motion of thought  
And its restless iteration,

In the place of the solitaires,  
Which is to be a place of perpetual undulation.

(*CP*, 60)

In Chapter Three, I will show how Stevens further propagates indeterminacy by subverting poetic devices that ordinarily effect or enforce closure. Stevens' manner of employing these devices sustains a continuously remarkable synthesis of his apprehension and understanding of the lived world.

• • •

## Chapter One

### Continual and Insistent Qualifications of Thematic Material

The eye's plain version is a thing apart,  
The vulgate of experience. Of this,  
A few words, an and yet, and yet, and yet—

Stevens announces the mission of "An Ordinary Evening in New Haven" in the first tercet of the poem: He tells us he doesn't plan to study the fabulous or the grand, but, rather, "The vulgate of experience." He wishes to explore a version of the commonplace made of several reiterated qualifications. And while he doesn't yet explain why the "eye's plain version is a thing apart," that version has everything to do with perception. The plain version is neither wholly of the mind since it involves an object which is external to the mind, nor is it the object itself since in perceiving the object the mind creates an relationship. How then is that relationship manifested? By "A few words" which expand into 31 18-line cantos.

This poem becomes "part of the never ending meditation" which not only refuses to resolve itself, but isn't even the whole of Stevens' canonic question. By saying that this "Part of the question" is a "giant himself," Stevens uses his private and cumulative symbology to express the idea that questions, and presumably answers, must be blooded; that is, made human-like.

The notion of an "abstraction blooded" is a recurring theme manifesting itself in metaphor throughout "An Ordinary Evening." Blooding an abstraction is for Stevens a way of apprehending external reality in the lived world by investing a concept with the attributes of a real object. This prosopopeiaic way of making fictions come to life allows Stevens to explore

and experiment with his perceptions of the lived world. The giants of canto I are just such a bleeding. Stevens uses these giants to begin exploring the relationship between imagination and reality. Thus the “second giant” of the imagination “kills the first” giant of reality to become a “recent imagining of reality.”

Sometimes bleeding an abstraction seems to result in myth-making, as it does here in the first canto. When Stevens has the second giant kill the first, he creates a fiction, an “imagining of reality.” And fictions, as Kermode tells us, are agents of change. Also, “Fictions are for finding things out, and they change as the need for sense-making change” (39). This giant fiction/fictive giant changes “Much like a new resemblance of the sun” into “A mythical form” that is blooded by “A great bosom, beard and being, alive with age.”

Kermode continues his distinction between fiction and myth by asserting that “Myths are the agents of stability, fictions the agents of change. Myths call for absolute, fictions for conditional assent” (39). At first glance, a reader is likely to see the poet as making the mythic giants into a combined agent of stability, for first of all the new “mythical form” occurs at the end of the canto where the two giants have come “together as one,” signaling a movement toward resolution. But the movement misdirects the reader because Stevens has slyly undercut this sense of absoluteness and stability.

He doesn't actually say that the second giant did in fact kill the first; he says “*Unless* the second giant kills the first...*Much like* a new resemblance of the sun [his recurring metaphor for reality]...there will be myth-making.” That is, there will be “A larger poem for a larger audience/ *As if*” the two did merge to create a “being, alive with age” (emphasis mine).

This furtive maneuver is poetical hypothesis, rather than a metaphorical description of an action, and thus opens an avenue for fictions; besides, this “never ending meditation” doesn’t stop after the first canto.

Stevens wields a similar strategy of creating and destroying myths in the famous canto VI by blooding the idea of reality in order to play with two notions of reading the world. He makes reality become “Naked Alpha,” the beginning of the Greek alphabet, and “the infant A,” the beginning of the modern English alphabet.

He begins characteristically with an assertion: “Reality is the beginning not the end,” and moves directly to describing his new characters. “Naked Alpha” is, as we know, the beginning, and with the single epithet “Naked” Alpha has unlimited possibilities before it. Stevens leaps in a single bound over the other 24 letters straight to the end where “the hierophant Omega,/ Of dense investiture” interprets his sacred texts before his “luminous vassals.”

Next is “the infant A standing on infant legs” also with implied possibilities who is contrasted with his alphabet’s ending, the “twisted, stooping, polymathic Z.” Not only do Stevens’ descriptions mimic the letters’ appearance, fleshed out, they run a spectrum from the initial and potential to the mature and masterful with its full implication of perfection and interpretive ability. Thus Stevens has blooded twin-like actors who metaphorically and logically represent beginnings and endings, a sort of serious Antipholus and Dromio of Syracuse played off the comic pair from Ephesus in *A Comedy of Errors*.

As in Shakespeare’s play, the four “characters are around us in a scene” and “both alike appoint themselves the choice/ Custodians of the glory of the scene.” They both claim to be “The immaculate interpreters of life.”

The momentum here is toward a conflict where a reader might normally expect a climax which yields a victor. Yet, in the last stanza, which reads:

But that's the difference: in the end and the way  
To the end. Alpha continues to begin.  
Omega is refreshed at every end.

The poet pauses to reflect that the difference is “in the end and the way/ To the end. Then suddenly when the reader might expect the comparison to be made between team Alpha/Omega and team A/Z, the difference pointed out is between Alpha and Omega; A/Z never appears in the poem again.

Significantly, Stevens has thwarted the momentum gathered by the twin-blooded abstraction from reaching a plot climax and denouement. Instead, he asserts that “Alpha continues to begin./ Omega is refreshed at every end.” This seems to declare the Alpha/Omega team the victors in a contest that never quite happens, but the Dromios Alpha and A are not united at the end, and neither are the Antipholuses Omega and Z.

Furthermore, Alpha “continues to begin,” implying a Sysiphean perpetuity. This is supported by the line above it whose last word is “way.” By placing a word at the end of a line, it takes on emphasis, and here process takes precedence. Omega, on the other hand, “is refreshed at every end.” The old sage is rejuvenated, strongly suggesting that he reaches a series of ends which “For one [Z] it is enough,” but “for one [Omega] it is not.” Otherwise Omega would rest on his laurels at a single climatic end. And just as the word at the end of a line receives emphasis, the word at the end of the last stanza is especially emphatic: “end.” It has already been cunningly robbed of its import by all that comes before it that demands reiteration. I am harkening back to the initial assertion that “Reality is the beginning

not the end.” Stevens’ emphasis shines in the middle of lines where the reader finds “beginning,” “investiture,” “perceptions,” “prolongations,” “profound,” “difference,” “continues,” and “refreshed,” words which imply process either by denotation or by context.

Laced throughout the poem is a plethora of images and metaphors that sometimes surround and sometimes construct the basic metaphysical movement of the poem’s major theme of mind engaging the lived world and ruminating on the product of that engagement. While the poem is, as Vendler says, “resolutely impoverished” and “sets a desperate scene” (269), it is also rich with “visibilit[ies] of thought.” They take their form in the diversity of images and metaphors of the senses, particularly the sense of sight.

The poem even begins with “The eye’s plain version.” “Eye(s)” occurs in 12 other lines as the mind’s initial instrument of contact with the external world. In the first instance, “The eye’s plain version is a thing apart,” the plain version is located in the eye, neurologically, but also as figure of speech with the significance that we try to locate our thoughts often with a metonymic compass. When I understand things your way, I say I see what you mean. The eye of the narrating poet intends to see a common edition of experience. And I mean here Edmund Husserl’s famous usage of the word “intentional” as direction not as state, and since it is a direction, it does not construct the reality of its object, rather it discloses or displays it (Jones, 251). So in this sense, Stevens will eye reality, and the version of the thing he sees will be a thing apart from both the lived world and the imaginative mind; it will be the “never ending meditation” of this poem.

The sensual instrument of vision has behind it, in canto III, “set deep in the eye,/ Behind all actual seeing,” a desire to fill “an emptiness that



would be filled,/ In denial that cannot contain its blood,” a thing that cannot be made human. At another time, the eye is “inexquisite”; that is, in canto V, when it refers to the “happy nation” of the people who go blindly about their bliss in “A great town hanging pendant in a shade.” In that town everything is “as unreal as real can be// In the exquisite eye” because the shade is that area midway between the light of the sun of reality and the darkness of the moon of the imagination, Stevens’ long-used symbols. These townfolk have refused to examine or apprehend their condition; they prefer the “Inescapable romance, inescapable choice/ Of dreams,” which, as static fictions, no longer attempt to refresh the people’s understanding of reality or their relationship with it.

But, as this poem keeps pointing out, “We keep coming back and coming back.” In canto IX the eye, in its intentional act, aims

Straight to the transfixing object, to the object

At the exactest point at which it is its self,  
Transfixing by being purely what it is,  
A view of New Haven, say, through the certain eye,

The eye made clear of uncertainty, with the sight  
Of simple seeing, without reflection.

Here is an eye that has undergone some permutations which have encompassed other aspects of vision. It is a metonymic eye no longer relying on reflection of light off surfaces, but bears the almost hypnotic power of transfixation with its narrowed focus on the correspondence of fictive power and the real. With its almost joyful

...spirit that goes roundabout  
And through included, not merely visible,

The solid, but the moveable, the moment,  
The coming on...

This is an eye pleased with the epiphanies of surface, substance, motion and temporality.

Stevens goes on to speak of eyes that don't look deeply, that are indifferent, closed, conditionally present, attentive, shaded, and multiple. As the literal instrument of vision, the eyes in this poem remain constant. It's as figurative trope that Stevens' eyes have their flexibility because in this mode, the eyes can occur as judgmental, indifferent, or discriminating. But he has added great richness to the poem by using several metaphors related to vision: reflection, faintness of outline, surface quality, and so on. A look at some of them will bring me around to how metaphor is used to help subvert final closure.

After speaking of impalpables and transparencies in canto II, "glistening" and "ablaze" in canto III, the "sheen of heat romanticised" in IV, a momentum is set up that underpins the first major image of reflection. My reader's eye has by now experienced Stevens' sense of difficult seeing, which is, of course, the metonymy for difficult "reading" of reality, when the poem says:

disillusion as the last illusion,  
Reality as a thing seen by the mind,

Not that which is but that which is apprehended,  
A mirror, a lake of reflections in a room,  
A glassy ocean lying at the door,

This vision oriented image expresses the difficulty of knowing the reality composed of substance and material; one can sense it, but the problem is

with apprehending it. "That which is apprehended" is the reflection of reality in "A mirror" which is a "lake of reflections," a "glassy ocean." These images simultaneously encompass the clearness glass and water can have, and a blockage of vision caused by the silver backing of the mirror and the suspended solids in lakes and oceans that block light and thus the sight's penetration into the depths.

In this way, Stevens has brought up the battle between the coherence theorists of truth and the correspondence theorists of truth. By coherence, the theorist means that we would like to check our ideas against perceived reality, but we can in fact only know ideas, and the most we can accomplish is to check ideas against each other. The coherence of ideas includes not only systematic ideas, but the ideas received from the "untidy flux of experience" (Reese, 152). By correspondence, the theorist says reality is a thing seen by the mind. Here, truth is established by comparing ideas to a reality perceived in the world (Reese, 152).

The poet explores this exteriorization in canto VII where "the spectator also moves/...with things exteriorized// Out of rigid realists." But for Stevens the rigidity is a function of things being made static by ornamentation, comparisons made either of substance or language which dress up and thus hide the plain version: "Men turning into things, as comedy,/...dressed in antic symbols." And again in XII: "The statues will have gone back to be things about." As "things about," the statues here and of canto XXIV stand as exemplars of bad form, as static representations of resolved concepts, institutions, points of view. The poet knows this and has the winds blow the marble statues as if they were newspapers, that is, yesterday's thoughts. And again, in a mode of willingness and readiness for reiteration, "There was a willingness not yet composed,/ A knowing that some-

thing certain has been proposed,/ Which, without the statue, would be new,/ An escape from repetition.” The escape from repetition is a whirling away from the same thing seen and known every time in the same way with the same modicum of knowledge. Whereas, a willingness for reiteration is the desire of the early cantos for searching “a possible for its possibleness” and expressing what one finds in “endless elaborations.”

