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Like decorations in a nigger cemetery : the poetic and political adjustments of Wallace Stevens

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"LIKE DECORATIONS IN A NIGGER CEMETERY":
THE POETIC AND POLITICAL ADJUSTMENTS
OF WALLACE STEVENS

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A THESIS
Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the
Requirements for the Degree of
Master of Arts
(in English)

The Graduate School
University of Maine
May, 2004

Advisory Committee:
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This project seeks to illuminate one of the most troubling, baffling, and most scrupulously unexamined poems in Wallace Stevens's entire body of work: "Like Decorations in a Nigger Cemetery." The lack of scholarship on this poem results from the incredible snarl of stylistic and ethical problems that the poem presents to critics. On the one hand, the poem represents the height of poetic modernity. On the other, the depths of racial insensitivity, if not racism. This mixture of poetic complexity and ethical callousness has combined to make the explication of the poem a daunting task and, hence, a task seldom undertaken. The question from which this project proceeds is this: What made a poem entitled "Like

"Decorations in a Nigger Cemetery" sound poetic to one of the foremost American poets of the 20th century?

The relative lack of scholarship on "Like Decorations in a Nigger Cemetery" says little about the poem's importance within Stevens's corpus. Not only does the poem mark Stevens's sustained return to writing poetry after a dozen-year "silence," but the poem is also one of the longest of Stevens's poems to appear before 1935. In addition to these important details, the poem is also an excellent example of how Stevens took the modernist poetic techniques he had mastered in the 1920s and began to apply those techniques to the turbulent social and political exigencies of the 1930s. It was not an easy union. But such uneasiness is precisely what is so interesting about the poem. Therefore, in this study of "Like Decorations," the thorny issue of Wallace Stevens and race is discussed at length.

In the two final chapters, the discussion considers Wallace Stevens and his relationship with the visual arts. Stevens learned much from the post-WWI aesthetic vanguard, who, because of the war, relocated to New York. This relocation of artists like Marcel Duchamp brought the radical aesthetic innovations of early-20th century Europe to within a short train-ride of Wallace Stevens. By discussing Stevens in terms of the visual arts, we see Stevens in a larger aesthetic context. We see where Stevens was in line with the aesthetic trends of his day, where he diverged, and where he led. After the discussion of

visual art's direct influence upon Stevens, the thesis closes on a more speculative topic: the analogy between Matisse's *The Red Studio* and "Like Decorations in a Nigger Cemetery." Concluding discussion in such a way allows us to examine the poem in the broader context of International Modernism.

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Introduction: The Idea of Order in Swanville, Maine

In December 1934, when Wallace Stevens sent "Like Decorations in a Nigger Cemetery" to *Poetry*, he explained that "the title refers to the litter one usually finds in a nigger cemetery and is a phrase used by Judge Powell last winter in Key West."¹ Despite this painfully clear gloss on the title, neither the title nor the rest of the poem are so easily explained. The offensive title and the stream of fifty disjunctive epigrams make it a politically and poetically challenging poem to critique. Therefore, I'd like to begin by appealing to the sympathy and forbearance of my readers, mostly for myself, but in part, also for Wallace Stevens.

Three years ago, I began work on this poem with every intention of producing the kind of linear, logical, conventional critical treatment that everyone in the scholarly community commonly expects. And without fail, the poem baffled each attempt. The poem's vast array of ideological and aesthetic complications and the simultaneity with which Stevens evokes such complications frustrated my

¹Stevens, Holly. *Letters of Wallace Stevens*. New York: Knopf 1966, 272. Hereafter cited in the text as *Letters* followed by the page number.

best efforts at conventional critical articulation. I have no doubt that a more powerful, more logical, more talented critical mind than mine could produce the kind of fastidiously organized critical treatment that "Like Decorations" deserves. To the credit of the many infinitely wiser critical minds than mine, they have either passed this poem up altogether or mentioned the poem only in passing.² Helen Vendler and Alan Filreis stand as exceptions to this critical phenomenon.³

Perhaps the ideal critical mind that I envision could explain with diamond-like clarity the complex array of ideological and aesthetic issues that the poem raises. Perhaps this ideal critical mind could also synthesize a definitive critical model of the dynamic interrelations of modernist aesthetics, racial discourse, the politics of the 1920s and 1930s, and Stevens's personal history, all of which are simultaneously encoded in "Like Decorations in a Nigger Cemetery." I would say that such a model emerges from my critique, but the poem and its period undercut any attempt at definition. And the more I envision an ideal critical treatment of "Like Decorations," the more I realize that I'm

²A glance through the index of any of the comprehensive studies of Wallace Stevens to appear in the last thirty years should make this apparent. Bloom provides good stylistic analyses of considerable length. Others quote various sections of the poem sporadically, as ancillary support for arguments whose purposes touch on "Like Decorations" only tangentially.

³Helen Vendler's *On Extended Wings* 65-75 and Alan Filreis's *Modernism Right to Left* 100-112.

envisioning a life's work rather than a scholarly article or a master's thesis.

And perhaps, out of self-indulgence or self-preservation, I've decided that the limits of the following five chapters have more to do with "Like Decorations" and Wallace Stevens than with myself. I've found consolation in the fact that "Like Decorations" is as powerfully and as radically ambiguous a poem as any in Stevens's body of work, perhaps as any in the language. If, at any point, you find yourself wondering why you should continue to read my critique of the poem, just as I found myself wondering why I should continue to write it, consider this: "Like Decorations" is one of the longest, most scrupulously unexamined poems in Stevens's body of work. The poem also marks a pivotal point in Stevens's poetic career, the end of what James Longenbach calls Stevens's "Second Silence" (*The Plain Sense of Things*, 105-133). In addition, the poem represents a strikingly direct instance of intercultural contact precisely where one would least expect to find such contact: between African-American aesthetic and spiritual tradition and Wallace Stevens's poetry. I'm trying very hard not to be flippant when I say this, and I say this not out of disrespect, but as a scholarly pragmatist: with only approximately thirty published pages on the poem in the past twenty years, beggars can't be choosers.

For those, like myself, who appreciate verity and

conclusiveness in the criticism they read, I offer the following list of fifty critical epigrams on "Like Decorations in a Nigger Cemetery." These fifty epigrams represent the fractured state of my academic discourse as I worked myself ragged trying to be explicit about this poem. As I wrote about this poem, I often worried that I'd never make sense again. I call this list "Like 'Like Decorations in a Nigger Cemetery'":

- 1.) Sadly for Stevens, "decoration" is as derisive a term as "nigger."
- 2.) The figure of the Black bears the brunt of Stevens's shift in poetics from *Harmonium* to *Ideas of Order*.
- 3.) In part, "Like Decorations" is the record of Stevens's poetic crisis in the late-1920s and early-1930s, what James Longenbach has called Stevens's "Second Silence."
- 4.) Stevens understood racial issues aesthetically.
- 5.) Stevens understood social issues aesthetically.
- 6.) Wallace Stevens and Henri Matisse never met.
- 7.) Stevens was adept at taking the techniques of the visual arts and transforming those techniques into poetic structural tropes.
- 8.) Stevens spoke French with Duchamp.
- 9.) "Like Decorations" had an undoubtedly generative effect on Stevens's ability to compose new verse.
- 10.) "Like Decorations" resuscitated Stevens out of the near-death of his poetic career.
- 11.) Stanley Burnshaw's "Turmoil in the Middle-Ground" is an exceptional piece Stevens criticism, one whose implications are only now being realized in recent historicist studies of Stevens.
- 12.) Stevens's ingenuity in "Like Decorations" lies not

in his invention of the poem's structural trope, but in his appropriation of the African-American tradition of grave adornment.

- 13.) The paradox of "Like Decorations" is that it combines offensive racial discourse with genuine modernist aesthetic innovation.
- 14.) "Like Decorations" is a readymade with pathos.
- 15.) To a certain extent, "Like Decorations" seemed poetic because of the generally high esteem with which the modernist aesthetic norm of primitivism was viewed.
- 16-49.) It's my guess that as Stevens looked at the Key West cemetery a powerfully personal analog formed between the look of the cemetery and the state of his poetic career.
- 50.) The sustained liminal imagery of "Like Decorations" presents the cognitive processes of a discrete poetic self in the midst of an aesthetic, ideological, and personal transition from the 1920s to the 1930s.

The poem's structural trope is contagious, I'm afraid.

I provide this list of fifty "scraps" of academic discourse not to scare my readers off, but to illustrate that my critical predicament with this poem is analogous to Stevens's poetic predicament in 1934. Just as I, in my criticism, try to do justice to the simultaneity of the aesthetic and ideological ambiguities in and surrounding "Like Decorations," Stevens was trying, in his verse, to do justice to the simultaneous aesthetic and political ambiguities of the Great Depression. The result of Stevens's efforts was *Ideas of Order*. *Ideas of Order* sprang from two poems: "The Idea of Order at Key West" and "Like Decorations

in a Nigger Cemetery." Both poems were the result of a poetically fruitful trip to Key West in the winter of 1934. By the time of this Key West trip, Stevens had a lot on his mind: the economy, his job, his family, politics, and his poetry's state of disrepair. Except for this last item on the list, we can all probably relate. Among such a list, the state of one's poetry might seem to be a concern of a lower order than the rest. But I don't think that Stevens was overstating his case when he wrote the following to Hi Simons in 1940, "what keeps one alive is the fury of the desire to get somewhere" with poetry (*Letters*, 350). Perhaps Stevens's priorities were askew, but in his mind, job, family, politics and poetry were inextricably linked. In his poetry, he presented the dynamic interrelations among all the sometimes disparate, sometimes complementary, aesthetic and ideological arenas that comprise a poet's life.

In a much different operation from poetic presentation, the prose of *The Necessary Angel* tries to explain the interrelations of art and life, or as Stevens put it, "an interdependence of the imagination and reality as equals" (*The Necessary Angel*, 27). Then, as now, critics most often hailed Stevens's poetic imagination and ignored the equally important reality behind and within his poetry. In 1936, Stevens was aware of this critical trend. After reading Howard Baker's comparison of *Harmonium* with *Ideas of Order*, Stevens wrote to Ronald Latimer, "but however striking Mr.

Baker's analysis may be, what he does not see is the type of world in which I am living" (292). In my study of "Like Decorations" I have tried to understand the simultaneity with which the world in which Stevens lived and the poetry that he wrote affected one another.

Recent thinking about literature has explored the simultaneity with which art and ideology inform one another. Stevens's essays on reality and the imagination in *The Necessary Angel* show that he, too, gave much thought to this subject. Other than literature, there are few places in our language that adequately present the simultaneous and problematic interrelations of ideology and aesthetics. The inherent linearity of our critical conventions emphasizes causality and often frustrates the articulation of simultaneity that a poem like "Like Decorations" requires. Traditionally, simultaneity and ambiguity find their most apt expression in poetry. Much of the "fun" for the reader and the critic of poetry lies in assigning a variety of causes to the way a poem works. For many critics, the imbroglios that arise from controversial assignments of cause are the "fun" of literary conferences. As spectators of, or participants in, such controversies we learn much about ourselves and our discipline.

And "Like Decorations in a Nigger Cemetery" is nothing if not controversial. As I attempt to show in Chapter One, "The Critical Reception," the poem entered a literary-

political milieu embroiled in controversy. In 1934, like many other modernists, Stevens was coming under fire from the left for his elitism, his political naivete, and his irrelevance to the social turmoil of the 1930s. In the 1920s, the left criticized the modernists, too, but with the 1930s and the New Deal, what had been leftist in the 1920s looked sensibly moderate in the 1930s. Leftist critics like Stanley Burnshaw and Geoffrey Grigson, supported by the literary-political platforms of their respective journals, *New Masses* and *New Verse*, persuasively characterized Stevens's poetry as, in Stanley Burnshaw's words, "the kind of verse that people concerned with the murderous world collapse can hardly swallow today except in tiny doses" (*New Masses*, 17, 42). On the opposite extreme, Harriet Monroe privately hailed "Like Decorations" as both a refreshing change of "mood and...form" and as a new and "delicate combination of [Stevens's characteristic] irony and humor and shy seriousness" (*Wallace Stevens: A Poet's Growth*, 263).

