

## Cultural Immaterialism: Wallace Stevens in Virtual Paris

*And there I found myself more truly and more strange*

(‘Tea at the Palaz of Hoon’)<sup>1</sup>

ABSTRACT: This essay explores the paradox in Stevens’s life and career that, notwithstanding his interest in France and especially Paris, he stood out from nearly all other American Modernist writers by the fact that he never visited Europe, even though more than some who did he endorsed the significance of what the French capital could offer. I shall suggest that the Paris Stevens denied himself strangely became the ‘Paris’ he achieved, and that his identification with the city was one that by its own logic not only did not require him to pay a visit, but in time rendered it essential that he should not do so; this uncovers something central to Stevens’s poetry, and also to his Americanness. The quotation above offers terms helpful in discussing his attachment to ‘virtual Paris’: where and what ‘there’ is, and how the strangeness of being ‘there’ is connected with its truthfulness, for the ‘I’ engaged in finding itself.

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Close to the Seine and not far from the *Grand Palais* constructed for the 1900 Great Exposition, there is an equestrian statue of Lafayette by the American sculptor Paul Wayland Bartlett (1865-1925). Its full-size plaster precursor had first been exhibited at the Exposition, and the duly-completed bronze, its inscription saluting Lafayette as ‘patriot of two republics’, was given to France in 1908 by the ‘schoolchildren of America’, organized to that end by the Daughters of the American Revolution. By gratifying coincidence, a bronze copy was in 1932 erected in Hartford, Connecticut: the city in which Wallace Stevens had lived since 1916, where he wrote most of his poetry, and where he headed the Surety Claims department of the Hartford Accident and Indemnity Company (rising to Vice-President in 1934). The issue of dual allegiance has often been raised in discussions of Stevens, referring to his careers as poet and as legal executive; but just as those apparently separate spheres can finally be seen to have exerted complementary rather than antagonistic influences, so a parallel occurs with the development of his attachments to the two republics of America and France.

The Franco-American axis celebrated by America’s schoolchildren and re-echoed by Lafayette’s statue in Hartford extended beyond Enlightenment politics into the arts, where it was particularly influential in the closing and the opening decades of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries – Bartlett, for example, lived mostly in France and learned his craft in Paris. Before the Civil War, Emerson had tried to dissuade Americans from any notion of the European tour as indispensable to their personal or cultural development, but with limited effect: Europe continued to be where one went to ‘find oneself’ as an American artist, with Paris a particularly prominent destination. There was, however, an implicit tension between the required expatriation of a would-be American artist and allegiance owed to the republic left behind – despite or because of the fact that America’s priorities at this period were felt by many to be at odds with those of art. Stevens was part of this intellectual climate; but the solution he found to the competing demands of America and France was that he managed simultaneously to ‘go’ and to remain at home.

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He was in the habit of jotting down aphorisms for himself in a commonplace book; most were composed during the 1930s, and several found their way into his poems. This dates from the late 1940s:

Reality is a cliché  
From which we escape by metaphor  
It is only au pays de la métaphore  
Qu’on est poète. (OP2 204)

This probably recalls Aristotle’s emphasis on the primacy of metaphor, but Stevens’s particular formulation is resonant: setting up a contrast between ‘reality’ as imprisonment and the metamorphosing mind (what he habitually termed the ‘imagination’) as the realm to which we ‘escape’ from its constrictions, the crossing of that frontier is enacted in the change from English to French. In this opposition between reality (here) and ‘pays de la métaphore’ (there), the move into French signifies poetic authenticity, with metaphor as the means by which an ordinary universe is

visited by what he termed the ‘necessary angel’ of transformation. That the contrast is less than absolute – that such an angel is ‘of earth’ (CP 496, *both*) not heaven – is unobtrusively signalled by the fact that ‘cliché’ is itself a French word domesticated in the English language.

One of the books in Stevens’s personal library was the English translation of Paul Cohen-Portheim’s *The Spirit of Paris* (1937), originally published in Germany seven years earlier. Discussing Sylvia Beach, Cohen-Portheim reminisced that ‘her shop was the intellectual centre of young literary America when almost the whole of it lived permanently or temporarily in Paris’; reminding us that France, and supremely Paris, once seemed the authentic milieu for the apprenticeship of a modern American writer.<sup>2</sup> The young Stevens had subscribed to such notions; he would have been in full agreement with the implication in Hemingway’s bitter-sweet retrospect, that ‘If you are lucky enough to have lived in Paris as a young man, then wherever you go for the rest of your life, it stays with you, for Paris is a moveable feast’. Stevens, however, denied the opportunity to accumulate such reserves in his youth, evolved strategies of surrogacy, by which for him too Paris preserved its value into his maturity. What sort of city was it, then, that he would ‘remember’? Clearly, he could not furnish the particulars of rapture encountered in Hemingway’s recounting of the routes he took, when hungry, that avoided unaffordable restaurants, or found in Malcolm Cowley’s reminiscence of day-trips, in *Exile’s Return*:

Paris was a great machine for stimulating the nerves and sharpening the senses. Painting and music, street noises, shops, flower markets, modes, fabrics, poems, ideas, everything seemed to lead toward a half-sensual, half-intellectual swoon. Inside the cafes, color, perfume, taste and delirium could be poured together from one bottle or many bottles, from square, cylindrical, conical, tall, squat, brown, green or crimson bottles – but you drank black coffee by choice, believing that Paris itself was sufficient alcohol.<sup>3</sup>