The mirror/lake/glassy ocean belongs with the coherence theory which has for its central tenet that of the internal consistency of each affirmation; we can only know ideas and thus can only check ideas against other ideas (Reese, 152). This eye sees the “mirror of the high serious,” the one capable of verduring blue into “a damask’s lofty symbol.” This is the eye that deals with sheens, surfaces, and the fictive power of “moonlit extensions of them in the mind.”

It seems that Stevens tends toward the coherence theory and its entailment: that we can not truly know reality, only our internal fictions of it. Yet, his synthesizing of perceived reality and fictive power into the meditative poem seems to lean toward a commingling of the two theories of truth, “as if the crude collops came together as one.” If he had succeeded in such a reconciliation, the poem would be an argument for such a new possibility, but he has rejected the commingling when it entails myth-making. It seems to me that he also rejects a final version of the commingled in favor of a series of experimental and temporary editions of the truth about reality, sometimes favoring coherence theory, other times correspondence theory. I will explore this series in the following chapter when I write about structure. Prior to that, I will look at the generation and dismissal of epiphanies, and how tonal variety contributes to the poem’s modus operandi.

The epiphanies that occur in this poem bear little resemblance to the anagnorises we expect in great drama—Oedipus suddenly recognizing his hubris, Hamlet finally recognizing he need not seek self-understanding and self-image through private martyrdom. These are large revelations with huge implications, in part because their actions affect whole nations; the revelations are also inevitable, at least according to the construction of the dramas, and so are the consequences.

Stevens' revelations bear a closer resemblance to Joyce's, though with some important differences. Joyce seems more concerned with the spiritualness of the sudden revelations that dawn on Stephen Dedalus or the characters in *The Dubliners*; when they come to radical terms with the whatness of a thing, that manifestation is overtly mystical. Stevens twists this conception. He says in his journal entry of February 5, 1906:

I wish that groves were still sacred—or, at least, that something was: that there was still something free from doubt.... I grow tired of the want of faith—the instinct for faith. Self-consciousness convinces me of something, but whether it be something Past, Present or Future I do not know.

(*Letters*, 86)

Forty-three years later, the poet writes:

In the metaphysical streets, the profoundest forms  
Go with the walker subtly walking there.  
These he destroys with wafts of wakening,

Free from their majesty and yet in need  
Of majesty, of an invisible clou,  
A minimum of making in the mind

(canto XI)

That early instinct for faith drives the walker to stroll in metaphysical streets looking at “profoundest forms”; that is, first principles which act as ultimates of reality. The profoundest forms are what he had suspected to exist because of his felt need for them, but in his old age the walker is subtle. He can easily destroy the old forms of mysticism and mythology with personal epiphanies or “wafts of wakenings.” These disregard the timbre of his times in a way his journal entry could not.

The walker is now free from the ornamental trappings of the old forms, “and yet in need/ Of majesty.” What kind of majesty though? The walker seems to have tossed over the Joycian spirituality of the epiphany even in a momentarily metaphysical landscape—one made spiritual by remembering the phrase “the lion of Juda” and then made merely semiotic since in the walker’s understanding, “The phrase grows weak.”

In the metaphysical streets of the physical town  
 We remember the lion of Juda and we save  
 The phrase . . . Say of each lion of the spirit

It is a cat of a sleek transparency  
 That shines with a nocturnal shine alone.  
 The great cat must stand potent in the sun.

The phrase grows weak. The fact takes up the strength  
 Of the phrase.

(canto XI)

It is a phrase metonymically charged to represent the numinous, but it is also a phrase that “shines with a nocturnal shine alone.” Its power is based in the imagination. For Stevens “the great cat must stand potent in the sun” of reality, which it simply cannot do in a post-Nietzschean world. Why?

The answer is subtly overt when the Frenchified phrase “of an invincible clou” is translated into “the unseen yet binding nail of an unyielding major point of interest.” The concept of “major point of interest” is structurally identical to “first principle,” but it wears secular garb. More importantly, it differs in a way central to my thesis: first principles are ultimate, universal, and static. Major points of interest are subjective; that is, they are intentional; they are of interest to someone, and someone can change the nature and intensity of his interests. Thus Stevens has reduced the ornamental version to the vulgate edition to the savage “plainness of plain things.” The great grindings in canto IV of the last plain man who was snuffed out by the “opiates of sleep” is now the subtle walker actively destroying the opiates of “profoundest form” with “wafts of wakenings.”

So also the collocation of vision and desire of canto III becomes transmuted into a need for “A minimum of making in the mind.” The poet’s waft of wakening is that he doesn’t need the constancy of spiritual first principles, that he can destroy them, and replace them with the poesis of the mind.

He continues: and yet in need of “A verity of the most veracious men/  
The propounding of four seasons and twelve months./ The brilliancy of the central of earth.” Here he explains the collocation of the epiphany. The walker needs the truth of men who habitually speak the truth—the poet—who puts forward for his and our consideration the “four seasons” on which religious holidays are predicated, and the “twelve months” of the secular, ordinary scientificness of the vulgate. This “brilliancy,” which recaptures the tropes of surface, is an essentialness of the earth, a sort of cross-breeding of major interest and first principle. Truth then is put forward for consideration, not asserted with absolute faith or authority.

Oedipus and Hamlet each have a single, monumental recognition that thematically has been led up to by the playwrights, and which culminates at a critical juncture in the play, close to the end. The consequence of each climax acts like a lever to pry the play into its final and conclusive state, which in these two cases amounts to leaving their responsibilities in the hands of others no matter how conveniently Fortinbras happens to be marching on Elsinore.

Yet, in this poem, the epiphany I've just discussed occurs in canto XI with most of the poem to follow. If it is not to be judged as out of place, then it is either a minor recognition or it is a false one, and we might legitimately expect it to be overturned or subsumed by a greater one near the end. I do indeed wish to look at another epiphany that does occur near the end, but I wish first to quickly disqualify the dramatic conventions as my guide in making meaning of this poem.

One may agree with Harold Bloom's notion that a poet creatively corrects a precursor, as he says "Stevens antithetically completes Whitman" (Bloom, *Anxiety*, 68), and thus has contact with and learns from the past. Or one may side with Baudelaire, as glossed by Calinescu, that "There is no link between these individual entities [past and present] and, therefore, no comparison is actually possible" (49). Or one can pick some hybrid of these two poles. Clearly, though, Baudelaire has accurately described the timbre of his modernity as "the transitory, the fugitive, the contingent" (48) and this well describes my reading of "An Ordinary Evening in New Haven."

If we take Baudelaire to mean that by being adrift from the past modern man does not think in terms of a literary beginning, middle and end, then his epithet does not accurately describe *Oedipus Rex* or *Hamlet* or their



type. These seminal dramas find a concrete beginning to their stories and conclude the events with a strong sense of finality through closure. William Bevis's assertion that the spirit of the modern times had an "interest in the subjectivity of perception" (171) seems to imbue the modern sensibility with a strong sense of openness and revisability. Indeed, it is the poet's very interest in the issue of the subjectivity of perception that floods over the reader of "An Ordinary Evening." One cannot escape the differentness of this poem, and the need to find a different perspective from which to take a reading. Therefore, the epiphany of canto XI is not misplaced, and neither should we say that it is properly placed. Neither is it flawed nor false. It is placed contingent to the canto's circumstances; it will do for a while, and is subject to revision, rejection, and sustainment depending on the poet's need and perspective at the next time. For, as Stevens wrote to Bernard Heringman (March 20, 1951):

I have no wish to arrive at a conclusion. Sometimes I believe in the imagination for a long time and then, without reasoning about it, turn to reality and believe in that and that alone. Both of these project themselves endlessly and I want them to do just that.

(*Letters*, 710)

No teleology, no closure.

Let me explore one more epiphany simply because, as Vendler points out, it is an anticlimatic recognition (293) that occurs with less than eight percent of the poem left. (Out of idle comparison, nearly 23-percent of *Oedipus Rex* remains when the great king yields "Alas, alas! All things are now come true.")

In canto XXIX, Stevens tells a little story of description and redescription.

tion, which as Vendler says, ends in a parable (295). In the exotic and fertile land of the lemon trees we see the sun of reality's yellow mixing with the moon of the imagination's blue to become yellow blue, and with nature's green to become yellow green. The colors are particularized as dangling fruit that spangles, thus reviving the reflection/surface metaphors. The language spoken here is "the mic-mac of mocking birds." Mic-mac is an Algonquin language and adds to the sense of exoticism. Mocking birds are so called because they imitate the songs of other birds, and there is nothing new in imitation; there is merely repetition.

This longed for land is immediately contrasted with the land of the elm trees, which as Cook informs us is literally New Haven, known as the Elm Tree City (268). Elm trees are relatively drab looking and contrast markedly with the exotic lemon trees. This land is where the wandering mariners look "on big women, whose ruddy-ripe images" encircle the dying "wreath of Autumn." Cleverly, Stevens uses "looked on" rather than "looked at" perhaps to connote erotic desire rather than mere perception similar to the way he heightened the sense of desire in "Peter Quince at the Clavier" when the red-eyed elders "watch[ed]" Susanna. This harkens us back to canto III's "The point of vision and desire are the same." Furthermore, in the land of lemon trees the mariners romantically "rolled their r's," but at home "the words they spoke/ Were mere brown clods, mere catching weeds of talk." This move by the poet manifests Bevis' "interest in the subjectivity of perception."

While in the land of lemon trees, the sunny reality of "blond atmosphere" is "bronzed hard," the metaphor for ornamentalized stasis. And the mariners realize, without having set sail, that they are "back once more in the land of the elm trees." Thus, physically, they haven't migrated, but percep-

tually they have been able to see New Haven in two ways: one exotic, one drab. They also realize that the land of the elm trees has been “folded over, turned round”; that is, changed whenever their language changes.

The poet now comments on this sudden recognition:

It was the same,  
Except for the adjectives, an alteration  
Of words that was a change of nature, more

Than the difference that clouds make over a town.  
The countrymen were changed and each constant thing.  
Their dark-colored words had redescribed the citrons.

Within the storyline, the wandering mariners had this epiphany, but they, like the ephebe, the solitary walker and other characters are blooded manifestations of the poet’s thinking.

For Vendler, this is a toneless moral and a “possibly depressing recognition” (293). Cook, similarly, says as she notes the echoes of this canto’s earthly paradise of the land of lemon trees to that of “Sunday Morning,” “I cannot solve the problems of tone here” (*Poetry*, 291). Certainly the canto drops bathetically from earthly paradise to weedy New Haven. And again, the “frolic of dactyls” noted by Vendler (292) of the early stanzas become prosy when the poet restates the epiphany in the last two stanzas. How then can the poet justify not giving an emotional reaction to the recognition that the exotic land of lemon trees is really Elm City where the countrymen speak in “mere brown clods”?