In Chapter One, I also attempt to show that, despite the few direct considerations of "Like Decorations" to appear in more recent Stevens criticism, this split between Burnshaw's political critique and Monroe's stylistic critique has nevertheless maintained its shape. In *On Extended Wings*, Helen Vendler provides an excellent, though determinedly apolitical, stylistic analysis of "Like Decorations" (65-76). Nineteen years after *On Extended Wings*, Aldon Nielsen's

Reading Race: White American Poets and the Racial Discourse in the Twentieth Century, briefly mentions "Like Decorations" in the context of an excellent discussion of 20th century American poetry and the politics of racial discourse (62). The maintenance of the original Burnshaw-Monroe split is due entirely to the poem. On one hand we have a radically innovative poem that challenges and rewards close stylistic scrutiny. On the other, we have a poem whose offensive title challenges and rewards discursive analysis. As I analyzed the poem, the problem which I set for myself was to bridge the gap between stylistic and discursive analysis. Because it seemed too hasty to dismiss "Like Decorations" as a racist poem and too inadequate to vaunt the poem as a poetic tour de force, I sought to discover whether there was any correlation between the style of the poem and the politics of racial discourse. In seeking to bridge the gap between the aesthetic and the political, Alan Filreis's *Modernism Right to Left* provided me an agile critical role-model. With its thorough documentation of literary-political trends and its frequent persuasive close readings, Filreis's criticism craftily demonstrates how the political trends of a period play themselves out in that period's poetry.

Following Filreis's lead, in Chapter Two I consider the place and the function of the racial other in Stevens's earlier poems. I begin by providing my readers with a broad sense of Stevens's aesthetic motivation, what Stevens calls

his "fury of the desire to get somewhere" with his poetry (*Letters*, 350). Then I argue that Stevens's intense motivation to write innovative poetry had a drastically reductive effect on the black figures that appear in his poems. In the 1910s and 1920s Stevens incorporates the offensive racial stereotypes of black sensualism, fecundity, and libidinal excess into a larger and fairly stable tension in his early poetry: the tension between Stevens's ascetic and sensualistic impulses. By 1930, however, Stevens manages to reduce his black figures even further. If before, Stevens had allowed some measure of human agency to his stereotypical black figures, by the 1930s he avoids attributing even the faintest hint of humanity to the racial other. I see these continuing reductions in the humanity of Stevens's black figures as a symptom of a larger shift in Stevens's poetics from the 1920s to the 1930s. In what I suppose to be an effort at becoming a more socially relevant poet, Stevens tempers the more frivolous examples of unbridled sensualism in his verse. I read the ever more drastic insensitivity with which Stevens mishandles his black figures as an attempt to expunge those sensualist impulses that threaten to mark him and his poetry as forever irrelevant.

With the implication that, at some level, Stevens was anxious about becoming poetically irrelevant, I begin Chapter Three. This chapter's historicist approach combines Stevens's fear of poetic irrelevance, letters, anecdotes, a

comparison of "Sunday Morning" with "The Woman Who Blamed Life on a Spaniard," and ethnographic Art History in an attempt to reconstruct Stevens's state of mind as he viewed the Key West cemetery. I argue that as Stevens reflected on the actual cemetery decorations, he formed a powerfully personal analogy between the state of his poetic career and the look of the cemetery. Ingeniously, Stevens appropriated the aesthetic sophistication of the grave adornments, what art historian Robert Farris Thompson calls "an intricate field of mediatory signs" (*Africanisms in American Culture*, 167). What Judge Arthur Powell recalled as "broken pieces of glass, old pots, broken pieces of furniture, dolls' heads, and what not" were, in fact, highly significant spiritual symbols (*Parts of a World: Wallace Stevens Remembered*, 100-101). Thompson explains that the decorations are a way for the grieving to deal with death in a very profound way. The decorations might be the last thing the dead touched when they were alive, or the objects may symbolize the dead's occupation in life. For instance, Thompson uses the example of a broken sewing machine. On the grave of a seamstress, the sewing machine becomes a mediatory sign between the world of the living and the world of the dead. The sewing machine is both a remembrance of the seamstress's place in the community, and a way to persuade her not to take her talents to the grave with her, but to allow her survivors the continued benefits of her expertise. Stevens appropriated

the aesthetic procedure of African-American cemetery decoration and transformed it into a poetic structural trope powerful enough to simultaneously present his personal dissatisfaction with the state of his poetry, and all the attendant ideological and aesthetic ambiguities that arose from his difficult transition from the 1920s to the 1930s. In his transformation of the aesthetic procedure of Afro-American cemetery decoration into a modernist poetic structural trope, Stevens maintained the intense pathos and radical liminality of the trope's source.

Chapter Four "riffs" off of an analogy implied by Robert Farris Thompson: "Powerful analogies exist, for example, between the "readymades" of Marcel Duchamp and objects placed on Kongo and African-American graves" (167). I begin my fourth chapter by elaborating on the analogy between "Like Decorations" and a readymade. Stevens, while probably not fully informed on the deep significance of the African tradition he appropriated, was very familiar with the work of Braque, Picasso, and Duchamp. This familiarity prepared him for the aesthetic sophistication of the Key West cemetery. With an implicit acknowledgment of the debt Stevens owes to Afro-American spiritual tradition, Chapter Four considers the poetic development from which "Like Decorations" comes. As Glen MacLeod finds in *Wallace Stevens and Modern Art*, Stevens's close affiliation with the "Arensberg circle" accounts for his adaptation of the techniques of modern

visual art to his poetry (3-24). Specifically, in poems like "Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird" and "Anecdote of the Jar" MacLeod shows that Stevens appropriates the aesthetic procedures of, respectively, cubist painting and the readymade. Still, though his poetry of the 1910s and 1920s reflects a cubist sensibility, Stevens did not blindly subscribe to cubist doctrine. As a letter to Ferdinand Reyher suggests, Stevens sought to modify the emotionally neutral intellectualism of cubist aesthetic processes with the "emotional purpose of rhythm" (*Wallace Stevens: A Poet's Growth*, 102). In the cubist poems that stylistically anticipate "Like Decorations," pathos is a side-effect of rhythm rather than a direct result of content. With the powerful flexibility of "Like Decorations's" structural trope, however, Stevens could combine emotional content with the more intellectual aesthetic processes of cubism. Drawing on my previous discussions of Stevens's fear of poetic irrelevance, I specifically locate the pathos of "Like Decorations" in Stevens's emotions surrounding his difficult poetic transition from the 1920s to the 1930s.

As a hybrid of both the aesthetics of an artistic vanguard and the traditions of a marginalized subculture, the structural trope of the poem aptly represents the marginalized status of Stevens's aesthetically sophisticated verse in the context of the 1930s poetry wars. In part, the poem's pathos stems from Stevens's self-reflective

confrontation with the narrowly-defined politicized aesthetics of the 1930s. According to Phillip Rahv and William Phillips of the *Partisan Review*, "the mood of the thirties required [from poetry] objectivity, realism, and an interest in the social manifestations of individual life" (*The Plain Sense of Things*, 135). One result of these literary prescriptions was a politicized critical stance that held realism and poetic musicality as mutually exclusive. In section XXV of "Like Decorations" Stevens directly confronts this type of mutual exclusion:

From oriole to crow, note the decline
In music. Crow is realist. But, then,
Oriole, too, may be realist.⁴

When measured against the strict requirements of journals like *Partisan*--as it so often was--Stevens's poetry seldom passed muster. But a closer look at the poem reveals Stevens's concern for at least two requirements: "realism and an interest in the social manifestations of individual life." As Alan Filreis suggests, the pervasive autumnal imagery of "Like Decorations" aligns Stevens with other more radical depression-era poets "who...claim to have made pointed political reference while nonetheless using a fully natural imagery" (*Modernism Right to Left*, 101). The autumnal imagery of "Like Decorations" has personal, aesthetic, and ideological significance for Stevens. Autumn is a liminal

⁴Stevens, Wallace. *The Collected Poems*. New York: Vintage Books, 1982. 154.
Hereafter abbreviated in the text as CP followed by the page number.

trope for Stevens, and it locates the poem and the poet between a variety of seeming oppositions: aesthetics and ideology; poverty and plenty; exhaustion and exuberance; participation and marginalization; the 1920s and the 1930s. And though the disjunctive procession of epigrams initially challenges readers' best efforts at constructing a unified whole, with time, a strikingly realistic resemblance of Stevens's difficult personal, ideological, and aesthetic transition emerges from the collage of fifty poetic fragments.

With the analogy between Matisse's *The Red Studio* (1911) and "Like Decorations in a Nigger Cemetery," my final chapter concludes discussion by shifting the context from the 1930s poetry wars to Stevens's position within International Modernism. Though Stevens and Matisse were an ocean apart and worked in different genres, an interartistic comparison reveals that the modernist aesthetic norm of primitivism exerted a vigorous influence on both artists. This chapter looks at the strikingly similar effects that the discourse of aesthetic primitivism had upon the racial and sexual other in *Odalisque with Red Trousers* (1921), "Exposition of the Contents of a Cab" (1919), "Floral Decorations for Bananas" (1923), *The Red Studio* (1911), and "Like Decorations in a Nigger Cemetery." By concluding the study of "Like Decorations" in this way we see Stevens as a participant in an aesthetic trend that pervades practically all modern

Western art.

I would like to conclude with a 1952 exchange between Wallace Stevens and I.L. Salomon that aptly demonstrates the kind of personal, political, and aesthetic dilemmas that discussion of "Like Decorations" raises. Salomon recalls that on his visit to the poet's home, the two "got into the business of what a poem was and what made it click. He says, 'Don't you believe this and this?' He mentioned his poem that talks about the nigger cemetery. I told him the truth: I found the title offensive. He just ignored it." (*Parts of a World: Wallace Stevens Remembered*, 133). In writing about "Like Decorations," I've attempted to mediate between Salomon's impulse to dismiss the poem as "offensive" and Stevens's unwillingness to see Salomon's point of view. I wanted to hear them talk to one another.

There is in the last number of the Southern Review, or Quarterly, an extremely intelligent analysis of my work by Howard Baker. No one before has ever come as close to me as Mr. Baker in his article. He is perfectly right, as you and I know, in thinking that Harmonium was a better book than Ideas of Order, notwithstanding the fact that Ideas of Order probably contains a small group of poems better than anything in Harmonium. But however striking Mr. Baker's analysis may be, what he does not see is the sort of world in which I am living.

*--Wallace Stevens, Letter to Ronald Lane Latimer,
November 5, 1935*

I.

The Critical Reception

Probably the best way to begin a detailed study of "Like Decorations in a Nigger Cemetery" is to provide a sense of the literary milieu into which it, and later, the rest of *Ideas of Order* were released. Beginning in this way should provide a basic setting within which to view clearly and against which to gauge accurately Stevens's poetic and aesthetic responses to the social, political, and ethical dilemmas of the real world. These dilemmas were articulated, demonstrated, presented, enacted, re-enacted, and reflected in the politico-critical and aesthetic debates of the mid-1930s. The implicit assumption behind this procedure, an assumption from which Stevens too proceeded in his poetry, is that social realities and art have an intricately reciprocal relationship.

The lack of criticism of--and when it does appear the limits of the criticism of--"Like Decorations" is due primarily to the snarl of problems the poem presents to critics. On the one hand, the poem represents the height of poetic modernity. On the other, it represents the depths of racial insensitivity. These extremes are difficult to reconcile when there are, critically speaking, other fish to fry. The difficulty has much to do with the lack of a set of critical approaches which can blend ideology with aesthetics. If the critic approaches the poem by way of ideological or racial concerns, then stylistic analysis generally suffers. Conversely, if the approach is primarily stylistic, the troublesome racial issues raised by the poem are quickly acknowledged and left behind.