For Stevens, any such particulars tended to be disaggregated from their originating location and rendered discrete and consumable, in the form of books about Paris such as Cohen-Portheim’s, catalogues of art-exhibitions he avidly collected, French periodicals to which he subscribed, and the books and paintings he caused his Parisian agent, Anatole Vidal, to send him. We might judge that this adds up to a singularly unreal city; except that for Stevens most cities were ‘material without being real’ (Fitzgerald’s phrase from *The Great Gatsby*),<sup>4</sup> unless actively perceived. A passage in the earliest of his critical essays, ‘The Noble Rider and the Sound of Words’, suggests how a material city might become more real, in consequence of the act of poetic perception:

If we go back to the collection of solid, static objects extended in space [...] and if we say that the space is blank space, nowhere, without color, and that the objects, though solid, have no shadows and, though static, exert a mournful power, and, without elaborating this complete poverty, if suddenly we hear a different and familiar description of the place [*quotes lines 4-8 of Wordsworth’s sonnet on Westminster Bridge*], we know how poets help people to live their lives.

(NA 31)

There were other places that intrigued Stevens, from which he excitedly received postcards, books, and other representative items; other languages as well as French crop up in his verse: Latin, German, Italian, Spanish. But it was France, and within France Paris, that most consistently compelled his imagination, early and late.

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At the outset of the twentieth century Stevens, having finished his Harvard education and newly-embarked on his attempt to become a newspaperman in New York City, was restlessly aspiring to some of the pursuits that might be thought more appropriate to his class and education. A journal entry for November 1900 strikes some familiar attitudes:

I keep asking myself – Is it possible that I am here? And what a silly and utterly trivial question it is. I hope to get to Paris next summer – and mean to if I have the money. Saving it will be difficult – with all the concerts and exhibitions, and plays we are to have – not to mention the butcher, baker, and candlestick maker. But to fly! Gli uccelli hanno le ali – that’s why they’re not here. Whenever I think of these things I can see, + do see, a bird somewhere in a mass of flowers and leaves, perched on a spray in dazzling light, and pouring out arpeggios of

enchanted sound.

(LWS 48)

This already manifests a characteristic dissatisfaction with 'here' that leads to desire for a 'not here', initially specified as Paris: a destination so beset with practical difficulties in its attainment, that Paris is by implication substitutable by a poetic image – mediated by the linguistic swerve into Italian – of a visionary bird. Rhetorically this closural image concedes the unlikelihood of his achieving geographical translocation, even as it camouflages it. It is as if Stevens foresaw the outcome of his meeting the following month with his father, who declined to fund any *Wanderjahr* and caused him to record in his journal that 'Europe is still on the other side of the ocean' (Dec 29 1900; LWS 49). On his side of the ocean was the America where 'modernity is so Chicagoan' (LWS 32), and where his father – who, he ruefully reflected in March 1901, 'always seems to have reason on his side' (LWS 53) – effectively enforced a masculinist ethic of self-sufficiency through work on his would-be wayward son.

Stevens had been dreaming about London as well as Paris, but it may be that his awareness of the French capital had been sharpened by the Great Exposition. Interest in the American presence there had been drummed up by the Commissioner-General, Ferdinand W. Peck, when emphasizing the commercial advantages to accrue from showcasing American manufacturers. Urging an increase of federal funding, Peck assured fellow-citizens that 'the American sections will prove the "clou" of the exposition', drawing particular attention to Bartlett's statue: 'The unveiling of the Lafayette monument, on July 4, will make United States Day the most conspicuously resplendent of the national days'. He also promised that 'The National Building will be an oasis where Americans may find Americans, and rest from the weariness of the sight of strangers'.<sup>5</sup> This struck an unfortunate note; but even if Commissioner Peck envisaged Americans depending on the wearisomeness of strangers, there were others for whom strangeness was very much the point. For in the dynamic unfolding between himself and his father, the Paris Stevens felt himself obliged to renounce became the site of imaginative revolt, a counter-city of the spirit to which he could snatch illicit access.

This is evidenced in January 1909, in comments made in a letter from New York to his fiancée, Elsie, recounting his visit to the National Academy:

Another sensation (one depends on them): one of the pictures yesterday had been exhibited in Paris. It had the number of the Paris exhibition on its frame and bore the 'Médaille' mark – an honor picture. By looking at that, and at nothing else I could imagine myself in Paris, seeing just what any Parisian would see – I laughed in my sleeve at New-York, far out on the bleak edge of the world.

(LWS 117)

Although depicting an 'Oriental' scene, its connection with the French capital gave this picture power to abstract Stevens from the 'here' of his American city, in an experience akin to what Pierre Bourdieu has termed 'cultural consecration', which 'does indeed confer on the objects, persons and situations it touches, a sort of ontological promotion akin to a transubstantiation'.<sup>6</sup> Such power may have been augmented by its secrecy, depending on a detail likely to have been overlooked by more ignorant gallery-goers; but while his act of inconspicuous consumption might seem to differentiate Stevens's private experience from the more collective phenomenon Bourdieu is concerned with, the accrual of cultural capital implies exclusivity. Yet there was also embedded in this scene – as with the desire to visit Paris that had in 1900 engendered Stevens's image of the singing bird – recognition that, as an instigation for his imagination, Paris could function by proxy: the mark on a picture-frame was a much quicker and less expensive mode of gratifying desire than transatlantic passage on an ocean liner.