Cook reads this poem with great verve and resourcefulness “as meditation on an actual city” (*Poetry*, 268) and also as “a purgatorial poem” (“Directions,” 305). Her reading of purgation is largely based on the word-play of apocalypse and eucalyptus of cantos XIV and XXII. She explains that

“eucalyptus” means well-covered, and it’s easy to see Professor Eucalyptus as an obfuscator. Apokalypsis means “the sudden, extraordinary uncovering of things” (“Directions,” 299). Tempering the steel of her thesis in my own forge, I would say that Cook sees the poet undercutting the “covering up” of the Professor without becoming truly apocalyptic in the sense of doom and final closure. Yet the recognition that the longed for land is actually New Haven and that the change has been a function of “adjectives, an/ alteration of words” is indeed an uncovering.

The placement of this epiphany so near the end of the poem and its bathetic momentum seem inextricably interlaced because of the mission to “keep coming back and coming back/...to the hotel instead of the hymns.” He has got “as close to the ordinary, the commonplace and the ugly” as is possible to get, but found in it no reason for ecstasy, no reason to rejoice or sing hymns. Neither has he found a reason to do anything more than redescribe, not the citrons, but the relationship between citrons and clods.

The epiphany remains anti-climatic to Vendler, but to me “The countrymen were changed and each constant thing” was also changed. Here the old dramatic conventions match up a bit better than before because there is a consequence to this epiphany (albeit not one that passes on the scepter of kingship) that gets clarified in canto XXX.

In this penultimate canto, the poet announces that “a clearness returns. It stands restored.” This clearness belongs to the coherence theory with its ideal of internal consistency: “It is a visibility of thought.” In other words, what is visible is the ability to see, to perceive. What then is meaningful must be within the context of the poem the meditation itself. Had the poem ended here, I would have to argue for closure instead of against it. But the poem doesn’t end here, and the epiphany of just a few lines ago

does not therefore set up a denouement in this canto. The epiphany is only an apprehension yielded by one of the “and yet’s” that is contingent in part on the preceding canto, XXVIII, and in part has been tenuous within the poem all along. Epiphanies, it seems to me, occur when they occur to the poet, not when they are useful or required for structural reasons.

If canto XXVIII is a possible ending to the whole as Vendler suggests, then why is it still the fourth canto from the last? I argue that Stevens intends a “perpetual meditation” in a descriptive text with a contingent structure that seeks only small, almost toss-away syllogisms rather than a unified and formal synthesis of a final outcome. Canto XXVIII would be a possible ending only for the reader whose reading strategy expects an epiphany to be a climax that levers the text toward a final resting point.

This canto says what the poet has been saying all along, but in a different way, this time in a theoretical way, as compared for example with the parabolic way of the following canto. Here he put the coherence theory of truth into the conditional syllogism: “If it should be true that reality exists/ In the mind,” then, “This endlessly elaborating poem/ Displays the theory of poetry,/ As the life of poetry.” This conclusion differs not all together from “Together, said words of the world are the life of the world,” found in canto XII.

Yet, note the conditional language—“If it should be true that”—which mitigates the otherwise all too conclusive assertion. Yes, certainly the poet has enscribed an “endlessly elaborating poem” in order to display “the theory of poetry,/ As the theory of life.” However, the use of the conditional language and syllogism give me ample reason to suspect the rock-solidness of his conviction. Furthermore, he invokes a stronger master who would develop proof that the theory of poetry really is the theory of life.

He is aware that the “intricate evasions of as” mean that metaphors can be no better than flawed substitutes. Such substitutes misspeak a perfect correspondence with reality both for “things seen and unseen,” things such as the “longed-for lands,” the phrase which overtly segues into canto XXIX.

With this uncharacteristic lead into the next canto, we can sense a momentum forward, at least in line count of the poem, to the epiphany discussed above which sets up the temporary return of clearness and visibility of thought.

The movement just in these three cantos has been from conditional theory with a cautiously eager tone, to the almost energetic tone of the first part of the parable. As the parable progresses to its apokalypsis, its tone drops. Any expectation of a joyous revelation is sideswiped by the diction which progresses into a darker tone in canto XXX as the clarification begins. Note “last leaf,” “has fallen,” “huddle together,” the recurring wind which has “blown the silence of summer away,” “barrenness,” “sad hanging on” as well as disparaging contexts such as “where the sun used to be reflected.” But wait. “It was something imagined that was washed away.” There is no call for depression because of the return to a clearness.

Tone in this section bothers Vendler and Cook. Yet tone has underpinned the movement leading up to, through, and away from this epiphany. Read this way, the three cantos would have a coherence if it were not for the multitude of other devices, which I cannot explore here, and the consistent re-viewing of his subject. Just as the changes of language change the location and perceptions of the mariners, so too do Stevens’ changing descriptions vary how he eyes the “vulgate of experience.”

## Chapter Two

### Modifying Qualifications and Reiterations To Create Macrostructure

*Something is beginning in order to end...it only makes sense when dead....And in reality you have started at the end. It was there, invisible and present, it is the one which gives to words the pomp and value of a beginning.*

*Le Nausee*  
Sartre

Sartre's existential hero Roquentin exits the novel having thrown over his long-time work on an issue of historical interest so that he may start over by writing a novel. *Le Nausee* thus ends at the beginning of Roquentin's authentic career, just as it began with the ending of his flagging career as historian. Thus the novel moves from beginning to end spiraling in its repetition of Roquentin's history. With a Viconian twist it comes full circle, but the final point of reference is on a different plane than the first.

This kind of spiral circularity only gives a sense of closure when looked at orthogonally, from the bird's eye downward, since then the starting and ending points of reference would appear to be on the same line at the same measurable locus. From this perspective, the reader witnesses Roquentin's closing out of an unproductive life, and will feel some resolution in that matter. Yet, there's no snapping shut of closure because, when viewed from the side, we see that Sartre stopped his writing by raising the possibility of Roquentin's becoming an authentic novelist. *La Nausee* ends on a plane higher than it began even though it ends where the next cycle of

Roquentin's life will start. Thus, contextually and structurally, the novel is open-ended.<sup>1</sup>

Likewise "An Ordinary Evening" gives us a sense of coming to closure—but it does so many times. Unlike *Le Nausee*, the poem makes no Viconian spiral; in fact, it would be misleading to think of the poem as making any kind of long-term linear progress in a straightforward, singular direction. For indeed, the poet visits the same thesis time and again, but with a "radial aspect" (canto XIX), that is, from a variety of perspectives. He knows how he will start the poem—whether or not he knows what paths he will travel or at what point of reference he will cease writing—for the opening stanza announces the poem's mission and *modus operandi*. This is the famous "plain version" in a few words of "and yet[s]."

Any linear paths of exploration or argumentation seldom last much longer than a canto, and often take the form of a thesis raised, a counter thesis offered, or sometimes a synthesis. Frequently that synthesis is subjected to an antithesis or outright dismissal. Of course, Stevens is famous for his use of the conditional syllogism, which I have already argued often has the effect of undercutting its ostensible theme.

Riddell's analysis is that "the poem's development is thematic, not in the sense of a rigid argument but of mind distilling forms of thought" (257). Riddell renders the poem into 12 clumpings to see the poem through a progression of macro-thematic movements in the apparent hope of culminating the poem into a more or less coherent and unified reading. His grouping is an excellent way to see the poem at once with a medium angle lens.

Yet structurally I see the poem reiterating Stevens' thesis by using a multitude of guises on the same thematic beast of burden. In doing so, he



works through the permutations of his thoughts by a process of qualification—the act of adding and subtracting conditions to and from the issue in question. This is not a particularly new idea, just never pushed so hard by a poet for such duration. For Stevens it's a matter of finding an appropriate structure for the problem of perception and interpretation. It's a matter of experiencing one thing many times under diverse conditions—for Cook this is New Haven, for me it's the relationship between perception and interpretation with their attendant concerns of desire and the truthfulness of one's epistemology. It is the poet "pointing to something and pointing out the meaning of something" (Gadamer, 68) from various—that is, qualified—points of view.

Every act of judgment or philosophy in the poem bears the burden of assumptions that may never have been intended to be assailed let alone proved. I believe Stevens has at least these three assumptions at work in the poem: 1) One can never know with certainty either because of epistemological problems or an inability to fully succumb to faith, 2) the knowledge he finds sufficient in the poetic expression will be temporary and contingent, and 3) what I've called ornamentation impedes knowing by its covering up of reality, thus one must clear the vision and look to the quale of plain things.

The first assumption precludes absolute closure, the second allows for fragile and short-term closure at best, and the third implies that the kind of closure brought on by ornamentation or institutionalization of thought is an ossified understanding no longer capable of fresh relationships with reality.

An appropriate structure to handle these thematic demands is one that serializes the reiterations. Conte, in his interesting study of postmodern

forms, comments on Umberto Eco in order to define serial form:

Eco's thesis is provocative and compelling: that the abandonment by science of a unidirectional system of causation for a multidirectional field of possibilities encourages a corresponding shift in the arts from closed to open forms. His argument is particularly useful to a definition of seriality in poetry. No longer bound by the fixed, preordained orders of closure, the series articulates both the indeterminacy and the discontinuity that the scientist discovers in the subatomic world and that we are compelled to consider in our own interaction with reality.... Postmodern poets recognize such qualities not as elements of disorientation or as a disruptive chaos, but as an essential aspect of their own investigation of contemporary existence.

(Conte, 19)

Conte continues to define his "infinite serial form" as having paratactic structure, as being metonymic rather than metaphoric, and as being immanently open rather than closed (22-3).

This infinite serial form makes a break from the modern poetics by virtue of its multi-directionalness in the field of possibilities and thus its inherent openness. Conte traces this break through the poetry of Robert Creeley, Paul Blackburn and Robert Duncan, all writing in the shadow of Stevens' corpus. Yet Conte's discovery of form in these later poets only partially describes what Stevens has done in "An Ordinary Evening."

I argue that "An Ordinary Evening" has a largely paratactic structure in that the structural parts are mostly "arranged side by side" and are often related by contiguity more than by a linear development of theme. As Barbara Herrnstein Smith puts it, "the coherence of the poem will not be dependent on the sequential arrangement of its major thematic units" (99). Yet, there is a strong sense of the hypotactic, which Conte defines as "arranged one under the other" (22), when read in Riddell's way of "associa-

tive 'blocks' of ideas" (256). In the hypotactic way of reading the poem, Riddell can see it "not in the sense of a rigid argument" but with a New Critic's development of theme where the connections among poetic parts is apparent in the text, or easily supplied by the critic through his act of filling in the gaps between parts.

In this study, however, I see the poem differently. The poem does indeed arrange the cantos side by side, even though we must view the cantos one after the other. But rather than forcing a long-term, forward or sequential progression of thematic development, and rather than a juxtaposed array of fully mobile substitutive elements,<sup>2</sup> Stevens has assembled something more like a legal defense: that is, he has meaning accumulate in the poem by a preponderance of meditative evidence, a piling on of the momentarily sufficient truths. His structure then is not an infinite serial form, but a reiterative serial form in which, as I've said, the same themes are re-qualified under different conditions. As the poem continues, it accumulates and discards meaning much in the way that a rolling snowball picks up snow thus adding to its girth (meaning) and also drops chunks of snow as it moves on (sloughing off meaning that no longer adheres).

What, then, would such a series look like as an infrastructure? Obviously, "An Ordinary Evening" is written in tercets, but beyond Stevens' presumed discovery that he liked the tercet and that it worked well for his style, I know of no particular advantage to tercets beyond its effect of order. He assembles six tercets into cantos providing Roman numerals as titles. Again the choice of six rather than any other number of tercets per canto seems arbitrary, especially since thematically one story line will sometimes spill hypotactically into the next canto, as Riddell's analysis points out, and at other times more than one issue is contained in a single

canto. And, finally, there are 31 cantos, a number which seems to have no link to anything, and this I think to be of some importance as we shall see.