This split is evident from the time of publication of "Like Decorations" in 1935, first by *Poetry* in spring, and later that same year, in autumn, when Rorald Lane Latimer's Alcectis Press published a limited edition of *Ideas of Order*. Stevens's poetry entered an arena already split into factions, which roughly took the form of critics on the right hailing further accomplishments of form and critics on the left calling for a content-driven poetry. In the years leading up to 1935, as Alan Filreis extensively considers and researches in *Modernism from Right to Left*, this literary debate and the "side-choosing" which precipitated the debate served to define the aesthetics of poets and critics alike. Then, the two sides

of the debate were on the one side, "lyricism," championed by Harriet Monroe and Morton Dauwen Zabel at *Poetry*, and "message" on the other side, with such proponents as Geoffrey Grigson at *New Verse* and Edwin Rolfe at *Partisan Review* on the other. Detractors on the left would dismiss a purely lyrical poetry's emphasis on musicality as irrelevant, elitist, and reactionary, while detractors on the right would dismiss "message" poetry as "anti-modernist" or aesthetically vulgar. At the heart of the debate was whether one chose to view art and politics as distinct or inseparable. For Filreis, this debate serves as part of the discursive context into which *Ideas of Order* was thrust and in which it participated.

Such a situation presented a real conundrum for poets in the 1930s; the beautiful was inherently unethical, and the ethical was inherently ugly. Stevens's poetry reflects his awareness of the debate over the politicization of poetry throughout *Ideas of Order*, and the poems therein demonstrate Stevens's attempts to accommodate both the demands for aesthetic, lyrical beauty and the demands for a political message. In Stevens's poetry, the terms of the debate translate into a tension between the simultaneous poetic demands of form--musicality, "pure sound," lyricism--on one hand, and content--social currency, sense, message--on the other. At times he directly questions the poet's social role and responsibilities as in this example from "Academic

Discourse at Havana":

Is the function of the poet here mere sound,
Subtler than the ornatest prophecy,
To stuff the ear? (144)

We find a similar idea in this passage from "Evening without Angels":

...And why the poet as
Eternal *chef d'orchestre*? (136)

Stevens doesn't ask such questions to clarify the debate but to present and further problematize the ambiguities with which a poet whose concerns are *both* lyricism and message must contend in the 1930s.

This politicized split between poetic form and content merely serves to define a general trend in early- to mid-1930s criticism; the ambiguities of politico-critical alignment were, of course, denser and richer than this definition of the extremes suggests.⁵ At the time, many critics from both the left and the right--Stanley Burnshaw and Harriet Monroe, to name two--argued that "message" and "form" need not be mutually exclusive.⁶ Still, in their articulations of just how such a combination might take place, they only reaffirmed their political opposition to one another.

⁵For a full discussion the political ambiguities of left and right, see Alan Filreis, *Modernism Right to Left*.

⁶For a complete treatment of the "Monroe-Burnshaw episode" of 1934, see Filreis, 180-206.

The critical history of "Like Decorations" begins informally, in a congratulatory tone. Harriet Monroe applauds Stevens's accomplishments in "form" and "mood." Fresh from a visit to China, Monroe wrote to Stevens and congratulated him on *Poetry's* publication of "Like Decorations" and "The Idea of Order at Key West": "I can't tell you what pleasure it gave me to see you in *Poetry* again--and to find you there in a mood and a form which reminded me of the country I had come from. For there is in Chinese art a most delicate combination of irony and humor and shy seriousness which one finds so often in your poetry, and now especially in these "Decorations" (*Wallace Stevens: A Poet's Growth*, 263). Monroe's informal observations on the "oriental" quality of "Like Decorations" suggest that she read the poem without regard to context. And although it was Morton Dauwen Zabel who solicited and accepted the submission of "Like Decorations" while Monroe was in China, clearly the choice to include the poem was made out of a policy which arose from the motive to maintain what those at *Poetry* perceived as the magazine's central role as the established arbiter of poetic normalcy. In the editors' view, explicitly political poetry was abnormal. Stevens's reputation as a modernist aesthete was surely meant to shore up *Poetry's* position in the poetry wars of the 1930s.

Despite *Poetry's* many assertions to the contrary, in 1935 accomplishments in "form and mood" alone were not enough

to secure critical acclaim from all sides--especially the radical left. The depression caused more and more critics to expect the modernist poets of the 1920s to become more politically conscious. In "A Stuffed Goldfinch," Geoffrey Grigson, writing for *New Verse*, moved to the opposite extreme from Monroe's congratulatory tone (February-March 1936) and argued that Stevens remained socially irrelevant, learning little in the dozen years following *Harmonium*: "less panache, periwinkle, cantilene, fewer melons and peacocks, but still the finicking privateer, prosy Herrick, Klee without rhythm, observing nothing, single artificer of his own world of mannerism" (*New Verse* 19, 18-19). Grigson turns Stevens's language against him. The "purple bird" in section XXXIII of "Like Decorations" becomes Grigson's "Stuffed Goldfinch":

For all his purple, the purple bird must have
Notes for his comfort that he may repeat
Through the gross tedium of being rare. (155)

After six years of world-wide economic depression, sympathy for rare birds had, understandably, worn thin; this lack of sympathy made an ironic reading of this passage difficult.

Critics on the radical left wanted a poetry whose "notes" were struck for revolution rather than "comfort" and which were repeated as countermeasures against oppression, exploitation, joblessness, and hunger rather than "through the gross tedium of being rare." In this context, the lamentation of tedious rarity provides a chance for a critic like Grigson to mock Stevens's self-

characterization as a purple bird. But in the review's overwritten ridicule, Grigson seems to relish the attack for its entertainment value rather than out of genuine political or literary conviction.

In light of Grigson's much sharper, even insulting, review, one might wonder at Stevens's stronger reaction to Burnshaw's "Turmoil in the Middle Ground," which, according to Alan Filreis, sparked "four-fifths of Stevens's longest poem," "Owl's Clover" in 1936 (10). The simple answer is that Burnshaw's review came first. Stevens was already immersed in the writing of "Owl's Clover," then tentatively titled "Aphorisms on Society," when Grigson's "Goldfinch" appeared in February 1936. According to Filreis, Stevens did devote some of "Owl's Clover" to a response to Grigson; there are echoes of Grigson's review in "A Duck for Dinner" (*Modernism Right to Left*, 241-2). But Stevens's more intense response to Burnshaw is less a matter of simple timing and more a matter of the originality that Stevens found in Burnshaw's thinking; Burnshaw's review "interest[ed]" Stevens in a way that Grigson's could not (*Letters*, 286).

By 1936, Stevens was accustomed to the grounds of Grigson's ridicule. Grigson's "Goldfinch" fell into a pattern of negative reviews of Stevens that Shaemus O Sheel, Yvor Winters, and Gorham Munson had established in the 1910s and 1920s. In a sense, then, Grigson was guilty of the same infraction for which he had pilloried Stevens. Just as

Grigson had indicted Stevens for remaining the "finicking privateer" of *Harmonium* and the 1920s, Grigson could be indicted for simply restating the grounds of these earlier reviewers' dismissals, adjusting them slightly in response to the depression. For while Grigson's dismissal made Stevens seem even more out of touch with the times than his predecessors had done, his judgement echoes O Sheel's labels of "untruthful" and "nauseating," Winters's label of "hedonist," or Munson's accusation of "dandyism" in the 1910s and 20s.

Much closer in sentiment and agenda to Grigson than to Monroe, Stanley Burnshaw, in his brief review of *Ideas of Order for the New Masses*, "Turmoil in the Middle Ground," nevertheless blended ethical and stylistic concerns more satisfactorily in the autumn of 1935 than the later critical generations were able to do.⁷ Like Harriet Monroe, Burnshaw was quick to point out the change in "mood and form" from *Harmonium*. But in a move rare in much of Stevens criticism, Burnshaw contextualized Stevens's shift from the poems of *Harmonium* and the 1920s, which he describes as

the kind of verse that people concerned with the murderous world collapse can hardly swallow today except in tiny doses.

And it is verse that Stevens can no longer write. His harmonious cosmos is suddenly screeching with confusion. (*New Masses*, 17, 42)

⁷This trend of contextless reading ended in 1985 with the publication of Bates's *Mythology of Self* and Brazeau's *Parts of a World: Wallace Stevens Remembered*.

Still, Burnshaw stops short of giving Stevens credit for consciously "philosophically adjusting" his poetics in response to the "murderous world collapse" (42). Instead, Burnshaw characterizes Stevens as ill-equipped for the demands of the 1930s upon his poetry, so that, *Ideas of Order* is the record of a man who, having lost his footing, now scrambles to stand up and keep his balance" (42). For Burnshaw, Stevens's "scrambling" is evidence of the inherent political and ethical confusion of a poet of Stevens's class rather than an intentional presentation of the ambiguous ideological terrain created by the economic, political, and civil unrest in the 1930s.

In Burnshaw's view, Stevens and other "middle ground" writers were "acutely conscious members of a class menaced by clashes between capital and labor,...writers...in the throes of struggle for philosophical adjustment" (42). At the same time that this presumably ethical "struggle for philosophical adjustment" is taking place in the middle ground, Burnshaw concedes that "their words have intense value and meaning to the sectors within their class whose confusion they articulate" (42). With their unconscious distillation of the ethical, philosophical, and political confusion of Stevens's class, Burnshaw is saying, *Ideas of Order* and books with similar class origins "have deep importance for us as well" (42, emphasis added). For Burnshaw's "us" read the following: "people concerned with the murderous world

collapse," *New Masses* readers, those of a lower class than Stevens, or those who subscribe to what Burnshaw considers an adequately revolutionary, radical frame of mind. Burnshaw's "us" clearly excludes Stevens.

While Grigson's review was an unqualified dismissal, Burnshaw's review was not, as George Lensing has characterized it in *Wallace Stevens: A Poet's Growth*, an "attack[...]" on Stevens's "irrelevance in the social turmoil of the mid-1930's" (126).⁸ It was, instead, a qualified acceptance of *Ideas of Order's* "deep importance" by means of an attenuated reading across class boundaries. To characterize the Burnshaw-Stevens episode as a simple attack and counter-attack does justice to neither the originality of Burnshaw's approach toward *Ideas of Order* nor to the amount of credit and consideration Stevens gave to Burnshaw's reading. The Burnshaw-Stevens episode was not a simple case of personal accusation or insult. Instead, Stevens reacted more strongly to Burnshaw than to any other reviewer because the young critic had denied Stevens precisely what the poet had worked so hard to attain with *Ideas of Order*: a link to the real world. In the end, the argument was over which of the two--a 1920s aesthete or a young communist--could

⁸ Lensing distorts the tone of the review from that of a corrective to that of an attack by cropping Burnshaw's statement--"And it is verse Stevens can no longer write"--to the more inflammatory--"Stevens can no longer write." In the fuller quote that I provide above, a very different meaning emerges. The "verse" that "Stevens can no longer write" refers to the "kind of verse" of *Harmonium* and the 20s that Burnshaw discusses in the previous paragraph.

authoritatively generalize about the social, political, and aesthetic exigencies of the 1930s.

Probably what irked Stevens most about the whole episode was that Burnshaw had come strikingly close to identifying Stevens's intentions for *Ideas of Order*: to blend the 1930s "pressure of reality" with the modernist lyric in the hopes of linking art to life. But just as Burnshaw was putting his finger on Stevens's intentions for *Ideas*, he excluded the poet, on the basis of class, from realizing the "deep importance" of the work and denied Stevens the credit of having intentionally created *Ideas of Order*'s full range of significance. On the basis of a rather strict class reading, Burnshaw contends that the only group with access to the true meaning of *Ideas of Order* is his rather exclusive, politically narrow "us." The frustration for Stevens came not from any perceived "attack," but from Burnshaw's unwillingness to acknowledge that the poet had access to everyday reality. While admitting the significance of *Ideas of Order*, Burnshaw depicts Stevens's poems as passive symptoms of a whole class's confusion rather than acknowledging them as agents in the process of rendering some meaning out of "the murderous world collapse."