What I call a 'strategy of surrogacy' in respect of Paris - by which books, pictures (whether high art or postcards), catalogues, periodicals, French food and wines all substituted for the place itself – became a feature of Stevens's recourse to the city that long outlasted his initial reason for accepting substitutes, because he could not have afforded the trip. Once safely installed at the Hartford he was not averse to taking quite long holidays, and for the final twenty-five years of his life (1879-1955) he earned enough to finance a family trip to Europe. That he did not do so may attest to the effectiveness of the alternative he had devised: as a stimulus to his imagination, Paris functioned more effectively as symbol than it could have done as an achieved actuality. Gatsby's 'green light' at the end of Daisy's dock lost its magic potency once he reacquainted himself with the woman it

symbolised; and for Stevens the colossal significance that Paris held for him might have been fatally impaired by visiting a city which, as a fiction, therefore continued to be one of his enchanted objects, more ‘real’ *because* immaterial. When Daisy bursts into tears at the sight of Gatsby’s ‘beautiful shirts’, she has just been told he has ‘a man in England’ who selects and sends them – in much the same way that Stevens would rely on the Vidals to choose French artwork for his Hartford home. Gatsby’s sartorial profusion – ‘the soft rich heap mounted higher – shirts with stripes and scrolls and plaids in coral and apple-green and lavender and faint orange, with monograms of indian blue’ (Fitzgerald, *The Great Gatsby*, 99 *all*) – itself is reminiscent of the imaginative night-gowns disdained but nonetheless enumerated in Stevens’s 1915 poem ‘Disillusionment of Ten O’Clock’: both might be thought to model a kind of extravagant consumerism as means to resist a deadening normality. Such a response was earlier glimpsed in Stevens’s repulsion from New York in June 1900:

I am beginning to hate the stinking restaurants that line the street and gush out clouds of vegetable incense as I pass. To-day I bought a box of strawberries and ate them in my room for luncheon. To-morrow I propose to have a pineapple; the next day, blackberries; the next, bananas etc.

(LWS 39)<sup>7</sup>

For in Stevens’s poem, the description of the fancifully multicoloured night-attire *not* being worn directly derives from what he asserts to be the case (‘None of them are strange’): the relation between reality (‘white nightgowns’) and imagination (‘purple with green rings’, ‘green with yellow rings’, ‘yellow with blue rings’, *CP* 66, *all*) is symbiotically causal. His 1943 paper ‘The Figure of the Youth as Virile Poet’ makes the following observations:

It is easy to suppose that few people realize on that occasion, which comes to all of us, when we look at the blue sky for the first time, that is to say: not merely see it, but look at it and experience it and for the first time have a sense that we live in the center of a physical poetry, a geography that would be intolerable except for the non-geography that exists there – few people realize that they are looking at the world of their own thoughts and the world of their own feelings.

(NA 65-6)<sup>8</sup>

Leaving aside his suppositions about other people, Stevens’s interlinkage of a perceived geography with a complementary if antiphonal ‘non-geography’ of thought and feeling suggests how, for him, ‘Paris’ as a non-geography, a ‘there’, achieved its effect within the context of a ‘here’ that was America. He once declared to a correspondent that ‘I never feel that I am in the area of poetry until I am a little off the normal’ (LWS 287), but in such a formulation ‘the normal’ remains as necessary *point de départ*. It is in this way that his attachment to France, and in particular his imaginative appropriation of Paris, interlinks with his Americanness.

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After his marriage (1909) and birth of his daughter (1924), Stevens became clearer that he was less and less likely to achieve his goal of visiting Paris. Although in 1913 he would write to Elsie that ‘tonight I’d like to be in Paris, sipping a bock under a plane-tree’ (LWS 181), by 1925 he was declaring to William Carlos Williams that ‘oh la-la: my job is not now with poets from Paris’ (LWS 246) – where the ghost of a Parisian exclamation seems to intensify the receding of his fantasy. Yet during the 1930s he maintained contact with Anatole Vidal there (and after the war with Vidal’s daughter Paule), from whom he acquired books and paintings by which he hoped to ‘keep in touch with new French books and with life in Paris generally’ (LWS 523). In fact, one of the high-water marks of Stevens’s involvement with imagined Paris occurred during the World’s Fair of 1939 and 1940 in New York; this coincided with his also coming into contact with Henry Church, co-founder in France (with Jean Paulhan) of the little magazine *Mesures* – to which Stevens had subscribed since its inception, through Vidal. Church, an American millionaire who lived at Ville d’Avray near Paris, in a house designed by le Corbusier, had found himself stranded in the USA by the impending war. These years therefore found Stevens stimulated by French concerns in two distinct aspects.