I have said that the structure involves reiteration, but not mere repetition, and I argue that the poem has one primary theme; only the points of view, metaphors and characterizations change. These points of view, metaphors and characterizations make for a procedural or micro-structural change that occurs from canto to canto: each canto has a different motion accompanying the thematics which enriches and diversifies the treatment of a thing seen many times, many ways.

Here is a chart of those primary motions by canto:

I-Meditation	II-Illumination & Sonority
III-Vision & Desire	IV-Assuagement/Appeasement
V-Apprehension	VI-Interpretation
VII-Exteriorization	VIII-Conversation
IX-Simple Seeing & Transfixation	
X-Faith in Permanence Composed of Impermanence	
XI-Evocation & Propounding	XII-Cry & Reverberation
XIII-Predication & Definition	XIV-Description
XV-Preservation & Touch	XVI-Palaver & Whisper
XVII-Serious Reflection	XVIII-Perception & Realization
XIX-Imaginative Ordering	XX-Becoming
XXI-Mingling	XXII-Re-creation & Searching
XXIII-Disembodiment	XXIV-Willingness/Readiness
XXV-Fixing & Permanence	XXVI-Change & Repose
XXVII-Notation	XXVIII-Syllogism & Metadiscourse
XXIX-Description & Redescription	
XXX-Clarification	XXXI-Abstraction

These 45 motions give some idea of the qualifications that occur, and of the subtle distinctions that Stevens explores, as well as, indicate that several cantos do more than one job. The graph does not show that cantos do occasionally lead one into another, as I have shown with canto XXVIII segueing into XXIX.

I would like now to show how the thesis gets reiterated and qualified through the poem, not as a fretted design but as the less than conventionally formalized elaborations of a subtle meditator. This will necessarily involve thematics and metaphor as well as structural devices. Furthermore, I hope to show that the very nature of Stevens' procedural approach to the poem corroborates with the meditative content to prevent final closure.

Conte can help us again. He defines "procedural form" as

...closed by virtue of its entirely predetermined structure, but the function of that structure is radically different from that of traditional closed forms.... The procedural form is a generative structure that constrains the poet to encounter and examine that which he or she does not immediately fathom, the uncertainties and incomprehensibilities of an expanding universe in which there can be no singular impositions (16).

In Conte's reading, Duncan, Blackburn and Creeley are not writing so very far apart from Stevens. Though Conte does not argue for a filial relationship, he does say that "the poets of today maintain a continuity with their predecessors, and...they extend and modify modernist poetics" (5-6). The closed procedural forms Conte finds in the poetry of Duncan, Blackburn and Creeley are prefigured in "An Ordinary Evening" in this way: the cantos often contain a strong or weak closed form, such as the conditional syllogism in III, the antiphony of VI, the anaphoric conditionals of XVIII, and the parable of XXIX. Within these sub-forms Stevens "encounters and examines" the relationship between mind and matter by generating a third entity, the poem. However, the most structurally constrained that "An Ordinary Evening" ever gets is the constraint of six

tercets per canto. Thus the poem is procedural in the sense that the poet finds his form to be generative as he encounters and explores the uncertainties of his universe. Yet closed forms are superceded by the open-endedness of the endless meditation.

I have shown in Chapter One how the antiphonal structure in canto VI was subverted from closing because the substructure was torqued in its content, and because the use of the mini-form was incomplete. Now let's look at cantos XX and XXI, which are grammatically linked and follow a less recognizable procedural form.

## XX

The imaginative transcripts were like clouds,  
 Today; and the transcripts of feeling, impossible  
 To distinguish. The town was a residuum,

A neuter shedding shapes in an absolute.  
 Yet the transcripts of it when it was blue remain;  
 And the shapes that it took in feeling, the persons that

It became, the nameless, flitting characters—  
 These actors still walk in a twilight muttering lines.  
 It may be that they mingle, clouds and men, in the air

Or street or about the corners of a man,  
 Who sits thinking in the corners of a room.  
 In this chamber the pure sphere escapes the impure,

Because the thinker himself escapes. And yet  
 To have evaded clouds and men leaves him  
 A naked being with a naked will

And everything to make. He may evade  
 Even his own will and in his nakedness  
 Inhabit the hypnosis of that sphere.

## XXI

But he may not. He may not evade his will,  
 Nor the wills of other men; and he cannot evade  
 The will of necessity, the will of wills—

Romanza out of the black shepherd's isle,  
 Like the constant sound of the water of the sea  
 In the hearing of the shepherd and his black forms;

Out of the isle, but not of any isle.  
 Close to the senses there lies another isle  
 And there the senses give and nothing take,

The opposite of Cythere, an isolation  
 At the centre, the object of the will, this place,  
 The things around—the alternate romanza

Out of the surfaces, the windows, the walls,  
 The bricks grown brittle in time's poverty,  
 The clear. A celestial mode is paramount,

If only in the branches sweeping in the rain:  
 The two romanzas, the distant and the near,  
 Are a single voice in the boo-ha of the wind.

In previous cantos, the town of New Haven has been alternately impalpable, slapped up (as in hastily built), and pendant. Now Stevens bluntly says, "The town was a residuum,/ A neuter shedding shapes in an absolute." Above it are the "imaginative transcripts" or past poems "of feeling" which are impossible to recognize distinctly. The town, likewise, is neuter, but keeps changing its appearance in a phrase recalling the serpent of "The Auroras of Autumn." So within the absolute reality of New Haven's existence, there is a shedding of forms and masks that comprise the indistinguishable transcripts.

Yet some persons, actors, still walk like the ephebe of XIII and the solitary walker of XI. They mutter lines of poetry, but they are nameless and flitting. This is a very different tone than the poet had in Canto XII in speaking the poem, in issuing his cry of a poem's occasion.

As the actors flit, the canto's perspective is geographical, one that moves from a broad to a tight focus: from clouds to town to street to "the corners of a man" sitting thinking in a room. In the process, it may be that men and clouds mingle, that is, readers and poems, and all because one man sits and thinks. When he does, he escapes the direct perception of reality, and his escape "leaves him/ A naked being with a naked will." In this unadorned state, he has "everything to make." Of course, "to make" is the literal act of the poet—poiesis—and since he has "everything to make" he has unlimited potential. In this way, "He may evade/ Even his own will and in his nakedness/ Inhabit the hypnosis of that sphere." This seems to suggest a need for some degree of form.

The "mays" here indicate potentiality. Evasion is, of course, what Stevens complains of whenever he presents statues, bronzed anything, and ornamentation in general; evasion masks the plain sense of things, even one's own will. The lovely amphibrachs of "Inhabit the hypnosis" recall the growling man in IV who was snuffed out by "obese opiates of sleep." If this canto were autonomous, it would present the conclusion that the meditator who closets himself in a chamber away from the "impure" real world, lived in by men, will sleepwalk in a fictional world and can create whatever phantasmagorias he wants.

But the canto is not autonomous; it is contiguous to and precedent to canto XXI, which begins, "But he may not." Without XX, we have no antecedent for either the pronoun nor the subordinate clause. The open



half-sentence then, by its own structure, and its location at the line between the two cantos, acts as a lever to deflect the motion away from XX's conclusion.

The thinker is categorically denied permission to evade his will and the wills of the other men, in all likelihood because "he cannot evade/ The will of necessity, the will of wills—." The use of "may" has switched from its meaning of conditional potentiality to mean permission. Presumably this permission is controlled by the maker/meditator, but certainly the double entendre contains a degree of ambiguity. Thus the meditator must be connected with the lived world. Using the dash mark after "wills" Stevens introduces a pastoral which at once is literary and mythical, as well as a new substructure within the arbitrary confines of the six tercet canto.

The neologism "Romanza" conjures up three related connotations that inform this short pastoral in structural and thematic ways. The word suggests "romanz," an Old French term meaning "in the Roman way" (as opposed to "in the Latin way") and leading to the story form in Modern English known as "romance" (Holman, 459). It also suggests a Roman character named Romanza. And it strongly suggests a Roman-like idyllic narrative, in this case, derived from mythology and Baudelaire.

In any event, there are two romanzas. The first is an exotic, imaginative one associatively connected with the island of Cythere, near where Aphrodite sprang up fully grown. This romanza is transcribed by the allusions to Baudelaire, as Vendler points out (288), which conjure up the darkness of the "black shepherd's isle" and his "black forms." The other romanza is local. Instead of its imaginative landscape—I read that in the line, "Out of the isle, but not of any isle"—the poet finds that "Close to the sense there lies another isle," one constructed "Out of the surfaces, the

windows, the walls,/ The brick grown brittle....” This “alternate romanza” is the story of New Haven, which is at hand and therefore “close to the sense,” made significant by the poem’s heavy metaphoric use of surfaces (glassy, mirror, spangle), windows (such as eyes and doors), and walls (of houses, chambers, corners, etc.).

If we recall the gradual narrowing of geographic focus in XX, where the poet pointed to the now repudiated conclusion, we can see a twist that begins at line 15 here in XXI: “A celestial mode is paramount,// If only in the branches sweeping in the rain.” The windblown branches of a tree sweep across the poet’s wide view of outer space and of heavenly procedures combining the abstract and the particular in the space of a stanza break. In other words, the abstract is paramount at least in the particular. This is the bringing together of two romanzas, “the distant and the near” into “a single voice in the boo-ha of the wind,” which mimics the blooding of an abstraction. This unification also suggests the internal consistency sought by the proponents of a coherence theory of truth.

The single voice recalls the conditional mingling of men and clouds in line nine of XX, only it has the authority of a declarative assertion. The comic sound of “boo-ha” recalls the “cry” of line one, canto XII, but boo-ha sounds remarkably like boo-hoo. If boo is the exclamatory half of the compound word, and hoo signifies the sadness, then ha would signify the gladness of the poet in bringing together what he will bring together again in XXIX.

As we saw above in XXIX, the wandering mariners—not unlike the “flitting, nameless characters”—realized that the land of lemon trees and the land of elm trees was really the same place, but appears differently when one describes it differently, whether in exotic, imaginative language

or plain language. Their epiphany, as we saw, occurs in the substructure of a parable, and was a lesson in language. That canto then reiterates the work and procedure of XXI with this important structural difference. The procedure of XXIX is easily recognizable as parable. But what do we find in XX/XXI?

I have talked about the gradual geographic zooming in of XX and its contrast to the sudden and juxtaposed refocus in XXI. Normally we would consider such movement to be a device rather than an infrastructure, though clearly XX hangs on this movement. The poet describes New Haven and the becoming of the thinker as he draws our vision nearer to a point. This focusing combines with the assertive syntax to evoke in the reader a sense of conclusion. Unlike the parable, where we know the conventions and expect a closure, we do not have in XX a clear set of conventions, and can only expect to reach some point at which we can hope to be surprised. We expect the conventional parable to present a confident moral or answer to some question at its end. In XX, we have an “And yet” followed by the uncertainty of a conditional “may” associated with the poverty of “nakedness” and the pejorative “hypnosis.” The form has drawn us to something, but it is a something that is tenuous.

The real surprise comes with the first line of XXI: “But he may not. He may not evade his will.” We realize the continuance of the point of view across canto breaks—there is no clear chapter break until the dash of line three, and thus we see the exterior structure breached by the line of thought and grammatical construction.

*[stanza six, canto XX]*

And everything to make. He may evade  
Even his own will and in his nakedness

Inhabit the hypnosis of that sphere.

*[canto break]*

XXI

But he may not. He may not evade his will,  
Nor the wills of other men; and he cannot evade  
The will of necessity, the will of wills-

*[stanza & chapter break, new sub-form]*

Romanza out of the black shepherd's isle,

It's as if we ran past the expected closure, much in the way that a camera lens, to get a clear image when using infrared film, must focus past the actual object . After the dash, the next 15 lines present some kind of romance or pastoral, but not a conventional kind. So if it's to be a procedural form according to Conte's definition, we still would expect this episode to be entirely predetermined, generative, and closed.