To a certain degree, Burnshaw concedes that Stevens is concerned with the "world collapse." What Burnshaw questions, however, is if Stevens and his class can reap as much significance from the realities of the 1930s as can

Burnshaw's "us." For Burnshaw, the "confusion" that one finds in *Ideas of Order* is symptomatic of a class out of touch with reality. But as James Longenbach notes in *Wallace Stevens: The Plain Sense of Things*, Burnshaw's review of *Ideas of Order* was limited in that it "ultimately missed...that Stevens was attempting to present confusion and ambiguity as positive artistic and political values" (143). Longenbach's point is well-taken, because throughout "Turmoil in the Middle Ground" Burnshaw is unwilling to grant the spirit of indeterminacy in which *Ideas of Order* is offered. At a time when people were looking for definite answers concerning ideas of social order, Burnshaw's impatience with Stevens's consciously cultivated ambiguity in "Like Decorations" and *Ideas of Order* as a whole is understandable. Yet it's also understandable that a poet as attuned and committed to poetic ambiguity as Stevens would naturally see the indeterminate relations of art and reality, poetry and politics, and politics and reality as richly poetic terrain. In *Ideas of Order* what looked to Burnshaw like the ethical "confusion" of a class in the throes of a "philosophical adjustment," seemed to Stevens like an array of ideological ambiguities that were highly reflective of "what one reads in the papers," ambiguities, importantly for Stevens, of a high artistic order (*Letters*, 308).

With all its limits, "Turmoil in the Middle Ground" remains an exceptional instance in the history of Stevens

criticism. Despite many discrepancies between the two on the particulars of just how art and politics are inseparable, Stevens and Burnshaw nevertheless took such inseparability as a foregone conclusion. For Stevens, a poet who recognized and explored the rich poetic ambiguities in the relationship between "imagination and reality" or art and life, identifying the inherently political nature of poetry required no great leap of logic. In Stevens's view, the relations between poetry and politics were a subset within the greater rubric of the intricate reciprocity between art and life. Stevens considered Burnshaw's observations "interesting" because in "placing" Stevens "in a new [political] setting," Burnshaw had implicitly conceded the relevance of Stevens's art to life in the 1930s (*Letters*, 286).

Stevens's reading of Burnshaw suggests that Stevens was aware of their implicit alignment on this score. Stevens was able to distinguish between Burnshaw's rhetoric and his logic. Just a week after Burnshaw's review appeared, in a letter to Ronald Lane Latimer, Stevens shows that while he considered the rhetoric of *New Masses* as "ghastly," he also indicated by an analogy to "an article by Dospassos on Ford" that he considered Burnshaw's thinking to be, if not completely accurate, at least somewhat exceptional (*Letters*, 286). Burnshaw's review fell into what for Stevens was an exasperating, common pattern for leftist literary critiques:

"atrocious piece[s] of writing and...incredible piece[s] of thinking" (286). What Stevens was noting as an incredible piece of thinking was Burnshaw's ability to "place [Stevens] in a new setting" (286). And even though the exclusive, class-specific nature of Burnshaw's placement of Stevens withheld adequate credit for Stevens's intentions, it nevertheless allowed Stevens's modernist lyrics something that critics from the right or left seldom recognized in them: a link to the real world.

With the ascendancy of the New Criticism in the 1940s and 50s, readings that contextualized Stevens as Burnshaw's did, apart from strict biography, became rare events. As Stevens's reputation as a poet soared, and as the New Critics gained more and more sway over literary study, their emphasis on formal analysis as well as their insistence on the inherently apolitical nature of literature effectively extricated Stevens from any ties to the real world. This combination of a rise in poetic reputation and the depoliticization of literature in the mainstream was responsible for creating some popular misconceptions about Stevens.

In the past four or five years, historicist critics like James Longenbach and Alan Filreis have begun to confront these misconceptions. In the preface to *The Plain Sense of Things*, James Longenbach puts the matter neatly:

[F]or several critical generations, the Stevens who

matters has existed in a world of words. But Stevens lived no double life. His was what he liked to call an "ordinary" life, one in which the exigencies of politics, economics, poetry, and everyday distractions coexisted--sometimes peacefully, sometimes not. (iii)

Because the bulk of Stevens criticism has approached the poetry as though the poet "existed in world of words," the discussion of a poem the likes of "Like Decorations," in which a High Modernist aesthetic and Stevens's racism coexist, became daunting, and, hence, a task that critics rarely undertook.

In the critical generations to follow Burnshaw, even when the finest critics do handle "Like Decorations," the poem has a way of undercutting the assiduity of their critique. While the space which Helen Vendler devotes to "Like Decorations" is exceptional--half of her briefest chapter in *On Extended Wings* --her procedure toward the poem typifies those critical approaches that emphasize style and theme. She titles the chapter "The Sausage Maker"--a reference to a line from section XLII of "Like Decorations" and to the form of the poem. Her discussion begins by borrowing some of the shock value of Stevens's title with a dropped quote:

"My poems are like decorations in a nigger cemetery." This is Stevens' flagrant borrowed simile for a chain of poems, fifty of them, an experiment in poetry as epigram, or poetry as fossil bones: "Piece the world together boys but not with your hands." The poem, a token of things to come, is, like many foretastes, perversely experimental. Though the poetry of disconnection

is Stevens' most adequate form, and though the gaps from canto to canto in the long poems will always challenge the best efforts of critical articulation, still the discontinuity will never again be so arrogant as in this example. (65)

Here, Vendler treats the poem as an experiment in form modified by Stevens's very bad mood. The poem's simile is "flagrant"; its experimentation, "perverse"; its discontinuity, "arrogant." These characterizations of the poem's style present the poem as an eccentric oddity and shift the discussion away from ethical concerns and toward the poet's mood. Rather than characterizing Stevens's ethical stance as arrogant or flagrant or perverse, Vendler labels as such Stevens's formal experimentation. By offering the poem as a perverse experiment, Vendler dispenses with any discussion of the disturbing racial issues raised by the title's simile. This characterization of the poem allows Vendler quickly to arrive at what she sees as the thematic heart of the poem: "The sense of death and fatal chill is the 'subject' of Decorations, as it will be the subject of The Auroras of Autumn, but to read only physical death into Stevens' lines is to limit his range" (66). But even with such weighty subject matter, can the problematic racial issues raised by the title be so quickly overlooked?

Within the space of a lengthy paragraph, Vendler has dismissed the racism. Afterward, her stylistic analysis proceeds in uncovering themes more emotional and rhetorical than racial, social, or ethical. She discusses the final

section of "Like Decorations" after quoting the last two and a half lines:

...Can all men, together, avenge
One of the leaves that have fallen in autumn?
But the wise man avenges by building his city in
snow. (L)

...This preventive avenging is stated as a proverb, and the suggested vengeance is reaffirmed in the telling dactyls of the last line. It is a remark, however, not an accomplishment; what it means to build a city in snow is to use this rhetoric of cunning, to put to bold use intimations of despair, to counter the erosions of process by one's own ice palace, not to regret autumn; to be the snow man, in short, and to decorate the cemetery. (67)

Vendler's term, "rhetoric of cunning," recalls her earlier characterizations of the poem as "arrogant," "ruthless," and "flagrant." But now, with the poem's title out of the way, the modifiers take on a more positive shade; Stevens puts "intimations of despair" "to bold use." While Vendler has keenly identified the plausible emotional origins of the poem and linked the poet's emotions with the poem's rhetoric, the problematic racial issues raised by the title are forgotten. For Vendler, by the end of "Like Decorations," Stevens resolves "not to regret autumn; to be a snow man, in short, and to decorate the cemetery." By this point, Vendler leaves out that Stevens's "cunning rhetoric" invokes racial discourse from the start.

Vendler's omission gives Stevens credit--too much credit in my view--for cunningly grappling with despair and, out of that despair, rendering some moral edification. In so doing,

not only are the actual decorators of the cemetery forgotten, but Stevens even becomes the cemetery's decorator. As we shall see, Stevens's ingenuity lies in his choice to mimic the aesthetic procedure of African-American grave adornment. While the transcription of such a procedure into modern verse is a considerable achievement, whatever edification Stevens comes to by the end of the poem is at least as much a result of the model he mimics as it is a result of his "cunning rhetoric." The purpose of African-American cemetery decoration is precisely what Vendler identifies as Stevens's achievement in the poem: to confront death and loss and to retain some strength for the living.

But if stylistic treatments of "Like Decorations in a Nigger Cemetery" eventually forget the poem's title, those treatments that focus on ethics or race tend to remember the title but forget the poem. Instead, they discuss in depth the manner and degree of Stevens's racism or his unreflective participation in perpetuating wrong-headed racial discourse. There are considerably fewer such treatments of "Like Decorations" than there are of the type that Vendler typifies. Their rarity makes them exceptional.⁹ Here, Aldon Nielsen's brief discussion of "Like Decorations" in *Reading Race: White American Poets and the Racial Discourse of the*

⁹I hesitate to use the plural, "they," here. While there are many long studies of race and modernism, Nielsen's *Reading Race* is the only one I've found to mention "Like Decorations." There are many more discussions of "The Greenest Continent" section of "Owl's Clover," a poem not included in *The Collected Poems*.

Twentieth Century almost directly reverses the proportion of style to ethics found in Vendler. Nielsen quickly alludes to the stylistic accomplishment of "the justifiably admired poem" and then moves into a brief discursive analysis:

The title to the justifiably admired poem, "Like Decorations in a Nigger Cemetery," Stevens has advised, "refers to the litter that one usually finds in a nigger cemetery" (*Letters*, 272). Why a graveyard for Afro-Americans should "usually" be more interestingly littered than one for whites, or why separate but unequal cemeteries should exist at all are questions which Stevens's explication does not address. (62)

Nielsen is right; these are issues one wishes Stevens had addressed in his explication. Therefore, it seems essential to study the poem to discover whether there is anything in the poem or its milieu which might explain why Stevens didn't or couldn't address such issues.

As we can see, "Like Decorations" has a way of rendering critiques with a single focus on either stylistics or ethics only partially successful. Such partial success is due less to the critic's skill than to the clash in the poem of the heights of High Modernist poetics and what looks to be the depths of a High Modernist's racial insensitivity. If a critic chooses to focus on either singly, then the reading will be imbalanced with respect to the uneasy coexistence of high art in the poem and racial discourse in the title. But as Stevens's offhand response ("the litter one usually finds") suggests, what coexists uneasily for readers now, seemed--at least on the surface--to coexist easily for

Stevens in 1935. Race and High Modernism also coincide in Stevens's poetry before "Like Decorations." The next chapter considers the place of the racial other in Stevens's earlier poetry and should provide the background we need to assess the place of the racial other in "Like Decorations."

Nothing has happened since my last letter to you from Elizabethton except that last evening a train of negroes that had been drafted passed through Johnson City on the way to camp. The station was crowded with negroes. When the train pulled in there was a burst of yelps and yells. The negroes on the platform ran up and down shaking hands with those in the cars. The few white people who happened to be near took an indulgent attitude. They regard negroes as absurdities. They have no sympathy with them. I tried to take that point of view: to laugh at those absurd animals, in order to understand how it was convenable that one should feel. But the truth is that I feel a thrilling emotion at these draft movements. I want to cry and yell and jump ten feet in the air; and so far as I have been able to observe, it makes no difference whether the men are black or white. The noise when the train pulled out was intoxicating

--Wallace Stevens, Letter to Elsie Stevens from Johnson City Tennessee, May 1, 1918

I went up to a nigger policeman to get my bearings and found that the poor thing could not even understand me.

--Wallace Stevens, Letter to Elsie from Havana, Cuba, February 4, 1923

II.

Poetic Adjustments:

"An Interdependence of Imagination and Reality as Equals"

and The Great Depression's Effect on Black Figures

In the Poetry of Wallace Stevens

OR

What Happens When a 1920s Aesthete Learns Sociology at Home

In a letter from January 1940, Stevens writes to Hi

Simons about his motivations for writing poetry:

These arts [music, poetry] which are so often regarded as exhausted are only in their inception. What keeps one alive is the fury of the desire to get somewhere with all of this. (350)

This life-sustaining "fury of the desire to get somewhere" is Stevens's aesthetic motivation. It drives Stevens's poetic mis-steps as well as his poetic innovations, drives him to question conventional aesthetics as well as to question his own aesthetic developments.

Perhaps the best way to construct a working sense of Stevens's aesthetic sensibility in 1935 is by defining the "somewhere" where Stevens so furiously desired to get. What goal did Stevens have for his poetry?