The World’s Fair was the shorter-lived and more theatrical. We know of Stevens’s interest in it principally through a memoir written much later by a colleague at the Hartford, Wilson E. Taylor. The published letters mention it briefly, although it is clear that the four-day visit Stevens had made with his wife and daughter in mid-June 1939 involved ‘seeing the World’s Fair until I could describe

it in the dark' (*LWS* 341). Joan Richardson reports that in the autumn Stevens 'had one of the Hartford drivers take him down just for the day',<sup>9</sup> and Taylor outlines his particular enthusiasm:

I am sure that I shall never know anyone who enjoyed the New York World's Fair of 1939-40 as much as Wallace Stevens did. Time and time again we would go there in the afternoon, walk for a few hours, and always end up in the French Pavilion, where, after taking in some of its exhibits and a vermouth-cassis or two for our jaded appetites, we would have dinner. This was his favorite building in the fair, and he spent many hours there among the works of art and the other exhibits.<sup>10</sup>

The Fair was constructed on a vast reclaimed dump in Queens' which 'once presented a scene of stagnant pools and muddy rivulets [...] Mountains of ash rose to a height of 100 feet; the topmost peak, waggishly named "Mount Corona", dominated the dismal panorama'.<sup>11</sup> It had been the original for the valley of ashes in *The Great Gatsby*.

While commemorating the 150<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Washington's inauguration in the city, the Fair was principally intended to celebrate a technological future which would be, in its important aspects, American in character. Dominated at its main entrance by the futuristic structures of the 700-foot high spire-like Trylon and the globoid Perisphere (200-foot diameter), the architectural code enforced was essentially modernist; major American business corporations erected appropriately-themed buildings, advertising the contribution they had made to the betterment of America and anticipating the future as a consumer's paradise. Such displays may have left traces in Stevens's poetry. Did the 'fat girl' revolving 'in crystal' at the end of *Notes toward a Supreme Fiction* (*CP* 407) – who, he told Henry Church was 'the earth: what politicians now-a-days are calling the globe, which somehow, as it revolves in their minds, does, I suppose, resemble some great object in a particularly blue area' (*LWS* 426) – owe anything to 'Arctic Girl' ('Clad in an abbreviated bathing suit, a beautiful girl is entombed in a solid cake of crystal-clear ice', *Guide* 35), or to the Perisphere's external stage-effects?

Here is the magnificent spectacle of a luminous world, apparently suspended in space by gushing fountains of liquid reds and greens [...] while at night powerful lights project cloud patterns on the globe, and wreathing it in color mist, create the startling illusion that it is revolving like a great planet on its axis.

(*Guide* 27)

World's Fairs were occasions for such spectacular consumption: Nick Carraway pays Gatsby the ambiguous compliment that, garishly lit up, his house 'looks like the World's Fair', and, mingling admiration and disdain, recognizes that his friend is in 'the service of a vast, vulgar, and meretricious beauty' (Fitzgerald, *The Great Gatsby*, 88, 105).

Stevens explored the Fair fully with his family, and doubtless would have seen much that could be dismissed as 'Another American vulgarity' – to quote a poem whose title, 'Celle Qui Fût Héaulmienne' (*CP* 438), evokes a French connection through the poet Villon and the sculptor Rodin. The Amusement Zone, in particular, shifted the balance from educational to sensational, by such displays as 'Strange As It Seems': 'strange people from remote lands', 'black beings with enormous distended lips', 'headhunters', 'fierce savages from Masambo and the Congo; and here you may stare in awe at the giraffe-necked women from Padeung' (*Guide* 33). Elsewhere in the zone was 'Little Miracle Town' ('its one hundred and twenty-five midget inhabitants have their own tiny restaurant, their city hall'), together with, of course, 'Merrie England' ('a faithful reproduction of an Old English Village'; *Guide* 44, *both*) and, nearer home – if such a concept retain validity – the 'Seminole Village', with its own jail and police force, 'where Indians wrestle with live alligators' (*Guide* 47). Such multiply-indiscriminate displacements and simulations suggest Baudrillard's later critique of Disneyland:

Disneyland is presented as imaginary in order to make us believe that the rest is real, when in fact all of Los Angeles and the America surrounding it are no longer real, but of the order of the hyperreal and of simulation. It is no longer a question of a false representation of reality (ideology), but of concealing the fact that the real is no longer real, and thus of saving the reality principle.<sup>12</sup>

According to Taylor, Stevens's favourite area lay in the Government Zone, where the various national pavilions were situated. Neither the Canadian Pavilion ('a style of architecture typical of this

young and virile country’) nor the British Pavilion (‘four large panels show how Britain’s history has centered around her kings’) nor the Irish Pavilion ‘designed in the form of a huge shamrock’ (*Guide* 97, 103, 105) are likely to have much delayed his progress to where, at ‘the intersection of Rainbow Avenue and Constitution Mall, the French Pavilion [...] faces the Court of Nations. Its majestic curves form an immense glass bay with a wide terrace’ (*Guide* 102). Because the dominant tone of the fair was one of American affirmation, his preference would have placed him in a minority. Indeed, so would his ability to afford so many repeat visits, since a widespread view of the Fair was that admissions charges were discouragingly high. Lower-than-anticipated visitor numbers, as well as the darkening political climate that shortly produced a future calamitously different from the planners’ optimistic vision, were a factor in its ultimate financial collapse; but for Stevens, visiting the French Pavilion enabled him to imbibe a commodified France in an American locale: he did not need to go to Paris, because France had come to him.