Here is the full romanz:

Romanza out of the black shepherd's isle,  
Like the constant sound of the water of the sea  
In hearing of the shepherd and his black forms;

Out of the isle, but not of any isle  
Close to the sense there lies another isle  
And there the senses give and nothing take,

The opposite of Cythere, an isolation  
At the centre, the object of the will, this place,  
The things around—the alternate romanza

Out of the surfaces, the windows, the walls,  
The brick grown brittle in time's poverty,  
The clear. A celestial mode is paramount,

If only in the branches sweeping in the rain:  
The two romanzas, the distant and the near,

Are a single voice in the boo-ha of the wind.

This is how Stevens has made these 15 lines seem closed: because 1) the rapid zooming from celestial to branches gives the feel of a movement stopping abruptly, 2) the evocation of form by alluding to romance/pastoral contains a set of expectations for closure, and 3) the conflation of the two romanzas into a single voice seems to be a triumph expressed in the gladness of boo-ha.

As for having an “entirely predetermined structure,” we can at least recognize that Stevens plays with the idea of a conventional form by hinting at some version of a pastoral, but it’s nothing for which we have a conventional term. If we were to work really hard, perhaps we could read the allusion to Baudelaire as a symbolic conjuring of form. But this seems to be reading too closely. It also seems to be reading too closely to see Stevens’ pastoral as allegorical to Baudelaire’s “Voyage a Cythere,” even though it is an allusion and the correspondences of tone (which do not concern us here) do enrich the quasi-pastoral.

We can also say that the romanza form seems generative. Within it, Stevens has referred to or alluded to the mythological in Aphrodite, the exotic in the island of Cythere, the mysterious in the “black shepherd’s isle,” the literary and romantic via the allusion to Baudelaire and romanz, its own (partial) structure in romanza, and the “radically different” in Baudelaire. Within it we also find the two neologisms: romanza and boo-ha.

However, there are two strong reasons why I should not like to read XXI as a fully closed canto nor the section XX/XXI as a fully closed section.

First: Stevens does not truly establish a conventional form beyond or

within the tercets-in-cantos infrastructure. And as we have seen, the grammar and the line of thought violate the end point of XX and segue clearly into XXI. With the transition, the momentum of that line of thought pushes it past not just the canto's end point but past the conclusive assertion that "He may evade/ Even his own will...." The structure fails to contain the meditation, and thus undercuts the superficial stability of the resolution reached by the time of line 18 of canto XX.

Neither has Stevens created a full procedural form for the episode XX-XXI as defined by Conte. Clearly the episode makes improvisational use of structures without regard to a predetermined structure, for, as we saw, it breaches the obvious structure of tercets-in-cantos, and inserts one form inside another without a strong sense of subordination.

While I argue for a connection, a contiguity, Riddell's graph of thematic development shows a break between XX and XXI. For Riddell, XX (and XIX together) presents "the life lived in the uncommon" which now becomes "something inhuman because it is perfect and unchanging." Twenty-One (together with XXII and XXIII), shifts for Riddell to "respond to previous problems" and to "suggest that the union of pure reality and pure imagination gives us the only reality we can know" (257). I respect Riddell's reading; however, I think it applies better as a generality than as a close reading of what occurs structurally, and for that matter, in terms of where changes in the line of thought and that line's momentum occur particularly to the text.

Second: Having breached the canto form, we might expect the poet to continue exploring the new denial of evasion. Instead, we get the dash which propels us into the quasi-pastoral, Riddell's shift into different thematic material. But even in this change of direction, this divagation of

sorts, Stevens goes no further than to merely suggest a new sub-form. And while I've called it a kind of pastoral, it actually lacks the lover's plaint, the praise of personage, the elegy of a dead friend, the serious and dignified diction, and the length of a pastoral romance. He only evokes the feel of the general pastoral in the manner I have already pointed out, and by his allusion to "Voyage a Cythere," which makes stronger use of pastoral elements.

This example shows Stevens' persistent disregard for using structure and sub-form to effect closure. It seems reasonable at this point to attempt evaluating the effects of refused closure on the reader from the structural point of view.

When I as reader recognize that Shakespeare's poem, "My mistress' eyes are nothing like the sun," has 14 lines and is organized into three quatrains and a final couplet, I know I'm reading a sonnet. That understanding recalls Jonathan Culler's "competent reader," who works with a set of conventions to recognize how the poem can make meaning. Recognizing the lyric's structural parts helps me come to grips with issues of the poem's tone, voice, and themes.

Thus I also have a set of expectations from the poem. I expect the sonneteer to praise his love by extolling her virtues, physical and moral. Furthermore, I expect that the issue raised in the three quatrains be brought home with finality in an epigrammatic couplet. To this end, Shakespeare does not disappoint. Yet thematically he surprises me by demeaning his love's physical appearance, and this twist delights me. Still, he maintains the structural procedure and brings the sonnet to a resounding close by turning the insults into a grand compliment and testimony to his love. The couplet form itself and the end rhyme of "rare/compare" serve to snap

shut the lid of closure. Thus my pleasure in reading the poem and making meaning from it is increased by having thematic, and especially structural expectations cleverly met with verve and wit by the poet.

In part, my satisfaction in reading a text comes from establishing expectations of it, then seeing in what ways those expectations are met or not, and how well they are handled by the poet. Naturally, these expectations are heavily predicated on my recognition of structural (as well as thematic) conventions employed in the poem. Minor breaches or omissions of the expected conventions can also lead to the making of meaning. What conventions will define “An Ordinary Evening” and what readerly expectations may I form?

We can see by the poem’s long length (558 lines) that it is no typical version of lyric. It does seem to share some attributes of the epic: it is long, it announces its thesis immediately, and on retrospect it seems to start in the midst of its subject, but it lacks too many other key attributes to be a version of epic. Its too urban and detached to be pastoral. There is little sense of elegy. It seems structurally to be unconventional except for the superficial construction of tercets-in-cantos, which appears arbitrary since the form seems unconnected to form/content conventions that have a name found in handbooks.

Thus, the reiterative serial form. But if epic or lyric rests on the species level of a taxonomy, the reiterative serial form is surely at the phylum level, and it would serve the reader to establish a set of conventions that can give the form a sense of being at the species level.

Professor William Bevis, in his treatise on poetic meditation *The Mind of Winter*, suggests the following elements as typical of a Stevens long poem:



- Sardonic wit rather than irony
- Detachment rather than sarcasm or bitterness
- A “form [of] fragmentation [that] expresses neither despair, nor nihilism, nor black humor, but a genuinely comic approach to consciousness”
- Immersement of the poetic self in “experience while maintaining detachment”
- An “emphasis on transition, on the act of arriving rather than on what one arrives at”

Bevis also provides guidance for the reader and his expectations:

...these formal properties demand, in turn, a different kind of listening on the part of the audience: future listening, a moment by moment expectation of change. By such listening, which highlights the author's intended effect: we take delight in the variety and transience of thought and feeling, we participate in being as a verb, not a noun (297).

This is not the kind of knowledge that the naive reader can find in a handbook, but it adds up to a species of “meditative” poetry. Critics have long recognized the meditative quality found in most of Stevens’ poems—a recognition that depends partly on canonical reading. We also have Stevens’ own announcement that this poem is “part of the never ending meditation.” Holman speaks only of “certain kinds of metaphysical poetry of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries” (311) as being meditative poetry, but this may do us more harm than good as a guide for competent response.

Thus, if we continue to speak of “An Ordinary Evening’s” structure in terms of reader-expected conventions, we can say that it is a form providing constant surprise since its overall motion is one of meditative “and yet,” which lead the reader to expect a series of changes. The change, as

can be seen, is phenomenological as we get descriptions and redescriptions of Stevens' response to apprehending reality and fiction. Each description is "situated," in Gadamer's terms, as paraphrased by Hoy:

Because an understanding is rooted in a situation, it represents a point of view, a perspective, on what it represents. There is no absolute, aperspectival stand point (a contradiction in terms!) from which to see all possible perspectives. Interpretation is necessarily a historical process, continuously elaborating on the meanings grasped in an understanding and on the meaning of this understanding for itself. In this respect understanding is not a mere repetition of the past but participates in present meaning (52).

Or as Stevens puts situatedness: "The point of vision and desire are the same." As he puts the 'historical process' of interpretation: the memories of

Bergamo on a postcard, Rome after dark,  
Sweden described, Salzburg with shaded eyes  
Or Paris in a conversation at a cafe.

This endlessly elaborating poem  
Displays the theory of poetry,  
As the life of poetry.

As an example of 'not mere repetition, but participat[ion] in present meaning,' Stevens presents the water cycle in situation with a consequence:

The seas shivered in transcendent change, rose up  
  
As rain and blooming, gleaming, blowing, swept  
The wateriness of green wet in the sky.  
Mountains appeared with greater eloquence

Meditation is an act of interpretation that is freest to explore the “idea and the bearer-being of the idea.”

How does one come to recognize this situatedness? Stevens recognizes “with the sight/ Of simple seeing” and through the process of “Search[ing] a possible for its possibilities.” Thus he needs a structure that allows a flow of serial thoughts, descriptions and re-descriptions that arrive and depart in disregard of a formal requirement to tie it all up as in the sonnet’s couplet or the envoi of a villanelle.

The reader finds his guiding conventions as he begins “An Ordinary Evening”:

The eye’s plain version is a thing apart,  
The vulgate of experience. Of this,  
A few words, an and yet, and yet, and yet-

As part of the never ending meditation,

He thus knows the *modus operandi*, and he can expect a number of qualifications, despite the teasing lie of “a few words.” As he begins to see structural devices reissued from canto to canto—most particularly the “as if” and “if/then” sub-structures—and new devices deployed on recurrent themes, he can expect variation of treatment, qualification and requalification of concepts and momentary conclusions, and an impressive diversity of points of view. As a result, the thoughts and their expressions often do not map one-to-one onto the *tercet-in-cantos* form as we saw with cantos XX and XXI.

As reader, I respond to the poem’s structural indications as though they were waves of a sea: the sense of rolling forward when actually rolling over. So the forward momentum is not linear and confident as in a ship’s

motion straight out to sea. Instead I sense that the poet's searching elaborations are tentative, exploratory, and coherent only in the fitful effort of elaborating. Stevens puts it this way in canto VII, "The objects tingle and the spectator moves/ With the objects."

The form, then, does not impose arbitrary constrictions on the play of sardonic wit or detachment. Stevens does not need to make the line "The objects tingle and the spectator moves" fit into iambic pentameter, nor does he have to rhyme the line with another. Its rhyme with the same word "moves" in the following line is accidental; that is to say, he repeats the action, "the spectator also moves" because it fits his rolling line of thought, and he does so with an impunity that would seem forced and flawed had he the mandate of rhyming a couplet.

As a result I should expect that rhyme and meter are inconsequential to both structure and content in the conventional sense. Thus I must bracket my sense of rhyme and meter's normal functions of creating delight through recognizing the poet's skill at exploiting the form, as well as their uses in adding emphasis and rhythm. Yet, any repetition persists in drawing attention to itself. It almost doesn't matter whether Stevens is relying on the repetition to add emphasis, although I may and do expect that he is aware that repeating the same words will do so. The point is that the line of thought transcends the bounds of conventional structure—it is the important poetic movement here.