One career-long goal was to link art with life, or, in more Stevensian terms, to demonstrate in his poetry "an interdependence of the imagination and reality as equals" (*The Necessary Angel*, 27). As this August 27, 1940 response to one of Hi Simons's queries indicates, for Stevens "art" and "imagination" were interchangeable terms just as "life" and "reality" were: "Although [The Old Woman and the Statue] deals specifically with the status of art in a period of depression, it is, when generalized, one more confrontation of reality (the depression) and the imagination (art)" (*Letters*, 368). Evidence of this goal to link art to life spans Stevens's poetic career and can be seen as early as *Harmonium* and as late as *The Rock*. By 1935, Stevens had yet

to articulate such a goal in any way other than obscurely and anywhere other than in his poetry; but as immersed as he was in the poetry wars of the 1930s, he was certainly aware of the necessity of such a link and the turbulent aesthetic and political debates that surrounded it.

By the time of "Ordinary Evening in New Haven" in 1950, after a lifetime of trying to chart the contours of art's link to life, Stevens was well aware of the difficulties of the project:

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

More harrassing master would extemporize
Subtler, more urgent proof that the theory
Of poetry is the theory of life,

As it is, in the intricate evasions of as,
In things seen and unseen, created from
nothingness,
The heavens, the hells, the worlds, the longed-for
lands.

(Collected Poems, 486)

This is Stevens at seventy. Even after a lifetime of reckoning with the difficulty of linking art to life, after writing a series of essays on "reality and the imagination," still the link remains tentative and conditional, mitigated by "the intricate evasions of as." But this should not connote failure in any way. In this passage from "Ordinary Evening" Stevens recognizes the circularity of his poetic aspirations and his poetic process: that each poem is merely part of a series of poetic assays toward a goal that he can

only gesture toward by means of a process of continuing essays. "The endlessly elaborating poem" to which he refers is not just "Ordinary Evening in New Haven," but a lifetime of poetry informed by deep reflection on, and participation in, the radically changing notions of artistic beauty--"the theory / Of poetry"--and how such changing notions might somehow constitute a "theory of life."

"Like Decorations" is an early experiment on Stevens's way toward more explicit, more systematic inquiries into the "interdependence of the imagination and reality as equals." In it, Stevens attempts to link art to life before he explicitly articulates or acknowledges this theme in either prose or in "The Man with the Blue Guitar" (1937). Despite being more obscure than either the prose of the 1940s and 50s or "The Man with the Blue Guitar" in the late-1930s, "Like Decorations" is a more personal attempt at linking art to life. In 1934, Stevens was dissatisfied with the state of his poetics and the quality of his poetry. His brand of 1920s art was "out of sync" with 1930s life. His poetic imagination had been especially attuned to 1920s reality, but by the early 1930s the flamboyant, aestheticist poetics of *Harmonium* were out of tune with a reality gripped by world-wide economic depression.

"Like Decorations" is a concerted effort on Stevens's part to re-attune his poetics, to get them into accord with the political, social, and economic exigencies of the 1930s.

This is not to say that Stevens completely abandons the poetics that worked so well for him in the 1920s. When we read "Like Decorations" or any of the poems in *Ideas of Order*, we know immediately that we're reading the poet who wrote *Harmonium*. Instead, "Like Decorations" marks Stevens's difficult transition from the aestheticist poems of *Harmonium* and the 1920s to the more socially relevant poems of *Ideas of Order*.

In the face of sweeping social change, the question that any successful poet must pose to him or herself is, "How do I respond to change while remaining myself?" If, as Stevens indicates throughout *The Necessary Angel*, we agree that what he aspires to most in his art and what he most admires in the art of others is an understanding and a demonstration of the dynamic and complex interplay between imagination and reality, then "Like Decorations in a Nigger Cemetery" can be seen as a successful, if ethically questionable, poetic self-corrective, an attempt at modifying his poetic so that while it regains social relevance, it also maintains continuity with the poetry of his past.

With "Like Decorations," in an effort to re-establish a link between his art and his life, Stevens mimics the aesthetic procedure of African-American grave adornment and applies the procedures of the custom to the state of his poetry and his poetic career. In some sense, employing racial discourse was an easy way for Stevens to demonstrate

the interdependency of imagination and reality. Racist discourse establishes a frighteningly concrete and direct correspondence between imagination and reality. Race is an especially thorny issue in Stevens because, with his highly cultured poetic ambiguity, the degree and depth of his racism is difficult to determine with any verity. Do the racial stereotypes we find in Stevens's poetry and letters stem from a deep-seated hate, from unreflective habit, from insecurity, from modernist primitivism, from a perverse sense of humor? Any of these explanations is plausible.

However, we can safely say that Stevens never understood or employed the conception of "race" in terms of its fictitious or metaphorical qualities. As Henry Louis Gates points out in the introduction to *"Race," Writing, and Difference*, the concept of "race as a meaningful criterion within the biological sciences, has long been recognized to be a fiction. When we speak of 'the white race' or 'the black race,' 'the Jewish race' or 'the Aryan race,' we speak in biological misnomers and, more generally, in metaphors" (4). Despite the wholly imaginary construction of "race," its consequences are very real, and, therefore, Stevens's deployment of racist discourse automatically evokes a complicated relationship between the imagination and reality.

Throughout our history, the term "nigger," while it issues from the imagination, has, along with a host of attendant racial fictions, unjustly determined reality for

vast segments of the population. In terms of Stevens's ideas on the interdependence of the imagination and reality, the term "nigger," probably more than Stevens could ever realize, aids him in presenting and establishing a link between art and life with all its complicated interdependencies. However, the link accomplished by racial discourse hardly attains the positive value or mystical significance that Stevens assigns to links between imagination and reality in his later long poems. If Stevens had applied his own conceptions of the interdependencies of imagination and reality to racism, he might have come to realize the fallacy of such a conceit as "race." While it's highly doubtful that Stevens intentionally employed racial discourse in order to point up its factitiousness or metaphoricality, the poem's origins in Stevens's direct experience of an actual cemetery nevertheless link Stevens's art to life. Regardless of racial discourse's equal participation in both reality and the imagination, it's by means of the anecdotal circumstances surrounding the poem that the imagination on display in "Like Decorations" attains a foothold in reality.

Stevens never came to recognize how supreme a fiction racialism is. Responding to the first question of a *Twentieth Century Verse* questionnaire in 1938, which asked him, "Do you think a representative 'American poetry' exists now, distinct from English poetry, that an 'American tradition' is in [the] process of creation?" Stevens says

that "the relationship between Americans is at least approximately racial, and does not pretend to be anything else".¹⁰ The question mentions nothing about race and asks instead for Stevens's opinion on the formation of an "American tradition," yet Stevens's first impulse is to define America in terms of its race relations. He further explains, "We have the country in common, even if we do not always have each other. This does not make for tradition" (*OP*, 308). His answer here may reflect some of the racial conceptions and figurations that we find in *Ideas of Order*.

There is some play among racial¹¹ boundaries in *Ideas of Order*, as the final stanza of "The Pleasures of Merely Circulating" indicates:

Mrs. Anderson's Swedish baby
Might well have been German or Spanish,
Yet that things go round and again go round
Has rather a classical sound. (*CP*, 150)

Based on this passage alone, we might assume that for Stevens race is but one of many sets of boundaries--political, artistic--that collapse once the ambiguities are explored. But not only is the racial indeterminacy of "Mrs. Anderson's Swedish baby" phrased in a conditional verb mood, the further possibilities of racial identities for the Swedish baby are

¹⁰Stevens, Wallace. *Opus Posthumous*. New York: Knopf, 1989. ed. Bates, Milton J., 308. Hereafter cited in the text as *OP* followed by the page number.

¹¹We can probably assume that for Stevens "nationality" and "race" were one and the same.

curtailed by the "Yet" clause which contains the poem's refrain. We should also note that in Stevens's curtailed speculation into the possible ethnic identities of the "Swedish baby," the play among racial boundaries never crosses from white to black.

With the initial stanza, "Merely Circulating" demonstrates a tendency to generate and exhaust itself in what appears to be an associational process:

The garden flew round with the angel,
The angel flew round with the clouds,
And the clouds flew round and the clouds flew round
And the clouds flew round with the clouds. (150)

And in the second stanza, with the appearance of "cattle skulls in the woods" and "drummers in black hoods," the associations seem to pile up even more freely. By the final, third stanza and the introduction of "Mrs. Anderson's Swedish baby," the reader has come to expect such surprises from the poem. From the associational process demonstrated so far, the reader could, quite plausibly, expect further conjecture on the baby's possible racial identity; the phrase, "German or Spanish," can lead easily to a long list of randomly chosen nationalities. If gardens can fly around with angels and angels fly around with the clouds, then the "baby / might well have been" Pennsylvania Dutch. But after a series of connective and's and or's, the "Yet" stops any further generation of associations.

In "The Pleasures of Merely Circulating," Stevens

presents the reader with a tension between self-generating free associations and the lyric impulse to return to and conclude with a refrain. The lyric impulse's coincidence with the radical racial indeterminacy discovered by the associational process signifies an uneasy co-existence of 1920s aesthete with 1930s sociologist. While Stevens gives the aesthete the last word--"that things go round and again go round / Has rather a classical sound"--after the radical suggestion of a collapse in racial boundaries, such a summation sounds premature and perhaps superficially imposed. The aesthete and the sociologist undercut one another, and in so doing, create just the type of Stevensian ambiguity that Stanley Burnshaw characterized as "screeching...confusion" (*New Masses* 42). The effect of such ambiguity is that the association of aesthetics with sociology resonates strangely. The aesthete's return to the refrain may be read as either an attempt at avoiding the logical conclusion of the racial indeterminacy or as a welcome reprieve from endless social theorizing. In either case, the poem's highly ironic tone points toward the mere circularity of both the aesthete's poetry and the sociologist's theories.

Importantly for "Like Decorations," though Stevens concedes the possibility of racial indeterminacy for a Swedish baby, he does not extend even the merest possibility of racial indeterminacy to the nonwhite. In Stevens's poetry, while it's rare to find any term or figure whose

value remains fixed, certain ethnic figures in his poetry attain stable figurative, and even qualitative values. "The rabbi," for instance, is generally a figure with positive associations for Stevens. However, except for Stevens's extremely attenuated and problematic identification with the cemetery decorators in "Like Decorations," the Black remains wholly other, and, in terms of his changing poetic, it's necessary that the Black figure remain wholly other.

These ethnic types attain figurative and qualitative stability because they are parts of a larger shift in Stevens's poetics. In Stevens we find a constant tension between sensualism and asceticism--or in Harold Bloom's terms, "Hoon" and "The Snow Man" (*Poems of our Climate*). Various figures and tropes come reliably to represent each side of this binary tension. Because I will refer to these various figures with some frequency, for clarity's sake I provide this chart:

ASCETICISM	SENSUALISM
"The Snow Man"	"Hoon"
"Rabbi"	"Black"
North	South
Winter	Summer
Autumn	Spring
Northern Place Names (Scandinavia, New England)	Southern Place Names (Florida, Havana, Africa)
Fallen Leaves	Floral Imagery

Sun	Moon
Sky	Earth
Rock	Mud
Masculine	Feminine
Philosopher	Aesthete (Connoisseur)
Classical	Romantic
Reason	Imagination
Crow	Oriole
Abstraction	Decoration
Culture	Nature
High Art	"low art" (folk art, The Primitive)

In the poems of *Harmonium*, this tension is unresolved; neither the sensualist side of the tension nor the asceticist side wins out. Again, as with Mrs. Anderson's baby, there is some indeterminacy between these opposing terms, especially the more abstract terms such as philosophy, realism, musicality, or rationalism.

Such ambiguity is quite evident, as in section VIII of "Eight Significant Landscapes"¹² published in 1916:

Rationalists, wearing square hats,
 Think, in square rooms,
 Looking at the floor,
 Looking at the ceiling.
 They confine themselves
 To right-angled triangles.
 If they tried rhomboids,
 Cones, waving lines, ellipses--
 As, for example, the ellipse of the half-moon--

¹² "Six Significant Landscapes" (CP, 73) is a later version of this poem. Sections V and VII were deleted from the original.