The guidebook description (evidently translated from French) suggests the Pavilion’s distillation of a French ambiance:

The first floor is dedicated to the scenic beauties of France and has a Bureau of Information for all touristic inquiries. Here dioramas show the charms of the country's Provinces accentuated by four interiors of homes from Alsace, Provence, Brittany and Savoie. An immense crystal map glorifies the French Spas.

The mezzanine is devoted to Arts and Industries. The Fine Arts Exhibit includes works of sculpture, painting, tapestries, and applied arts. A vast hall, adorned with Gobelins tapestries and an imposing Sèvres vase, is used for official receptions. The remainder of the floor houses displays of the many Parisian specialties for which France is famous[...]

The second floor of the Pavilion is divided into three sections, ‘French Thought’, which includes displays representative of the country's literature, philosophy, education and music: ‘Five Centuries of French History Illustrated by Five Centuries of French Art’ [...] On the terrace, overlooking the Lagoon, a Centre de Dégustation, French wines and food delicacies may be sampled. Close by, in a charming roof garden restaurant, native wines and provincial food specialties are served.

(*Guide* 102-3)

His response to the French Pavilion in 1939-40 can be seen as a more extended version of what had happened with the Parisian mark on that picture in New York, years earlier: it transplanted him to his ‘pays de la métaphore’. The Pavilion restaurant, showcasing great French chefs, introduced America to *cordons bleu* cooking and, like the younger Stevens’s proposed regime of different daily fruits, enabled consumption as a form of resistance to the everyday: an acquisition of cultural capital connected with actual capital, because it was expensive to eat there. It possibly enabled Stevens to feel superior to the crowds milling about below, and doubtless also offered opportunity to display connoisseurship to Taylor, his subordinate – in much the same way that he would later impress his nephew John, by taking him to ‘a very fine little French restaurant’ in New York, where he ‘just rattled off a lunch in French’ (Doggett and Buttell, *Wallace Stevens: A Celebration*, 121). But if there was an element of revolt against what the Fair was principally designed to celebrate, this was safely contained by the fact that finally it all took place on American soil, as part of a quintessentially American spectacle, and therefore involved no fundamental conflict of loyalties. This elaborate engagement with commodified France, occurring at the juncture when that nation faced its profoundest historical crisis, may actually mark the point at which Stevens understood more clearly that there was a separation between his idea of France and the actual country, which he could preserve only by not going there. If so, it is less a question of Baudrillardian ‘hyperreality’ abolishing distinction between ‘real’ and ‘unreal’, than of preserving a fiction from divergent actuality.

Alan Filreis has argued that, at this period, Stevens was a committed isolationist; he shared the national majority’s desire for uninvolvement in the European conflict, which in June 1940 made America resist French pleas for military intervention. It is noteworthy that when, six months before Pearl Harbour, he gave his lecture ‘The Noble Rider and the Sound of Words’ at Princeton, he chose to exemplify outmoded nobility by an equestrian statue he cannot have seen (Verrochio’s statue of Colleoni in Venice), rather than Bartlett’s ‘Lafayette’, of which a perfectly good copy existed in his home town. This is the more striking, given that its erection in Hartford may already have suggested to Stevens just such an obsolescence: for in his 1935 poem ‘Dance of the Macabre Mice’, those

rodents swarm over the statue of a Frenchman on horseback who, like Lafayette, brandishes a sword. In May 1941, it might have seemed untactful to evoke the Franco-American axis Lafayette embodied, lest it suggest uncomfortable debts of gratitude or historical obligations undischarged. The unidentified ‘American artist’ cited in the same lecture, a reproduction(!) of whose painting ‘Wooden Horses’ Stevens cited to exemplify an art ‘wholly favorable to what is real’ (NA 12), was in fact Reginald Marsh, who had been born in Paris and had studied there. Despite this, Marsh was known as painter of kinetic, demotic American scenes: his ‘High Yaller’, where a smart young woman strides confidently down a Harlem street in long yellow dress, hat and gloves, had featured in the exhibition mounted by the Museum of Modern Art to accompany the World’s Fair.<sup>13</sup> The iconographical move in Stevens’s lecture, from immobile (European) armoured horseman to revolving (American) carousel where, as he noted, a man with jutting cigar embraces a sturdy-legged woman astride their wooden horse, almost prefigures the 1960s slogan: ‘Make Love Not War’.

The actual being-in-France could be done by others like Henry Church, whom Stevens described to a third party in 1943 in terms that bear closely on his understanding of his own position: ‘Mr Church is practically a Frenchman, although, like most Americans who are practically something else, he is devoted to this country, and his chief pride is that he is an American’ (LWS 438-9). Like Stevens’s former Harvard acquaintance Walter Arensberg (also a millionaire), in whose New York apartment the poet had encountered the milieu of the European avant-garde in his earlier years, Church brought France to Stevens’s door. Through Arensberg he had met Marcel Duchamp, offering another example of France in America, both in his own person and in the ampoule of Parisian air he brought as gift for his host; through Church he would meet Jean Wahl, and feel himself associated with Jean Paulhan and others. Church and Arensberg lived the life that Stevens aspired to, and in a way they lived it for him – or he lived it through them. Church’s is the more relevant example, because he came into Stevens’s acquaintance in circumstances emphasising France as a state of mind or transportable culture rather than as a fixed geography. If the French Pavilion offered a sort of theme-park presentation, Church brought with him the intellectual ambiance associated with *Mesures*; so when world events were making it impossible for Stevens to visit France even had he planned to, he was presented with encapsulations of the country reinforcing his own predilection for relating to it as virtual rather than actual place. Church also personified familiarity with the French cultural and political situation which, while furthering Stevens’s grasp of what was actually going on, doubtless also had the allure of conferring insidership. It would shortly be the case that ‘true’ France would constitute itself outside the national boundaries, with De Gaulle in London rather than Pétain in Vichy; later, Jean Wahl’s presence at Mount Holyoke was further evidence of the constitution of Frenchness abroad.