The same point holds true in terms of a "comic approach to consciousness." The comedy is free to roam beyond a tight form. More importantly, perhaps, an approach to consciousness requires the bearing of all his human faculties on objects of his meditation. The reiterative serial form allows him room, as well as a minimal foundation for ruminations unen-

cumbered by strict form. This is especially important because he already restricts his meditation by conceptual constraints such as the epistemological problems of “the poet’s search for the same exterior made/ Interior.” He has explored such problems through his metaphors of surface, reflection, desire, vision, palpability, and other issues of knowledge and certainty. Boundaries would impede progress—when the form of boat—on-river was no longer sufficient for the situation, William Clark had to leave Meriwether Lewis and strike across country.

With the reiterative serial form, Stevens could immerse himself in his experience of perception and meditation, yet the form is not constrained in the way we think of a lyric poem as typically restricted to a single voice expressing a single state of mind, thus generating a strong sense of immediacy. The openness and length of Stevens’ form allows him to resort to distanced characters like the solitary walker, the wandering mariners and Professor Eucalyptus. By such distance, he can play with his characters and proceed with the “comic approach.” This way he can encumber Professor Eucalyptus with comic associations in canto XIV by including words such as ramshackle, commodious and tink-tonk, which make that character seem shabby and a touch ridiculous, not unlike polymathic Z.

Most important in Bevis’ set of conventions is the “emphasis on transition.” As reader, I grow to expect that with each transition, some or all of what has just been arrived at may be recast, unravelled, revised or otherwise modified. I then continuously ask of the poem what will come next, what will the poet do with each new understanding. Thus my own understanding of the poem must transmute with every twist and turn. So when the poet speaks: “not grim/ Reality but reality grimly seen// And spoken in paradisal parlance new” my readerly understanding becomes ‘not grim

reality, but reality grimly apprehended, and then transmuted into paradisaical parlance.'

If I cannot adjust to these new conventions, as signaled by the unconventional form, then I will surely leave the poem "indifferent to what it sees" and find it "of an essence not yet well perceived." On the other hand, I am well suited if I assume as convention Gadamer's advice that:

[i]t is important to note that all interpretation points in a direction rather than to some final endpoint, in the sense that it points toward an open realm that can be filled in a variety of ways...This interpreting is not a reading in of some meaning, but clearly a revealing of what the thing itself already points to" (68).

In short, I must be open to a structure that itself is deliberately open to accommodate a lengthy thought process that is never meant to cease because, as Stevens wrote in "The Well Dressed Man with a Beard," "It can never be satisfied, the mind, never" (*CP*, 247).

Let me now follow one movement through its many qualifications to see how it tacks through the poem. Throughout the poem, Stevens reiterates the movement of "coming together," a kind of closure, which he begins in canto I when he says: "As if the crude collops came together as one." The two collops are the giant of reality and the giant of the imagination come together in the grotesque image of folds of fat on the body. The drollness of this image qualifies the seriousness of closure—at least the ecstatic, revelatory annotations—brought about by the act of synthesis.

In canto II the "far-fire flowing" of the sun of reality comes together with man's ability for speech, the metaphoric "dim-coned bells." But they com-

bine “in a sense in which we are poised/ Without regard to time or where we are.” This lack of situatedness results in a confusion between “illuminations and sonorities,” and between “The idea and the bearer-being of the idea.” Again, an uncertain closure, but now one that is serious and abstract rather than grotesque and particular.

In canto III the poet collocates “The point of vision and desire,” which seems to indicate that what he can see is inextricably bound to what he desires. Thus emotion is linked to the intellect in as much as the intellect focuses on sensible objects through sensory perception. Unfortunately, this desire cannot possess and leaves “Always an emptiness that would be filled/ In denial that cannot contain its blood.” Vendler calls this an “esoteric closure” (281) because to her it never seems quite “natural” since the final image is of porcelain left unfired. In my reading it is a lopsided closure where the artificiality of the coming together is less interesting than the fact that one half of the collocation does not hold up its end of the job. “The point of vision and desire” may be the same, but desire according to Stevens cannot be filled and thus completed no matter how much the vision can see.

Another kind of coming together occurs in canto VI as polymathic Z and hierophantic Omega are linked by comparison, as are naked Alpha and infant A. Alpha/Omega and A/Z come together conceptually “Since both alike appoint themselves the choice/ Custodians of the glory of the scene.” The poet sees each as serving the same custodial purpose, but the linkage ends up being tentative because A/Z disappears from the scene in the last stanza, thus emphasizing the ever freshening circularity of Alpha and Omega. As in canto III, this emphasis of one pole over its counterpart yields a lopsidedness that unbalances any effect of closure.

Another version occurs in canto VIII where the “impassioned cry...that contains itself” is the mingling “In which looks and feelings” come together. This is the complementarity of reality and imagination, not really a synthesis. The poet understands this to be a “quick answer,” one which is “Not wholly spoken in a conversation between/ Two bodies dismembered in their talk.” The poet remarks his weakened confidence in this relationship by saying that the cry that expresses this mingling (not commingling) is “Too fragile, too immediate for any speech,” as if he doesn’t know what to say about this overpowering mingling.

Stevens follows up on that complementarity in canto X, when he writes: “The enigmatical/ Beauty of each beautiful enigma// Becomes amassed as a double-thing.” Yet rather than having a new singularity composed of complementary parts as before, the description is of a “double-thing,” something composed of two wholes joined at the hip, so to speak. The word “amassed” supports the image as made from two whole things—“the enigmatical Beauty” and “the beautiful enigma”—because complements would not accumulate; they would fit together naturally. Here the poet assumes a distinction between puzzling beauty and a beautiful puzzle, but this is problematic because “We do not know what is real and what is not.” To accomplish this distinction the poet separates “the man of bronze who mind was made up and who, therefore, died” from “We [who] are not men of bronze and we [who] are not dead.” There seems to be little difference in the effect of being “imprisoned in constant change” and residing “In a permanence composed of impermanence.” The difference is one of motion—the man of bronze is passive, the men who are not are active as poets in the construction of change. By revising the notion of complementarity in this way, the poet announces his compulsion for poiesis.



When, in canto XII, “The poem is the cry of its occasion,” and thus “Part of the res itself and not about it,” then “The poet speaks the poem as it is, // Not as it was.” Unfortunately, “There is no tomorrow” for the poet, leaving him in an ever-present present where “The wind will have to pass by, [and] The statues will have gone back to be things about.” The past poem can no longer be part of the present res. Consequently, the “area between is and was” is reduced to the status of leaves whirling in the gutter. Vendler sees this passage as the place where nature evolves into art (277). But from a Gadamerian perspective, it sounds like the connection between the present and history (tradition) has degenerated into litter. So the “area” between presence and completedness now only

resembles the presence of thought...as if,

In the end, in the whole psychology, the self,  
The town, the weather, in a casual litter,  
Together, said words of the world are the life of the world.

As litter, the former synthesis of “is and was” has entropied and broken apart.

The two romanzas of canto XXI also come together as “a single voice in the boo-ha of the wind.” Vendler sees wind and rain as pervasive elements in the poem; she concludes that the wind and rain of the last stanza of XXI “unite the necessity of poverty with the necessity of death, and in this imperfect we must find our paradise” (289). Yet, two issues spoil the closure here. The first is the issue of voice, not the poetic voice of the narrator, but the speaking/crying voice of the poet/meditator and his characters. This is the voice(s) that vacillates and renegs on assertions and conclu-

sions. How far can the reader trust it? At least he can for the sake of the argument, but not with the certainty that each assertion is a nugget of universal and absolute truth for the poet. Furthermore, any strength in this certainty is mocked by the inherent humor of the word boo-ha. The second issue concerns the notion of imperfection. Strictly speaking, only perfection can be considered as fully closed. An imperfect paradise, like the bleak Cythere presented by Baudelaire with its hanged man, must be open for revision, for paradise is a matter of perception and description.

“The sun,” in canto XXIII, “is half the world...what remains,// At evening, after dark, is the other half.” This image cleanly evokes the Tao symbol of ying and yang. The dark half, imagination, has “a long, inevitable sound” that is unworried by day’s multiple personalities, which themselves have “come together as one.” So in that “single future of night, the single sleep” there exists a harmony and unity. Yet as the astronomers of today tell us, the movement of the universe, of sun and night sky, is toward entropy, disassembly. Likewise for the poet, “disembodiments// Still keep occurring” because “Desire prolongs its adventure to create// Forms of farewell,” and this explains why the “cozening and coaxing sound” is “inevitable.” Once again, closure through unity is forbade the poem, but this time a balance of opposites exists where both sides become disembodied.

Stevens tests the coherence theory, as he has done before, in canto XXVIII. He begins with the conditional: “If it should be true that reality exists/ In the mind” then “it follows that/ Real and unreal are two in one.” For his example he offers real cities recollected, say, “Bergamo on a postcard.” That is, one thinks of an external object and what one thinks has a reality just as the picture of Bergamo on the postcard has a reality in pressed cellulose and ink. Yet, that reality is unreal, too, since the picture

is not Bergamo the place, nor is the description of Sweden actually Sweden. In this way, the real and unreal become one. In a similar manner, he asserts that “This endlessly elaborating poem/ Displays the theory of poetry/ As the life of poetry.” In this self-referential passage, the poet chooses the word “Displays,” a word which evokes reality, as a picture of Bergamo evokes Bergamo, but does not become the object evoked. We may wish to recall the earlier images of mirror and glassy ocean, and other surfaces that at best serve only to reflect other real things. The canto starts with “If it should be,” but the last stanza contrasts markedly by beginning “As it is,” presumably in reality. Yet I don’t sense that Stevens is trying to overturn his Display. Rather, I think he admits that the realities understood or imagined in the mind are comparative and imperfect, “in the intricate evasions of as.”

We have already seen how the coming together of the land of the lemon trees and the land of the elm trees was epiphanic for the wandering mariners and the poet. It was a re-coming together since the distance was created by language and imagination. Yet that imaginative separation and the realistic recombination created a new insight for the poet so that while “It was the same,” it was also “folded over, turned around.” It has been changed by the new insight. The closure of the epiphany is altered by the adjectives of description and the “alteration/ Of words.”

Canto XXX could have been the poem’s conclusion. As Vendler says, it is another version of the last word (295), but it isn’t the last word despite its having the strongest sense of closure of all the cantos. It begins its sense of closure in the first line with: “The last leaf that is going to fall has fallen.” Furthermore, all the reflective sources no longer reflect, and the poet seems to have achieved the barrenness he started out seeking.

The something imagined “has been washed away” and a desirable “clearness has returned” This all culminates in “a visibility of thought,/ In which hundreds of eyes, in one mind, see at once.” This is indeed a kind of unity, but not of coherent elements that like the sonnet serve to click the closure into place. Rather it is a unity of multiples, which strongly suggests the approach to meaning taken by both the poet in writing the poem and by me in reading it for meaning. It is hundreds of points of view, in one mind, that have taken a variety of looks. And in the grammatical vein of Gadamer with his pointing to something, this is really not so much a coming together as a “coming on and a coming forth.” Thus we have the thematic sense of closure jarred open by the endless rolling of the structure. Besides, another canto follows, thus preventing XXX from being the last word.

To this point, I have looked at some thematic elements that indicate the poem’s continual and insistent qualifications through metaphor, tone, recurrent themes, epiphany, and relationships that occur among these elements. Also, I have pointed to how Stevens modifies these qualifications and reiterations to create both macrostructure and substructures in which he can explore his descriptions of reality, imagination and the possible connections between them, while working against closure. Stevens subverts other poetic elements that normally tend toward a closure, some weakly and others with vigor, that I would now like to consider. These include closural elements such as word choice, falling rhythm, aphorism, and stable time.