Rationalists would wear sombreros. (OP, 23)

Similar play exists in two sections of "Like Decorations" as well:

IX

In a world of universal poverty
The philosophers alone will be fat
Against autumn winds
In an autumn that will be perpetual. (CP, 152)

XXV

From oriole to crow, note the decline
In music. Crow is realist. But, then,
Oriole, also, may be realist. (CP, 154)

In *Ideas of Order*, however--either to regain some measure of social relevance or in response to accusations of social irrelevance--Stevens tempers some of his more frivolous sensualistic impulses. In "Eight Significant Landscapes" (1916), it's the "rationalists"--squarely on the side of asceticism--who need to loosen up a bit, regard the moon, and wear sombreros, an accoutrement, significantly for Stevens, from South of the border. By contrast, in 1935 and section IX from "Like Decorations," there is no need for the philosophers--figures, like the rationalists, from the ascetic side of the binary tension--to modify themselves. "A world of universal poverty" makes the philosophers so at home that they become "fat / Against autumn winds" (152). Even more markedly, a figure like the oriole, from the sensualistic side of the binary, reverses the process that

the rationalists undergo in the earlier poem. While the rationalists' sombreros signify a partial shift from the ascetic to the sensual, the oriole, by crossing over from pure musicality to realism--not unlike Stevens in the 1930s--moves from the sensual to the ascetic.

After *Harmonium*, Stevens begins to tip the scales in favor of asceticism. Or, at the very least, he begins to make finer distinctions between different degrees of sensualism, some of which, as demonstrated by the oriole, are permissible. There is markedly less play, however, with the ethnic figures of the black and the rabbi. The black figure can reliably be associated with the sensualistic, "Hoon" side of this binary tension, and just as reliably, the rabbinical figure can be associated with "The Snow Man" or asceticist side of the binary. As Stevens adjusts his poetic from the 1920s to the 1930s, he no longer permits himself or his poetry the type of sensualism he associates with the Black.

In 1917, with "In the South," the earliest appearance of a black figure in his poetry, Stevens simply reports the activities of the nonwhite: "The black mother of eleven children /...hangs her quilt under the pine-trees" (*OP*, 27). As Aldon Nielsen points out in *Reading Race*, the appearance of the black mother "fits into Stevens's pattern of employing nonwhites as local color" (62). In turn, Stevens's pattern of employing the female nonwhite also fits into a more general trend in the aesthetics of International Modernism.

One of the clearest articulations of this trend comes from the Art History criticism of Carol Duncan. In her article, "Virility and Domination in Early 20th-Century Vanguard Painting," she identifies a dichotomy common in the vanguard's visual representations of women in the 1900s and 1910s (*Feminism and Art History*, 293-313). Duncan's now famous "Man/Culture-Woman/Nature dichotomy" corresponds closely with the female nonwhite's place in Stevens's tension between asceticism and sensuality (303).

In keeping with the terms of both the Asceticism / Sensualism binary and the Man/Culture-Woman/Nature dichotomy, Stevens associates the black mother of "In the South" with the sensual by remarking upon her fecundity and the decorative pattern of the quilt: "There is a connection between the colors, / The shapes of the patches, / And the eleven children..." (*OP*, 27). In another early poem (1919), "Exposition of the Contents of a Cab,"¹³ Stevens takes more liberties with "Victoria Clementina, negress" as she "[takes] seven white dogs / to ride in a cab" (*OP*, 41). As he does with the black mother hanging her quilt, Stevens also considers Victoria Clementina's personal relationship with decorations. "Exposition of the Contents of a Cab," however, has more to do with sexuality than with fecundity. Rather than connecting the decorative patterns of the quilt to the

¹³ This was one of the three poems that Stevens chose not to include in the re-issue of *Harmonium* in 1930, the version of *Harmonium* in the *Collected Poems*.

black mother's eleven children, Stevens stereotypically connects "savage" sexuality to the decoration of Victoria's undergarments:

She too is flesh,
And a breech-cloth might wear,
Netted of topaz and ruby
And savage blooms; (OP, 41)

Here, the vaginal imagery and libidinal excess of "savage blooms" coincides so closely with the decorative that the black, the decorative, the feminine, and the primitive all become roughly equivalent terms. While Victoria Clementina isn't nude, Duncan's generalizations concerning the images of female nudity by the vanguard painters correspond strikingly with what we find in "Expositions of the Contents of a Cab":

Most images of female nudity imply the presence (in the artist and/or the viewer) of a male sexual appetite. What distinguishes these pictures and others of this period from most previous nudes is the compulsion with which women are reduced to objects of pure flesh. (*Feminism and Art History*, 298, emphasis mine)

Stevens's statement, "she too is flesh," further aligns him with the pattern of female representations in the visual art of Duncan's early 20th-century vanguard.

Not surprisingly, Stevens's representation of Victoria Clementina is more sexually inhibited and adolescent than are the representations of women by Duncans' vanguard painters. Stevens plays on the word "Exposition" (The poem is an "Exposition of," rather than an exposition on); as Victoria climbs into the cab she momentarily *exposes* herself, and

Stevens takes the opportunity to peek up her skirt.

Stevens's unobtrusive, opportunistic voyeurism contrasts with the more mature, if domineering, gaze of artists like Erich Heckel, Edvard Munch, and Ernst Kirchner who present their images of women as unabashedly nude and voraciously sexual objects. Despite the low level of sexual maturity on display in "Exposition," Stevens nevertheless exposes more than Victoria's underwear. In the final stanza--in contrast to the example of Victoria's "racy" topaz and ruby underclothes --he exposes stereotypical "white" sexual inhibition, signified by more modest "linen":

What breech-cloth might you wear,
Except linen, embroidered
By elderly women? (OP, 41)

In emphasizing this presumed difference between white and black sexual appetites, Stevens differs from the painters who comprise Duncan's vanguard. For the European vanguard painters, sexual excess is inherently female; for Stevens, on the other hand, sexual excess is *Black and female*.

In these early poems, even with all the offensive stereotyping, Stevens never implies the superiority of the white over the black. Rather, with little interference or value judgements from the poet, he allows the tension between stereotypical white asceticism and black sensualism to resonate as a tension in its own right. In the original *Harmonium* of 1923, Stevens placed unfettered sensuality alongside sober asceticism and reaped the interesting poetic

results. But beginning in 1930, with "Two at Norfolk"--a poem written to be newly included in Knopf's re-release of *Harmonium*--there's a remarkable coincidence of the imperative mood with black figures. Stevens orders the black figures to work: "Mow the grass in the cemetery, darkies / Study the symbols and the requiescats" (CP, 111). This imperative mood marks a change from earlier appearances of black figures. More than likely, the controlling tone of the imperatives is Stevens's attempt to rein in some of the unfettered sensualism of the earlier version of *Harmonium*. In light of Stevens's newly-tempered sensualism, it's interesting to note that one of the three poems omitted from the 1930 re-issue of *Harmonium* was "Exposition of the Contents of a Cab."

The new tone may also indicate Stevens's assumed mastery over his black figures' range of signification. Before, with the black mother of "In the South" and with Victoria Clementina, Stevens allows his black figures some measure of agency and reports with interest on the actions they perform. With the patches of the quilt, the black mother displays the capacity for artistic creation, and Victoria Clementina demonstrates the capacity for surprise. While Stevens's use of racial stereotypes limits the range of these figures' agency, the slight measure of agency he grants them results in enough ambiguity to allow for significant resonance in their contrast with terms from the ascetic side of the Asceticism / Sensualism binary.

In the earlier poems, at least, the black figures were included in the drama of the poem. By 1930, and "Two at Norfolk," however, Stevens abandons even the simple task of elaborating on black racial stereotypes. In "Two at Norfolk," the racial epithet alone, "darkies," is meant to provide readers with the full range of significance needed for an understanding of the mowers' place in the poem. The mowers care for the appropriate "funereal" flora and provide Stevens with figures whose ignorance of the secret lives of the dead allows the poet to divulge the dead's secrets to the reader. After ordering the black workers to set the scene, he then presents the real drama of the poem: a love affair between the dead.

If, in "Two at Norfolk," Stevens uses the imperative voice to tell blacks what to do, in a later poem from *Ideas of Order*, "Some Friends from Pascagoula," he tells them what to say and how to say it:

Tell me more of the eagle, Cotton,
And you black Sly,
Tell me how he descended
Out of the morning sky.

Describe with deepened voice
And noble imagery
His slowly falling round
Down to the fishy sea. (CP, 126)

Here, Stevens asserts strict control over what Cotton and Sly bring to the poem. By exerting mastery over the black figures of "Two at Norfolk" and "Some Friends from Pascagoula," Stevens expunges from his poetry the strain of

unbridled sensualism which threatened forever to render him an irrelevant, poetic anachronism. In speculations on the degree and manner of Stevens's racism, it's a telling bit of evidence that the figure who bears the brunt of Stevens's poetic adjustment from the 1920s to the 1930s is the figure of the African-American.

Giving up The Alcestis Press must be to you what giving up any idea of writing poetry would be to me.

--Wallace Stevens to Ronald Lane Latimer, May 6, 1937

Wallace Stevens is remembered by Harmonium; he is no longer a living poet.

--Edwin Rolfe, Partisan Review, May, 1935

III.

What Possessed Stevens to Name a Poem

"Like Decorations in a Nigger Cemetery"?

The callousness of the title, "Like Decorations in a Nigger Cemetery," may have less to do with Stevens's dismissal of African-American folk art than with his unreflective acceptance and ironic adoption of the racial discourse of Judge Arthur Powell, Stevens's friend, Southern guide, and informant. The title would sound to Stevens like Judge Arthur Powell's gentrified, earthy, and figurative Southern White racial discourse. In "Two at Norfolk" and "Some friends from Pascagoula," we've also seen how Stevens dominates the figure of the black in order to exert mastery over those poems' significance. In order to regain mastery over his poetry after over a decade of near-silence, Stevens may be playing a dual role in "Like Decorations": both poetic master and poetic slave. The metaphor of the title has a racist relationship with the ensuing fifty sections. In

effect, the title masters the fifty sections, causing them always to be read in light of the title's domination.

In order to more fully understand what possessed Stevens to name a poem "Like Decorations in a Nigger Cemetery," it will be useful to look at the poem's anecdotal origins. And while proceeding in such a way delays discussion of the poem itself, the delay is necessary in order to unpack the densely significant title.

Peter Brazeau's oral biography, *Parts of a World: Wallace Stevens Remembered*, provides the circumstances surrounding the poem's inception. Brazeau gives Judge Arthur Powell's recollections of the poem's origins and his reflections on it:

"We were walking in Key West," the Judge recalled, "when I stopped to look through a fence. I explained that I thought it contained a graveyard, as some of the rubbish looked 'like decorations in a nigger cemetery.' He was interested when I explained the custom of negroes to decorate graves with broken pieces of glass, old pots, broken pieces of furniture, dolls' heads and what not. The poem itself is an olio, and the title is fitting."
(100-101)

As the Judge's taste in literature and his own verse indicate, his literary proclivities tended toward traditional formalism, so it's only natural that his comments would explain more about the formal analogy that "Like Decorations" makes with the actual cemetery than the nature and specifics of Stevens's interest in the decorations. It's likely that Stevens's interest in the cemetery was met with the same off-

hand tone that Powell used to explain the poem's inception. Not offended by racist terms in the least, Stevens picked up this tone as an appropriate way for a gentleman to refer to such things.

On December 6, 1934, when Stevens sent the poem to Morton Zabel at *Poetry*, he knew the poem's title required a quick gloss, and he made it clear that he was borrowing from Powell: "The title refers to the litter one usually finds in a nigger cemetery and is a phrase used by Judge Powell last winter in Key West" (*Letters*, 272). But in this brief gloss on the title, Stevens borrows more than just Powell's words. He also adopts Powell's attitude. When Stevens wrote to Zabel, he had been familiar with this type of cemetery decoration for only a year, and his discovery of the custom sparked his interest, so the familiarity in the phrase, "the litter one usually finds," sounds affected and incongruous coming from Stevens. Perhaps Powell "usually" found such "litter," but for Stevens there was nothing usual about this cemetery.