‘Paris is the great luxury of the French, a thing of beauty that lies beyond the domain of the useful, in short, a work of art’; Cohen-Portheim also described it as the ‘playground of the whole human race,’ and paid tribute to the ‘many-coloured, ever-shifting pageant of her streets’ (Cohen-Portheim, *The Spirit of Paris*, 99, 20). Such perceptions of the city may have heightened the contrast between Stevens’s imagined Paris and the American civic setting where he worked: a 1935 letter described Head Office as ‘a solemn affair of granite, with a portico resting on five [*sic*: there are actually six] of the grimmest possible columns’ (LWS p. 283). But just as the World’s Fair could create a microcosm of France in New York, so the spirit of Paris could be felt as far away as Hartford – and not just in the statue of Lafayette recently acquired. Like Wordsworth’s sonnet, the 1939 poem ‘Of Hartford in a Purple Light’ (CP 226-7) concerns itself with metropolitan transfiguration, showing how the city where Stevens composed poems walking to and from work could have its granite lightened by a *jeu d’esprit*. It opens noting that the sun, apostrophized throughout as ‘Master Soleil’, has made the trip ‘From Havre to Hartford’ many times. So, too, ‘the ocean has come with you’ as rain-showers, like a ‘poodle’ shaking water off in prismatic droplets, ‘Each drop a petty tricolor’. In the ‘male light’ of earlier sunshine the city’s features had been boldly defined but now, with the softening of sunset, ‘as in an amour of women/ Purple sets purple round’, and the poodle is finally enjoined to ‘flick the spray/ Of the ocean, ever-freshening,/ On the irised hunks, the stone bouquet’. Suffused in this glow of the setting sun, prosaic Hartford is modified by poetic France, in a many-coloured pageant where inessential houses melt away and you may stare in awe, as cityscape turns into a bunch of flowers.

But not everyone is awestruck, it seems; briefly, the poem has diverted from Connecticut to California, to evoke 'The aunts in Pasadena'. Thus identified, at a knight's move from sibling fertility and caught in the act of 'remembering', they are, inferably, ageing spinsters, whom this French light dismays: for in response they 'Abhor the plaster of the western horses, // Souvenirs of museums'. I take this to imply that, in recalling France, they heighten their own sense of cultural exile by disdaining locally-available copies of European statuary (a plaster replica of Bartlett's 'Lafayette' was prominently displayed at the 1915 Panama-Pacific International Exposition in San Francisco). But this poem repudiates their abhorrence, rather registering how near France now becomes than how distant its museums are. Their fixatedly 'remembering' the Grand Tours of their girlhood runs counter to its pronounced commitment to the present tense ('It is Hartford seen in a purple light'), and to its deictic insistence that we should 'Look' and 'See' 'this purple, this parasol', 'Now'. Playfully, the poem inserts French words like 'soleil' and 'amour' into its register; the phrase 'petty tricolor' aspires to the condition of '*petit tricolore*' even as it evokes the French flag, alongside the French national dog. By ending on the word 'bouquet' it shows how, as with 'souvenirs', the presence of French in English is an achieved actuality – with the correct pronunciation enforced by the rhyme, which itself points up harmonies between the languages. 'Paris', nowhere named, keeps coming constantly near: 'Havre', alliteratively linked to Hartford, is its principal sea-port. Hartford might turn into Havre, and 'Pasadena' starts off as if it, too, might turn into the French capital, abetted by those museum horses, whose 'plaster of' potentially initiates the formulation 'plaster of Paris'. The word 'parasol' puns on the possibility of 'Paris-soleil', which is the poem's basic premise. The virile poet finds himself willingly entranced, as masculine America is enticed by feminine France; but the fundamental implication is that, therefore, you can have your taste of Paris without needing to leave Hartford. Those 'aunts in Pasadena' should have tempered their abhorrence of what California offered (after all, the Huntington Museum is nearby); for, as 'Prelude to Objects' notes, in a very Emersonian sentiment: 'he has not / To go to the Louvre to behold himself' (CP 194).