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### Chapter Three

#### Deceptive Clues of Closure

Throughout “An Ordinary Evening,” Stevens played with poetic elements that led to closure and found either a thematic or a structural way to upset his closures. Just when it seemed that a section of the poem reached culmination and established a solid resolution or stasis, the poet unnerved it, disrupted it, or repudiated it and then rolled the meditation on to the next plain version of his subject.

Stevens augmented his thematic and structural avoidance of closure by employing poetic devices that normally contribute to closure, but which actually serve the opposite purpose. In this chapter I will examine how Stevens subverts four such closural devices in ways that counter the reader's natural expectations. Word choice is one way to indicate some sort of finality; however, with Stevens such finality is momentary. In combination with word choice, he often employed a falling rhythm which can lull the reader into expecting a closure in the way that a lullaby leads to sleep. This poem is a meditation with insomnia.

Furthermore, Stevens is famous for his aphoristic nuggets, and aphorism by definition is structurally closed, often with a vengeance. In interpreting Stevens, readers tend to hang a strong sense of finality on his aphorisms, but he often undoes the finality outright or saps it of its vigor by some poetic subterfuge. Finally, temporal unity induces closure. I have already written of Stevens' use of momentum to roll the poem forward, and of how his conclusions are temporary, but I will shortly look at how he escapes

such unity with his basic attitude toward time.

As Stevens employed the elements of poetry mentioned above, they lend a sense of closure or expectation of closure to their respective passages. In this final chapter I will examine Stevens' use of these closural devices to see how he wriggles free from actually wrapping up the section and the poem.

Word choice is the most disingenuous of the clues because it is the most obvious signal of content. Thus it is the one most likely to fool the reader who, reading only on the surface, may read too much into an ending line such as "Omega is refreshed at every end." If the reader is insensitive to the other elements working in canto VI—the antiphonal structure with its asymmetrical emphasis on Alpha and Omega, its distinction between "the end and the way" and the apparent value placed on "way" over "end"—and pays too much attention to just the words themselves, then it's easy to presume too much connotative value into the last word of the canto: "end."

In the following canto, the end word is "again," a slant rhyme of "end." There is an interpretive connection here: "end," a concluding word, is replaced by "again," a reiterative word. Our literary convention of giving the last word the most emphasis can deceive the reader in canto VI, but can rescue him or her in canto VII. With "again" as the ending word, Stevens unsettles the sense of finality that nags even the thoughtful reader of canto VI, and the sense of continuous "and yet's" is restored—which is itself a kind of meta-closure.

In another example of word choice that suggests closure Stevens combines that choice with falling rhythm to give a strong sense of easing to a halt. In canto XXVI, the motions are of change and repose. The first four tercets concern themselves with change: specifically the change in nature

as the purple blotches are “Blooming and beaming and voluming colors out,” and “The seas shivered in transcendent change.” Having established this motion of change, Stevens then punctuates the 12th line with ellipsis marks: “Added and added out of a fame-full heart...” which indicate not a trailing off of thought as in the conventional use of ellipses, but a shift in motion and thought toward the last word of the canto: “repose.” In addition, the ellipses act as a pivot point to form a micro-section which also focuses the reader's attention on the last word of the canto. By lining out the verses according to phrasing, the falling rhythm becomes more apparent, and we can see how the momentum piles up against the final word, thus pushing it into the foreground:

But,  
 here,  
 the inamorata,  
 without distance  
 And thereby lost  
 and naked or in rags,  
 Shrunk in the poverty of being close,

Touches,  
 as one hand touches another hand,  
 Or as a voice that,  
 speaking without form,  
 Gritting the ear,  
 whispers humane repose.

(*CP*, 484)

In the first of the two stanzas, commas chop up the rhythm giving a staccato effect until the phrases gradually grow longer. The last phrase, the third line of the stanza, has ten beats making it the longest of all six lines. Furthermore, the line ends on the word “close,” after reaching a pinnacle of rhythmical upswing. The second of the two stanzas takes a

different phrasal form. It begins with the trochee “Touches,” leaps to the second longest of the phrases (with nine beats) then settles into a relatively regular pattern of nearly equal length.

Thus the first of the two stanzas reaches a height as does a falcon riding the updrafts. Having reached the pinnacle of the draft, the falcon dips once, rides up in the second stanza and then casually spirals to earth in phrases of nearly equal length. The final phrase begins with a trochee: “whis/pers,” which has an up-down movement of sound. The trochee is followed by the iamb “hu/mane” with its down-up sound movement. This is like the falcon’s final spreading of its wings for the landing, a movement that actually lifts the bird up giving him room to drop his legs. The up sound of “-mane” is carried forward by the up sound of “re-” in the final trochee “re/pose.” The down sound of “-pose” combines with the open “o” sound and the stretching out sound of the sibilant “se” to evoke a smooth, gliding stop on a falling sound.

Furthermore, the sense of closure is heightened by the end slant rhyme of “close” (klos rather than kloz, but on the surface they are homonymically klos) and “repose.” The rhyme collocates the sense of intimacy denoted by “close” with the sense of rest and calm denoted by “repose.” In a disingenuous way, it is easy to confuse kloz with klos and thus add to the collocation the associative value of finality denoted by kloz. Nonetheless, by shifting the canto’s motion away from change (signaled by the ellipses), the falling rhythm and the choice of “close/repose,” Stevens has created a strong feeling of closure.

But can the feeling last? No. Should the reader trust these poetic signals? Yes and no. Stevens will undermine the sense of closure that canto XXVI creates, but the reader must still trust the signals of closure or he



will miss the poet's strategy of synthesis and entropy.

Stevens begins undermining the closural feeling with the very poetic element that helps establish that sense of closure: the motion of change. He has written contextually of change in the first four tercets, and then he follows by acting on his words—he affects a change in motion and line of thought with the ellipses at the end of line 12: "Added and added out of a fame-full heart..." This sustains and emphasizes the overall motion of change, mutability, and redescription that the poem has already established as an expectation in the reader's mind. Thus, the reader, having completed cantos I-XXV, should suspect the permanence of such repose.

The reader can also recognize this passage's reiterative qualities. Just in the last two tercets alone the word "poverty" harkens the reader back to cantos XVI and XXI where poverty plays the sentient thematic role of a reality stripped of debilitating ornamentation. The "Gritting in the ear" is another version of the great grinding and growling of teeth in canto IV, especially since that growling is followed by the "obese opiates of sleep"—a condition Stevens has presented in a perjorative light. This intratextual association alone places a heavy sentence on the plaintiff "humane repose," guilty as an agent of myth for the purpose of institutionalizing a statue-like stasis.

In addition, Stevens provides the textual oxymoron of a voice that grits the ear as it whispers. It grits the ear primarily because it is "speaking without form." Thus it cannot be poetic, and it cannot be a welcome part of the meditative exercise. Gritting the ear without form encourages the same repose that the poet spoke against in canto XXIII, "those that sleep, // Of the single future of night." In canto XXVI, they are "the inamorata, without distance / And thereby lost, and naked or in rags." The quiescence the word

“repose” might suggest on the surface is mitigated by the currents of the poem and Stevens’ concurrent and subversive use of other poetic elements.

Stevens makes heady use of another poetic device to simulate closure: the aphorism. As a terse statement of principle or truth, the aphorism is related to the epigram, and while they are not strictly synonymous terms, what Barbara Herrnstein Smith says about the epigram in terms of closure applies to the aphorism as well. She says, “To epigrammatize an experience is to strip it down, to cut away irrelevance, to eliminate local, specific and descriptive detail, to reduce it to and fix it in its most permanent and stable aspect, to sew it up for eternity” (208). Smith also says that the intention behind the epigram is to “clinch” experience as opposed, for example, to the haiku’s “capture” of experience (209). Thus by definition the aphorism is a closed form, even when it exists within a larger form, that aims at maximum certainty with great impunity.

Why would Stevens insert such a form into a poem that otherwise dismisses any certainty that claims permanence, and generally proceeds, if not with a quality of humility, at least with a quality of deferment? Perhaps the answer lies in the poem’s basic approach of moving toward certainty before modifying that certainty in the continual process of redescribing reality and the poet’s relationship to reality. Perhaps, also, the use of aphorism allows the reader to better sense the undermining of closure by its very contrast with a strongly closed form.

“An Ordinary Evening” contains two of Stevens’ most famous aphorisms:

The poem is the cry of its occasion,  
Part of the res itself and not about it.  
(canto XII)

This endlessly elaborating poem  
 Displays the theory of poetry,  
 As the theory of life.

(canto XXVIII)

These aphorisms sum up Stevens' poetry, and this poem in particular, but they have received so much attention from critics and readers, I have chosen to examine a less well known nugget for its role in denying closure.

Professor Eucalyptus says, in canto XXII:

The search  
 For reality is as momentous as  
 The search for God.

The assertion lacks local, specific and descriptive detail; it is pared down so that it does not capture an experience so much as it clinches the moral value of a truth; it's conclusiveness fairly thunders with finality. That much is readily apparent. The reader, encountering only this canto, might expect that the remainder of the canto would work to support this asserted truth. The reader of the whole poem already knows by canto XXII of the temporal quality of Stevens' conclusions and assertions, and thus can expect to find the truth of this aphorism modified or crippled. What does happen?

The reader may recall that he met Professor Eucalyptus in canto XIV, and that the professor was described as seeking god "In New Haven with an eye that does not look// Beyond the object." That is, the professor does not seek a metaphysical god, but a sensate god in reality. He is associated with "The dry eucalyptus [who] seeks god in the rainy cloud"; the tree seeks what it needs and calls that god.

In canto XXII, the professor has attached moral import to that search,

and has elevated the poet's "search for the same exterior made/ Interior." (Note that the word "Interior" is capitalized and at the beginning of a line to give it emphasis.) In the third tercet, the poet associates god with original creation when he writes of "original cold/ And of original earliness." It is at this point in the canto that the poet makes his twist: "Yet the sense/ Of cold and earliness is a daily sense,// Not the predicate of bright origin." Thus, the truth of the aphorism is flat because it is an impossible task, since each person must have a daily sense unencumbered by the origin of long ago. A "lone wanderer" cannot search the "bright origin" for god, nor is the sense of cold and earliness a consequence of their origins.

The professor's aphorism places a value on reality, but the poet will reorder the search. He says, "To re-create...is to search." The poet locates this reordered search in the imagination when he says,

Likewise to say of the evening star,  
The most ancient light in the most ancient sky,  
  
That it is wholly an inner light, that it shines  
From the sleepy bosom of the real, re-creates,  
Searches a possible for its possibilities.

Thus the act of searching is the act of re-creating, which is the poet's task. Yet, Professor Eucalyptus seems to wish to recreate the original in much the same way that E.D. Hirsch wants the hermeneutic reader to recreate an author's original situation and life. In Hoy's paraphrase, Hirsch believes that "the one underlying meaning of the work does not change. The meaning of the text...is said to be reproducible" (14). Thus, there is for Hirsch and Professor Eucalyptus an inherent closure because they assume an original, intended meaning always persists that can be revived in its

original guise.

Stevens, however, denies such static meaning. He says, "To re-create...is to search...That it is wholly an inner light [that] Searches a possible for its possibleness." The emphasis for Stevens is on a new becoming rather than on resuscitating "the predicate of bright origin." Thus he has subverted the truth of the aphorism, and shown its inherent closedness to be unsatisfactory.