The condescending tone and insensitivity of the title and Stevens's explanation of it understandably offend many readers. But Stevens's attitude disguises, I think, his initial interest and the deep and very real effect that viewing the cemetery and its decorations had upon him.

Powell may have treated Stevens's interest in the cemetery with the same condescension with which he describes

the cemetery. Stevens, no doubt, found this an apt attitude to take with regard to the quality and the amount of poetry he was producing. James Longenbach has termed the time between the first publication of *Harmonium* and the publication of *Ideas of Order*, 1923-1935, as Stevens's "Second Silence." During this span of a dozen years Stevens concentrated on his insurance career and his family--Holly Stevens was born in 1924--rather than on adjusting his poetics to account for a changing world. By the end of his "silence," Stevens found himself with a lot of poetic catching up to do. Like the title, "Like Decorations in a Nigger Cemetery," the following letter to Harriet Monroe characterizes Stevens's attitude toward his poetry at this time:

August 5, 1932

Dear Miss Monroe:

Whatever else I do, I do not write poetry nowadays.

Some time ago *Contempo* wrote to me and I looked round and found a few *scraps*, which I sent to it. I don't know what would happen if, shortly after telling you I had not a thing to my name, *Contempo* should come out containing what I sent.

With that possibility in mind, I am enclosing another *scrap*, but it is the best I can do. If it is of no use, don't hesitate to say so. Of course, I shall be furious. But what of it? The egotism of poets is disgusting.

I wish it were possible for me to come to the aid of Poetry. But I have been most extravagant recently. Besides, I have a pretty well-developed mean streak anyhow. (*Letters*, 262, emphasis mine)

It's probably safe to infer from Stevens's letter to

Harriet Monroe that she had asked Stevens to "come to the aid of *Poetry*" because, as Alan Filreis thoroughly documents in *Modernism Right to Left*, the politics of its editorial policy was coming under heavy criticism from the left (Letters, 262). With Stevens's awareness of the growing political factionalism in the literary world, and with his demonstrated resistance to poets and critics who belonged to "groups" (a term which Stevens employs in his letters with derogatory connotations, 309), he would naturally want to avoid being lumped into a "group" himself.

As far as his poetry was concerned, Stevens wanted to keep his options open. If he were to cast his lot entirely with *Poetry*, and if *Poetry* were to fail to come out on top of the poetry wars of the 1930s, then his poetry could be dismissed not only as the work of a member of a "group," but also as the work of a member of the losing side. To a poet as committed to ambiguity as Stevens, nothing could be more distasteful than taking sides. Stevens knew that coming "to the aid of *Poetry*" would significantly limit his options as a poet. No amount of personal loyalty--and he had a great deal where Monroe was concerned--would cause him to compromise himself by choosing sides.

But even if Stevens *had* been willing to "come to the aid of *Poetry*," it's doubtful, considering the state of his poetry at the time, that he'd have been much help.

The "scraps" to which he refers in his letter to Monroe

are "The Woman Who Blamed Life on a Spaniard" (*Contempo*, III, December 15, 1932) and "Good Man, Bad Woman" (*Poetry*, XLI, October 1932). Stevens is right to refer to them as scraps; these poems are far from his best work. They seem to be pieced together out of fragments of *Harmonium*. While they exhibit all of Stevens's characteristic language play, their surface effects serve as camouflage for the imaginative poverty at their core.

In both of these "scraps" from the early 1930s, he reprises the rhetorical successes in the more pathos-laden moments of the poems of *Harmonium*. The effect, however, is sterile self-parody. For instance, a comparison of a moment from "Sunday Morning" with a moment from these "scraps" from 1932 should demonstrate rhetorical similarities along with a stark decline in emotional resonance. Consider the masterful and wonderfully emotive problem and solution from this passage of "Sunday Morning":

She says, "But in contentment I still feel
The need of some imperishable bliss."
Death is the mother of beauty; hence from her,
Alone, shall come fulfillment to our dreams
And our desires. (CP, 68-69)

Compare the similar problem and solution in "The Woman Who Blamed Life on a Spaniard":

How, then, if nothing more than vanity
Is at the bottom of her as pique-pain
And picador? Be briny-blooded bull.
(OP, 66)

While there are probably thirteen ways of looking at

this self-parody, I'd like to briefly speculate on only two ways of looking at it, and in so doing, reconstruct Stevens's attitude toward the state of his poetry, from which "Like Decorations" arises.

One could view the echoes of "Sunday Morning" in "The Woman Who Blamed Life on a Spaniard" as unintentional. This view is quite plausible. In 1930, Stevens revisited *Harmonium* at the behest of Alfred Knopf, who wanted to reissue the volume with some additional poems.¹⁴ With *Harmonium* still fresh in his mind, this 1932 echo of "Sunday Morning" may have been inadvertent. Certainly the strained alliteration of "pique-pain/ And picador? Be briny-blooded bull" rivals the frivolity of anything in *Harmonium*.

But what if Stevens is deliberately mocking "Sunday Morning," one of *Harmonium*'s less frivolous successes? This bit of speculation is interesting--especially with respect to Stanley Burnshaw's "Turmoil in the Middle Ground" (1935). If Stevens is mocking himself in "The Woman Who Blamed life on a Spaniard," then in 1932 he may be anticipating Burnshaw's point about the verse in *Harmonium*: "It is [the type of] verse Stevens can no longer write" (*New Masses*, 42). As we have seen, referring to the state of his poetry in 1932,

¹⁴Knopf wrote to Stevens in the spring of 1930. Stevens responded on October 16 that same year. Stevens chose to maintain the order of the first printing of *Harmonium* and omitted three poems: "The Silver Plough Boy"; "Exposition of the Contents of a Cab"; and "Architecture." He added nine poems, written, as a letter from July 21, 1930 indicates, between late-July and early October 1930 (*Letters*, 258). They appear in the *Collected Poems* 96-112.

Stevens communicated a similarly harsh version of this same sentiment to Harriet Monroe: "Whatever else I do, I do not write poetry nowadays" (*Letters*, 262). As Stevens indicated to Lincoln Kirstein, the editor of *Hound and Horn*, writing the additions to *Harmonium* was slow-going: "The truth is that I am supposed to be writing poetry this summer: actually I am doing anything but" (258). Was part of Stevens's difficulty due to the untimely task of revisiting and writing *Harmonium*-type poems less than a year after the Stock Market crash?

Whether Stevens echoes "Sunday Morning" inadvertently or mocks it intentionally, in 1932, the spiritual crisis of "Sunday Morning" would seem to many like a bit of indulgent reverie. There was much less "contentment" to go around, and correspondingly, markedly less "imperishable bliss." But however trivial the "complacencies of the peignoir" and searches for paradise might have seemed in the face of the Great Depression, "Sunday Morning" remained as masterful a poem in 1932 as it was in 1917. These lines from "The Woman Who Blamed Life on a Spaniard" may reflect the equivocality of Stevens's re-assessment of his fifteen-year-old "masterpiece":

Perhaps at so much mastery, the bliss
She needs will come consolingly. Alas,
It is a most spectacular role, and yet
Less than contending with fictitious doom. (OP, 66-67)

Whether this is an intentional comment on, or unintentional reprisal of some of, the key themes of "Sunday Morning" ("the

need of some imperishable bliss," and the poet's attempt to provide such bliss while simultaneously questioning the "fictitious doom" of the Judeo-Christian tradition and its ability to provide personal fulfillment), this echo or appraisal demonstrate Stevens's awareness of the problematic status of a poetry that centers on such themes. In light of the actual doom of the Great Depression, the pathos of "Sunday Morning" that results from the juxtaposition of "late coffee and oranges" with "the holy hush of ancient sacrifice"--albeit "spectacular"--might well seem like "contending with fictitious doom" (CP 65, 66 & OP 67). At this time there was plenty of "need," but for the masses of hungry and homeless, "bliss" was not the prime necessity. In light of what Burnshaw called in 1935 "the murderous world collapse," more poetry along the lines of "Sunday Morning" would be irrelevant and unnecessary. Though the poem remains masterful, what was profound in 1917 would seem to many--including, perhaps, Stevens--like "nothing more than vanity" in 1932 (OP, 66).

Section II of "The Woman Who Blamed Life on a Spaniard" mimics the movement of sections IV and V of "Sunday Morning":

She says, "I am content when wakened birds,
Before they fly, test the reality
Of misty fields, by their sweet questionings;
But when the birds are gone, and their warm fields
Return no more, where, then, is paradise?"
There is not any haunt of prophecy,
Nor any old chimera of the grave,
Neither the golden underground, nor isle
Melodious, where spirits gat them home....
(CP, 68)

"Spaniard" refigures this problem/(re)solution format between the questioning "She" and the answering voice of the poet. In "Spaniard," the exchange between paramour and poet becomes an absurd, sexualized, poetic bullfight:

The babble of generations magnifies
A mot into a dictum, communal,
Of inescapable force, itself a fate.
How, then, if nothing more than vanity
Is at the bottom of her as pique-pain
and picador? Be briny-blooded bull.
Flutter your lance with your tempestuous dust,
Make melic groans and tooter at her strokes,
Rage in the ring and shake the corridors. (CP, 66)

Somehow from 1917 to 1932, the *bon* "mot" of "Sunday Morning" "magnifie[d]...into a dictum," whose "inescapable force" now compels the poet/bull (in other words, Stevens) to "make melic groans and tooter at her strokes." It's probably safe to assume that one of the antecedents of the "her" is Harriet Monroe, the picador jabbing Stevens in the side for more poems. In 1930, Stevens wrote what later became part III of "Spaniard" as a Christmas gift for Monroe, so upon returning to the poem, Monroe naturally would be on Stevens's mind (Letters, 260). The different tone of part II, written after part III, may reflect Stevens's growing resentment toward his poetic obligations and frustration with the quality and amount of his poetry. Part II reads as the frank poetic underside of the apologetic tone we find in the letters of this period. Perhaps Stevens--finding his poetic out of tune

with the tenor of the times, and in dire need of renovation to accommodate the times--had come to resent his obligations to editors and publishers dunning him for more poetry along the lines of Harmonium. Perhaps he resented the obligation of having to publish poems that he felt weren't up to snuff and might therefore damage his already-shaky reputation as a poet, or perhaps Stevens resented being "type-cast" as the poet of "Sunday Morning." In any case, by 1935 and the end of his silence, Stevens had gained some perspective on his poetic difficulties, as this passage from "Sailing After Lunch," the opening poem of the Alcestis edition of *Ideas of Order*, indicates:

But I am, in any case,
A most inappropriate man
In a most unpropitious place. (CP, 120)

No doubt these lines characterize Stevens's attitude towards himself as a poet as his obligations grew and his ability to meet them in a satisfactory manner diminished.

Two or three years prior to "Like Decorations," in "Spaniard," Stevens had cast himself as a bull who made "melic groans" at a picador's prompts. "Like Decorations" recasts the poet and his poetry in the dynamics of racial politics--a dynamic similar to the domination and subjugation one finds in a bullfight, only much less absurd.

Given the state of Stevens's poetry and his attitude toward his poetry in the year or so prior to viewing the Key West cemetery with Judge Powell, the apt analogy he offers in the jarring title between the cemetery and his

poetry makes perfect sense--from Stevens's point of view, at least--and explains why Stevens was "interested" in Judge Powell's explanation (*Parts of a World*, 101).

In 1934, as Stevens and Judge Powell were looking at the cemetery, Stevens may have experienced "the sense of death and fatal chill" that Vendler identifies as the "subject" of "Like Decorations"; in Stevens's reflection on this experience, an analogy took form between the state of his poetry and the look of the cemetery. (*On Extended Wings*, 66). As Stevens indicates to Harriet Monroe, his poetic process at the time was very similar to the process of decorating the cemetery: "I looked round and found a few scraps" (*Letters*, 262). But Stevens's nonchalance here is deceptive. At times during the "Second Silence," the "death" of his poetic career must have seemed imminent to him, and so the degree of his emotional investment in this process of looking "round" and finding "a few scraps" would certainly be higher than the tone he uses to describe the process would suggest.