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The years following the war showed Stevens continuing to avoid the Louvre, becoming increasingly disinclined to visit Paris and almost comically disposed to believe he had already done so. In 1950 he wrote to Bernard Heringman, a young acquaintance then visiting the city, 'I suppose that if I ever go to Paris the first person I meet will be myself since I have been there in one way or another for so long' (LWS 665). When a young writer charged with reviewing Stevens's *Parts of a World* called on him in the early 1940s, he 'assumed from the way [Stevens] talked about Paris that he had been there . . . at least several times'. Holly Stevens, musing on her father's failure to visit Europe, reported that 'he felt World War II had changed everything'.<sup>14</sup> It became characteristic of his post-war correspondence that evocations of Paris were accompanied by acknowledgements that it was impossible to consider going there. 'Certainly I should get the keenest pleasure out of a visit to Paris. But, alas, I have no expectation of ever visiting Europe', he wrote to Paule Vidal in 1950, 'The other day I received from Europe a copy of No. 7 of *Le Portique*. Merely to read the names of book-binders, the names of publishers and book shops excited me. But I think that perhaps the excitement is more real at this distance than it might actually be' (LWS 698). In fact, the intensity of his desire to be in Paris seems to have been matched by the strength of his resolve not to go there; a subsequent letter makes this clear:

There seems to be only one place left in the world, and that, of course, is Paris, in which, notwithstanding all the talk of war and all the difficulties of politics, something fundamentally gay and beautiful still survives. I rode in town to my office this morning with a man who has just returned from Paris. When he had finished telling me about it, I sighed to think that it must forever remain terra incognita for me.

(LWS 755)

Later in the same letter (June 18 1952), however, Stevens told her that 'There is a possibility that I might have come to Paris this spring in connection with the Twentieth Century Work gathering but I was asked in such a peculiar way that I said no' (*ibid.*). The tenses are intriguing: although the event referred to was, as he wrote, in the past, the possibility remains, as possibility – 'there IS a possibility that I might have come'.



Thus the significance of Paris for Stevens largely depended on its remaining ‘terra incognita’. If earlier that same year he had written to Henry Church’s widow, Barbara, that ‘Paris seems to be more than ever a centre, this spring, if there is a centre anywhere’ (LWS 751), I am tempted to think it was a centre that could be everywhere, including Hartford, provided he never visited the actual city. Two years earlier he had written to Thomas McGreevy in Dublin, criticising Léon-Paul Fargue because too many of his poems concerned themselves with Paris: ‘Paris is not the same thing as the imagination and it is because Fargue failed to see the difference [...] that he is not first rate’ (LWS 697). This might seem surprising, unless we see that for Stevens Paris was capital city of the ‘pays de la métaphore’ in the abstract, not the concrete: only as an object of prospective longing or as the subject of retrospective regret (‘I wanted all my life to go to Paris’ is his last reference, LWS 845) could it compel his imagination. In his psychological and artistic economy, the 1952 conference he declined to attend had possibly presented more as threat than opportunity.

A 1953 letter to Paule Vidal uses vocabulary that makes explicit the value of the idea of Paris to Stevens, and the ways in which that idea connects to concerns central to his poetry:

After waiting for FIGARO a long time, several numbers came at the same time. This has brought Paris close to me. When I go home at night, after the office, I spend a long time dawdling over the fascinating phrases which refresh me as nothing else could. I am one of the many people around the world who live from time to time in a Paris that has never existed and that is composed of the things that other people, primarily Parisians themselves, have said about Paris. That particular Paris communicates an interest in life that may be wholly fiction. But, if so, it is precious fiction.

(LWS 773)

There is hardly a higher accolade to be bestowed, in Stevens, than that of ‘precious fiction’; its describing a spiritual resource bears comparison with Hemingway’s valediction at the end of *A Moveable Feast*:

There is never any ending to Paris and the memory of each person who has lived in it differs from that of any other. We always returned to it no matter where we were or how it was changed or with what difficulties, or ease, it could be reached.

Paris was always worth it and you received return for whatever you brought it.

The difference, of course, is that for Stevens the key to the experience was *not* to have lived in Paris: to visit the city would be the spatial equivalent of the ‘minor wish-fulfillments’ that he associated with the ‘the romantic’ in its debased form (‘Imagination as Value’, NA 139). This may be why, when places specifically associated with Paris occur in the poetry, they seem to be subject to criticism: ‘They will get it straight one day at the Sorbonne’ (CP 406).

If imagination has value, however, it is through interaction with ‘reality’; the purple light of Paris is meaningful *because* it shines on Hartford, enabling perception of what ‘The Bouquet’ (1950) defines as ‘The infinite of the actual’, when ‘The real’ is ‘made more acute by an unreal’ (CP 451). It was such a moment of prosaic epiphany that informed the 1949 poem ‘Angel Surrounded by Paysans’, suggested by Pierre Tal Coat’s still life of a Venetian glass bowl amidst more humdrum vessels, acquired through Paule Vidal. This interaction justifies Stevens’s assertion that ‘French and English constitute a single language’ (OP2 202): not that they are the same but that they are complementary; that awareness of French within an inhabitation of English is an enrichment that depends on recognition of difference, not identity. This is what emerges from later comments he made in his letter to McGreevy, following on from his judgement of Fargue’s poetry, and thinking of the distinctiveness of the French:

I mean what I say in the same sense that I would mean if I said that it means more to one to live in Paris than to live in New York. Both places are much alike, but the accents of one are not the accents of the other and, however much alike they may be, there is a difference and the difference is not to be bridged.