In the example above, Stevens has used contrast to make the aphorism stand out, thus setting it up to be undermined. The reader looking for a New Critical kind of unity might insist that all aphorisms be subject to the same treatment; however, that expectation does not follow; he will use the same poetic device, aphorism, for different purposes. The two famous aphorisms, "The poem is the cry..." and "This endlessly elaborating poem..." do not get torpedoed. They are truths spoken by the poet, not by a character, and truths the poet believes: they act as first principles, basic assumptions that permit him his explorations. Yet, they serve not as closural elements, but as forces of momentum to roll the poem onward.

One issue remains: temporality. In the middle of canto X, the poet is speaking about "the man/ Of bronze whose mind was made up and who, therefore, died." This is the institutionalized thinker, typically represented by Stevens as a statue, who can no longer view the world in different lights. The bronze man typifies static, resolved, and closed thinking, and therefore, is figuratively dead. Here, the poet uses him as a foil to reveal his own position of the moment:

His spirit is imprisoned in constant change.

But ours is not imprisoned. It resides

In a permanence composed of impermanence,  
In a faithfulness as against the lunar light,

So that morning and evening are like promises kept  
So that the approaching sun and its arrival,  
Its evening feast and the following festival,<sup>3</sup>

This faithfulness of reality, this mode,  
This tendance and venerable holding-in  
Make gay the hallucinations in surfaces.

We recognize this canto as one in which Stevens has “turn[ed] to reality and believe[s] in that and that alone” (*Letters*, 710). Thus, the man of bronze is debilitated by his over-dependence on an imaginative thought which occurred in the past, has become institutionalized, and is now one of the “hallucinations in surfaces.” The poet, on the other hand, now takes the position of faithfulness in reality, in “a permanence composed of impermanence” which allows him to scoff at the fictive knowledge layered on surfaces like a patina.

We can identify two versions of time in the poem. First there is the revolution of the earth around the sun which provide the sun’s approach, arrival and disappearance, but these revolutions are not tied to a specific date. Without such a calendar, the reader has only a general sense of time’s passage, as he did in canto XI with the “propounding of four seasons and twelve months.” This is *chronos*, as described by Kermode; “passing time or waiting time” (47). It is not a *kairos*, “a point of time filled with significance” (47), and therefore it has little value except in retrospect after the passage of time. If this passage of time can be reviewed after it has become historical then, perhaps, a significance can be placed upon it, and it may then be understood as a *kairos*, but for the moment it lacks what Gadamer calls “temporal distance.” Weinsheimer in discussing Gadamer's

notion of “temporal distance” remarks that it “has the effect of excising the prejudices and errors of immediacy that obscure the past” (179).

Clearly Stevens has a prejudice in favor of reality in this canto that seems to create temporal distance. Weinsheimer completes his statement: “but this work is never done” (179), just as “An Ordinary Evening” is “a perpetual meditation” which seeks to excise the errors and prejudices of imagination and our perceptions of reality. I take this to mean that only in time can Stevens as poet review this position and attach an understanding to it.

The second issue of time in this canto is the constant change/permanence/impermanence issue of *aion* and *aei einai*. Kermode explains *aion* as “the time of a world of becoming” (72) and *aei einai* as “being-for-ever” (74). Both terms possess a certain sense of perpetuity, as Kermode explains them (73), in that the time of becoming never arrives, never reaches its end; whereas, “being-for-ever” lacks beginning and ending. The “man/ Of bronze” has a sort of “being-for-ever” because of his imprisonment “in constant change.” However, Kermode says that men cannot have *aei einai* because they cannot be truly eternal (74). The imprisonment has the sense of being-for-ever because the poet delimits it as a constancy. Consequently, the use of “constant” as an adjective becomes oxymoronic at the same time it is descriptive of the bronze man’s changing.

The poet in his plural form of ‘our’ claims a similarly oxymoronic status with his spirit “resid[ing] In a permanence of impermanence”—a constancy of transitoriness. This version of time is like the *aion* since it implies a world of becoming, which Kermode says men can have (74). But on closer inspection, Stevens seems to have said essentially the same thing about both spirits, the difference being in tone as reflected by prejudices. The

“man of bronze’s” spirit is “imprisoned” with its connotations of forced residence and punishment. The poet’s spirit “resides” in essentially the same state of time, but the word “resides” suggests a willingness of habitation as well as the physical and spiritual ability to switch residences.

So while I can portray the oppositions of time as a way of describing the differences between the two spirits, it really seems that the essential temporal differences between the two situations is one of tone and prejudices. The significance is that Stevens may have painted himself into the proverbial corner. If this is true, he will sense at some point in his “becoming” that the “faithfulness in reality” described by him in this canto eventually becomes less tenable, thus forbidding a closure.

Yet the poet persists in the moment. In canto XII, he asserts: “There is no/ Tomorrow for him,” him being the poet who “speaks the poem as it is, // Not as it was.” No temporal distance has occurred yet; he still speaks with the prejudices and immediacy that concern Gadamer. He makes the “cry of the occasion” because this is a meditation, a rolling onward of his explorations into the relationship between reality, imagination and its expression as poem. If he does *not*, he becomes imprisoned like the “man/ Of bronze.” Fortunately for his position, it is “composed of impermanence.”

Even so, the poem must cease for practical reasons, although it need not come to an end. It ceases with the 31st canto:

The less legible meanings of sounds, the little reds  
 Not often realized, the lighter words  
 In the heavy drum of speech, the inner men

Behind the outer shields, the sheets of music  
 In the strokes of thunder, dead candles at the window  
 When day comes, fire-foams in the motions of the sea,

Flickings from finikin to fine finikin



And the general fidget from busts of Constantine  
To photographs of the late president, Mr. Blank,

These are the edgings and inchings of final form,  
The swarming activities of the formulae  
Of statement, directly and indirectly getting at,

Like an evening evoking the spectrum of violet,  
A philosopher practicing scales on his piano,  
A woman writing a note and tearing it up.

It is not in the premise that reality  
Is a solid. It may be a shade that traverses  
A dust, a force that traverses a shade.

Stevens opens the canto with a new, qualified version of “transparencies of sounds’ (canto II): “the less legible meanings of sounds.” These sounds are no longer invisible; they are “the little reds/ Not often realized,” but they can be heard. The reader may be tempted to see this reference to the earliest cantos as forming circular unity; however, this is not the case despite the convention of wrapping up a text by referring to its beginning. Rather, this is a new interpretation of the poet’s reading of reality, for [i]nterpretation...is continuously elaborating on the meanings grasped in an understanding” (Hoy, 52). This is another “and yet,” version of the reiterated theme that has been qualified and revised.

Tercets two and three amplify examples of the less legible meanings, and ridicule the aesthetic of the “dead candles at the window” who are the stifled minds imprisoned in their happy slapped-up town.

In the three remaining tercets the less legible meanings are the “edgings and inchings of final form”; they are not final form, but only suggestions of, intimations of, revisable possibilities of some final form that otherwise has never been admitted to by the poet. Furthermore, the edgings and

inchings are “swarming activities” with all the connotations of bees that never land but for a moment. As “as activities of the formulae/ Of statement,” the poet is “directly and indirectly getting at” ordinary things such as evening, a philosopher and a woman doing daily, ordinary things. If we look closely at his words, we see that formula is plural. This suggests a multiplicity of approaches to statement. “[D]irectly and indirectly” reiterate the opposition central to the problem of knowledge: the battle between coherence and correspondence theorists, but together they ‘get at’ knowledge. This “getting at” is Stevens’ version of Gadamer’s “point[ing] in a direction rather than to some final endpoint... toward an open realm that can be filled in a variety of ways..., a revealing of what the thing itself already points to” (68).

The phrase “getting at” is the hinge of the canto. It sets up the similes of evening, philosopher and woman. Of particular interest is the simile, “Like an evening evoking the spectrum of violet.” Evening is the time between sunlight and moonlight (and darkness); it is, therefore, if not the synthesis of reality and imagination, then at least the *kairos* wherein the two commingle. Violet recalls but qualifies the symbolic “blue” of the fictive power of imagination, and is not only more particular because it is a specific version of blue, but more vivid thanks to the brightness of purple. This line’s presence at this point in the poem is also significant because its metaphorical particularity contrasts with the gray abstraction of the subsequent and last tercet. The two other lines of this penultimate tercet are similes that mirror the poem’s theme of endlessness and continual revision. By practicing scales, the philosopher avoids the form of a musical piece that has beginning, middle and closure. The practicing of scales by a philosopher is an image of repeated exercise that evokes the staleness that

can occur in the pursuit of reason. The image of a woman writing and tearing up a note evokes the poetic process, the act of making and remaking the response to reality in which the imagination engages.

Lines 556-558 are aphoristic because they are terse and assert something:

It is not in the premise that reality  
Is a solid. It may be a shade that traverses  
A dust, a force that traverses a shade.

but they refuse to solidly clinch the experience of the poem because they are abstract and made dubious by the conditional phrase "It may be." The tercet begins with the typical Stevens expletive "It is," but what does "it" refer to? We must go on to decide. The rest of the sentence, "not in the premise that reality/ Is a solid," seems clearly to emphasize the coherence theory of truth over the correspondence theory. That is, reality is unknowable as substantial matter, and the perceiver's ability to sense it is untrustable. The poet treats this concept as a premise, an assertion assumed to be true.

It, he continues, "may be a shade that traverses a dust." First of all, the poet reveals his repeated pose of possibility as opposed to absolute certainty when he employs the conditional tense. Second of all, "shade" is another version of "evening/violet," a metaphorical synthesis of sun and night he has previously put to work in cantos V and XXVIII. Yet, as always, there is the qualification of meaning. Evening is a time that transits from day to night, thus it is a movement toward imagination as represented by night and moonlight. Shade is the consequence of sunlight being blocked by something. Thus, the emphasis is on the sun metaphor of reality. What-

ever “It” is, it is like a shade that crosses a dust, not any particular dust such as the dust of Main Street, New Haven, just dust in general. Dust, of course, is the entropied or disembodied remains of a substance.

Had Stevens left “It” to be merely a shade, then he would have omitted an important element in his own formula—the poet himself. He needs to complete the formula of *reality perceived by mind* → *engaged by the poet’s imagination* → *made meaningful by the poet’s meditation* = *the poem*. To do so, he appends the appositive: “A force that traverses a shade.” Thus “It” is not the *kairos* when reality and imagination commingle; rather it is the fictive power of the poet to ruminate and continually reorder his experience of the relationship between perceived reality and myth-making imagination. The poet understands that to clinch the experience is to bronze it. Yet he acts upon a faith that he can capture immediate truths of an occasional nature in a never ending meditation on the eye’s plain version of experience.



## Notes

1 I am indebted in a general way to Gerald Prince's article "La Nausee and the Question of Closure," for my understanding of the novel's open-endedness.

2 I have included the word "fully" in my paraphrase of Conte's definition of infinite serial form because Conte's discussion makes it apparent that the work done by his subjects is heavily substitutive. Apparently in the strongly serial (I resist here the word "purely") the various blocks of verse can be rearranged one or more ways to create and refashion meaning without the poet raising a cry of protest (not that Stevens would either). Indeed, this John Cagean extreme calls for mobile and undeliberated substitution of parts. Stevens has also moved parts as he did with "Sunday Morning" and with the so-called short version of "An Ordinary Evening." But because Riddell can find a development of theme, and I can find motions slopping over into the next canto, or themes being picked up in later cantos that must carry forward the baggage of meaning already assigned to it by the thoughtful reader, I resist seeing the individual cantos as "fully" and always individually mobile.

3 For an interesting explanation of how festival is a repetitive act of "creation and elevation into a transformed state of being," See Hans-Georg Gadamer's "The festive character of theater," pp. 58-61, in *The Relevance of Beauty and Other Essays*.

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