(LWS 697)

The irony here, is that it could only ‘mean more’ to live in Paris than New York (which Stevens had), if one actually refrains from doing it: because it is the imagined plenitude ascribed to Paris from an American perspective that produces the meaning, which bridging ‘the difference’ would destroy. As he explained to an early enquirer (1928): ‘Another way of putting it is that, after writing a poem, it is

a good thing to walk around the block; after too much midnight, it is pleasant to hear the milkman, and yet, and this is the point of the poem, the imaginative world is the only real world, after all' (LWS 251-2).

And this, finally, is how Stevens's Francophilia was so deeply involved in his being American, a patriot of the two republics of the USA and of the 'pays de la métaphore' so closely linked to Paris as 'terra incognita'. Earlier I quoted the question from his journal, 'is it possible that I am here?', to which the answer is, 'Yes; because the "there" you long for turns out to be a function of where you long for it from'. It is fitting, then, that the last piece of public prose he wrote was a paean to his adopted state, 'Connecticut Composed' (1955), which closes with these words: 'It is a question of coming home to the American self in the sort of place in which it was formed. Going back to Connecticut is a return to an origin'. Interestingly, however, the very last sentence generalizes this experience beyond the State and beyond the United States: 'And as it happens, it is an origin which many men all over the world [...] share in common: an origin of hardihood, faith, and good will' (OP2 304, *both*). Connecticut, too, turns out to be a 'moveable feast', in a vision which supposes the whole world to be in natural sympathy with Yankee values (this was written for the 'Voice of America' airwave). Yes, it was certainly possible that Stevens was 'here', having never been anywhere else, except metaphorically; but rather than end with a piece somewhat inflected by propagandist intentions, I prefer to acknowledge the truth and strangeness of his finding himself in 'Paris', by recalling the end of 'Crude Foyer' (another French word at home in English), which accepts that, as 'ignorant men incapable/ Of the least minor, vital metaphor' we shall be 'content,/ At last, there, when it turns out to be here' (CP 305).

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<sup>1</sup> The following abbreviations for references to Stevens's writing will be used: CP = *Collected Poems of Wallace Stevens* (London: Faber and Faber, 1955); LWS = *Letters of Wallace Stevens*, ed. Holly Stevens (London: Faber and Faber, 1967); NA = *The Necessary Angel: Essays on Reality and the Imagination* (New York: Vintage Books, 1975); OP2 = *Opus Posthumous* (London: Faber and Faber, revised edition, 1990). Page references to these will be given in the running text.

<sup>2</sup> Paul Cohen-Portheim, *The Spirit of Paris*, trans. Alan Harris, (London: Batsford, 1937), 40.

<sup>3</sup> Ernest Hemingway, *A Moveable Feast* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1964), 6; Malcolm Cowley, *Exile's Return: A Literary Odyssey of the 1920s* (New York: Viking, 1956), 135.

<sup>4</sup> F. Scott Fitzgerald, *The Great Gatsby* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1974), 168.

<sup>5</sup> Ferdinand W. Peck, Commissioner-General for the United States to the Paris Exposition of 1900, 'The United States at the Paris Exposition in 1900', *The North American Review*, CLXVIII (Jan. 1899): 24-33. All quotations at 32 (accessed via Cornell University Library Website, 22 October 2013).

<sup>6</sup> Pierre Bourdieu, 'From *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*', in *The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism*, Second Edition, ed. Vincent B. Leitch (New York and London: W.W. Norton & Co., 2010), 1664-70, at 1669.

<sup>7</sup> *Wallace Stevens, New York and Modernism*, ed. Lisa Goldfarb and Bart Eeckhout (New York and London: Routledge, 2012) explores the impact of New York on Stevens. Especially relevant is Edward Ragg's essay 'Bourgeois Abstraction: Gastronomy, Painting, Poetry, and the Allure of New York in Early to Late Stevens'.

<sup>8</sup> Stevens delivered this paper in the presence of Jean Wahl as part of the 'Entretiens de Pontigny' conference transplanted (with Henry Church's financial assistance) from wartime France to Mount Holyoke College. As Alan Filreis (see note 14 below) has shown, Stevens's contribution was emphatic in its Francophile orientation; he gives a detailed exposition of the poet's evolving awareness of French political realities during this period.

<sup>9</sup> Joan Richardson, *Wallace Stevens: The Later Years 1922-55*, (New York: William Morrow, 1988), 153.

<sup>10</sup> Wilson E. Taylor, 'Of a Remembered Time', in *Wallace Stevens: A Celebration*, ed. Robert Buttel and Frank Doggett (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980), 91-104, at 101-2.

<sup>11</sup> *Official Guide Book, New York World's Fair 1939* (New York: Exposition Publications, Inc., 1939), 17.

Further references will be cited in the running text as 'Guide'.

<sup>12</sup> Jean Baudrillard, 'Simulacra and Simulations', in *Selected Writings*, ed. Mark Poster, (Oxford: Polity Press, 1989), 166-84, at 172.

<sup>13</sup> See *Art in Our Time: An Exhibition [...] held at the time of the New York World's Fair* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1939), Reprint Edition, (Arno Press, 1972), 143.

<sup>14</sup> Alan Filreis, *Wallace Stevens and the Actual World* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991), 103. Holly Stevens, 'Bits of Remembered Time', *Southern Review*, 7 (1971), 651-7.