Toward the end of Stevens's "Second Silence," with the frequent demands placed upon him for more poetry, and with an inadequate supply of poetry to satisfy those demands, the artistic emphasis for Stevens was upon the act of finding poems and choosing from among his poetic leftovers rather than upon composing new poetry. He was in a state of poetic and imaginative poverty. With so little poetry to go around, Stevens couldn't afford to make submission decisions lightly.

Thus, although he knew the "scraps" to be substandard, never did Stevens's poetry come at so high a premium. While it's true that one can only speculate on the effect that viewing the cemetery had upon Stevens, there is little doubt that the trip to Key West, in February 1934, had a generative and reinvigorating effect upon his verse. From this trip came "Idea of Order at Key West" and "Like Decorations in a Nigger Cemetery." And from these two poems came the rest of *Ideas of Order*. It's my guess that viewing and reflecting upon the cemetery provided Stevens with a powerfully personal analog for the near-death experience from which his poetic career would eventually emerge.

In 1934, Stevens had to find a way to write innovative poetry that could transform his poetic difficulties into assets. At the same time, he also had to find a way to deal with his marginal status in the milieu of 1930s poetry. As it so happened, the Key West graveyard demonstrated both the transformation of "scraps" into significant symbols and the diminished status of a marginalized art form. Following the cemetery's example, "Like Decorations in a Nigger Cemetery" turns "scraps" into poetry and helps Stevens deal with his marginal status as a poet. Though Stevens directly confronts his marginal status in several sections of the poem, the title is the most immediate such confrontation. The title, we remember, is a direct quote of Judge Arthur Powell's aesthetic pronouncement on the inferiority of the "rubbish"

that adorned the cemetery (*Parts of a World*, 100). The title's offensive term "nigger," while it may signify Stevens's too-ready acceptance of the Judge's racial discourse, does not signify an entirely unreflective acceptance. Indeed, few other terms in our language carry the power of "nigger" to effect such instant marginalization. By quoting Powell's use of the term, Stevens aligns himself with the decorators as a subject of marginalization. Although the title sounds racist, it is instead a problematic assertion of Stevens's identification with the decorators: what Stevens saw as his and the decorators' shared marginal status.

Of course we should acknowledge that the marginal status of an entire group of people has much more drastically destructive effects than the marginal status of a poet's verse. But if we can sympathize with Stevens for just a moment, perhaps we can see how closely the dynamics of racial prejudice and hasty aesthetic judgements resemble one another. With the eyes and ears of a northerner, Stevens simultaneously saw the decorations and heard a hasty aesthetic judgement informed by nothing other than deep-seated prejudice. The Judge's aesthetic ruling instantly reduced and marginalized the aesthetic qualities of the decorations and the value Stevens saw in them. By using someone else's assessment of a similar aesthetic procedure to launch the poetic "scraps" of "Like Decorations," Stevens

immediately acknowledges the marginal status of his verse in the 1930s. The title's prejudiced source casts doubt upon the cause of his marginality. Is his diminished status the result of his verse, or the aesthetic prejudices of the verse's context? With some of the bashing Stevens took from critics' hasty dismissals of his work, he could easily identify with the cemetery's decorators as Judge Powell dismissed their decorations.

Still, while Stevens's identification with the cemetery's decorators was personally profound, a good portion of the analogy proceeds from racist, or at the very least, Eurocentric assumptions on Stevens's part. Stevens made the mistake of identifying with the cemetery's decorators on the level of poverty. The analogy he makes in "Like Decorations" runs something like this: "Just as this cemetery displays the economic poverty of its decorators, so these poetic decorations display my imaginative poverty."¹⁵ But just as it's a mistake to assume that, by referring to his poems as "scraps," Stevens cared little for the state of his poetry at this time, it's also a mistake to assume that the appearance of the cemetery was merely a function of intellectual or economic poverty of its decorators. Rather than a symptom of poverty, African tradition, spirituality, and deep personal significance accounted for the manner and type of the Key

¹⁵A less sympathetic reading of Stevens's racism would assume that Stevens saw intellectual poverty in the decorations as well.

West cemetery's decorations.

If we assume that the Judge's description of the cemetery's decorations is accurate--"broken pieces of glass, old pots, broken pieces of furniture, dolls heads, and what not"--then the two men viewed a style of grave adornment whose traditions can be traced to the Bakongo and Angola. Robert Farris Thompson, in "Kongo Influences on African-American Artistic Culture," notes that "the graves of North American Blacks [exhibit] a set of Kongo and Angola formal influences" (*Africanisms in American Culture*, 167). What Judge Powell calls "what not" were actually, according to Thompson, "conceptual doors to another universe" and "an intricate field of mediatory signs" (167). Thompson goes on to say that

The function of these signs, sometimes materially simple but conceptually very rich, anticipated several aims of modern Western art. Powerful analogies exist, for example, between the "readymades" of Marcel Duchamp and objects placed on Kongo and African-American graves--stopped clocks, telephones with receivers off the hook, shorn handlebars, anchors. Like Duchamp, Bakongo seek to impose a fourth dimension upon the three dimensionality of ordinary things. But the placement of a sewing machine or an umbrella on a Kongo grave establishes more than aesthetic surprise and expressive potentiality through unusual juxtapositions. When such objects are the last things used by the dead, they are believed to be impregnated with traces of the spirit, traces that may be used to persuade the dead to release their talents in dreams and inspiration to the benefit of their descendants. (167)

While Stevens was probably not well-informed on the tradition behind these African traditions, his knowledge of,

and participation in, modern Western art would certainly have prepared him for the aesthetic sophistication of the Key West cemetery. Stevens was certainly no cultural anthropologist. In "Like Decorations," Stevens applies his "well-developed mean streak" to an "olio" of his own poetic "scraps" (*Letters*, 262 and *Parts of a World*, 101). With the sequence poems of *Harmonium* and their "unusual juxtapositions" from segment to segment, Stevens had already engaged in a poetic procedure closely analogous to the African-American tradition of grave adornment (*Africanisms in American Culture*, 167). "Like Decorations," however, pushes this poetic procedure further than earlier sequence poems like "The Plot Against the Giant," "Six Significant Landscapes," "New England Verses," or "Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird." These *Harmonium* poems were innovative in that they registered the kind "aesthetic surprise" and "expressive potentiality" that Thompson mentions (167). Certainly "Like Decorations" exhibits these same qualities, but in one important respect it's also a radical departure from these earlier sequence poems. By mimicking--with his own verse--the African tradition of grave adornment, Stevens accomplishes a level of pathos unprecedented either in any of his previous sequence poems or in any of Duchamp's "readymades."

In the next chapter we can look with considerably more detail at the poem itself. I will specifically discuss the poem's pathos, its origins in earlier poems, and its

participation in the 1930s poetry wars. My delay of the direct consideration of the poem has been necessary in order to define a broader critical context for the poem, to understand the Black figure's role within Stevens's earlier poetry, and to account for the immensely problematic issues raised by the poem's title. I've proceeded in such a way to provide as thorough an account of the poem's background as possible. Without some sense of what possessed Stevens to name a poem "Like Decorations in a Nigger Cemetery," a close reading of the poem seems somehow incomplete. I also wanted to give credit to the African-Americans who decorated the Key West graveyard before praising Stevens's poetic ingenuity. Given the undoubtedly generative effect that "Like Decorations" had upon Stevens's ability to compose new poetry, acknowledging that debt seems only fair. And it's interesting to note that Stevens's mimicry of African grave adornment had the same effect upon his verse as the actual cemetery decorations are meant to have upon those who survive the dead. If "Like Decorations" marks the burial of the poet and the poetics of *Harmonium*, then the poem also persuades the now-dead poetic of the 1920s to release its poetic vigor for the benefit of the poet of the 1930s and *Ideas of Order*.

Many readers in the 1930s were unsympathetic to Stevens not so much because his politics did not lean far enough to the left but because he did not offer a catastrophic vision of gloom and doom.

--James Longenbach, The Plain Sense of Things

IV.

I Placed a Cubist Poem in the Depression:

"Like Decorations in a Nigger Cemetery"--

A "Readymade" with Pathos

In 1919, when he writes, "I placed a jar in Tennessee," Stevens used poetry to both mimic and describe the process of making a readymade (CP, 76). In late 1934, when Stevens submitted "Like Decorations" to *Poetry*, the effect of the later poem was much the same as "Anecdote" because its structural trope resembled that of a readymade. In the milieu of 1930s poetry, "Like Decorations" seemed just as out of place as a jar on a hill in Tennessee or a urinal on a wall in an art exhibition (Duchamp's *Fountain*, 1917). Smack in the middle of the Great Depression, *Poetry* placed a list of fifty imagistic fragments proposing to be like a form of cemetery decoration with which most readers would be unfamiliar. Because these fragments were written by one of the foremost poetic dandies and aesthetes of the 1920s, the seldom-heard-from Wallace Stevens, the source of these

fragments further underscored their contrast with the 1930s. The poem, like the jar, was "like nothing else" in the poetry of the depression (CP, 76). Because of the poem's contrast with its context, and also due to the personal and aesthetic history behind the poem's structural trope, we can accurately identify "Like Decorations in a Nigger Cemetery" as a "readymade with pathos."

As for the personal history behind the poem's structural trope, we find the context surrounding the beginnings of the poem in a letter to Elsie Stevens dated February 23, 1934. Stevens records the walk (or at least a similar such walk during the same trip) with Judge Powell during which they viewed the Key West cemetery (*Letters*, 268).¹⁶ "Like Decorations" was not ready for publication until December 6, 1934, thus Stevens spent nine full months pondering the analogy between the cemetery decorations and the diminished state of his poetry. When Stevens finally sent the poem to Morton Zabel at *Poetry*, the poet said of his submission, "If you do not like these, do not hesitate to say so. It is very difficult for me to find the time to write poetry, and most of these were written on the way to and from the office" (*Letters*, 272). The autumnal imagery that pervades the poem literally reflects what Stevens saw in Hartford's landscape

¹⁶This letter also mentions the Casa Marina, where the *Wyoming* was anchored at the time, one of the details upon which James Longenbach constructs the political context surrounding "Idea of Order at Key West" (*Plain Sense of Things*, 155-163).

as he composed the poem "to and from the office."

In other correspondence of the early 1930s, we have seen that Stevens alludes to his poetic difficulties by referring to his poetry as "scraps" (262). During this time, Stevens's creative emphasis was upon the act of finding poetry rather than upon composing it, and, emotionally, Stevens was deeply invested in this process of finding and choosing from among his poetic leftovers (262). These details in the personal history behind the poem characterize both Stevens's emotional investment in the poem and the compositional process that created a poem made of fifty "scraps." The process behind the poem's composition is so closely connected to Stevens's feelings surrounding the state of his poetry that the poem's structure reflects the poem's pathos.

Alan Filreis calls the result of this compositional process, "a structural trope of *found art*" and says further that the poem "challengingly consists of stanzas-as-found-objects" (*Modernism from Right to Left*, 100, 101, his emphasis). Consistent with Filreis's identification of the poem as a collection of "found objects," I term "Like Decorations" a "readymade." Because the poem re-enacts Stevens's arduous culling through of his poetic "scraps"--perhaps while mourning his past poetic stature--the poem evokes pathos as it mimics the process of a readymade. These pathos-laden "stanzas-as-found-objects" are so offensively titled that some may lose sight of the deep emotional

investment in each of the stanzas/objects that Stevens "found" on his way to and from work. If we see no other emotion in "Like Decorations," we should at least see the sheer determination it took for Stevens to compose fifty epigrams at a time when writing poetry was difficult for him. The title also obscures Stevens's ingenuity in converting his poetic limitations into a long and extremely complex poem, a poem which, along with "Idea of Order at Key West" resuscitated Stevens out of his twelve-year silence and the near-death of his poetic career.

As for the much more complicated aesthetic history behind the poem, fifteen years before writing "Like Decorations in a Nigger Cemetery," Wallace Stevens had demonstrated an aptitude for taking techniques from the visual arts and adapting them to his poetry. "Like Decorations" clearly demonstrates this aptitude. It was Stevens's familiarity with the aesthetic experiments in the visual arts of the 1910s and 1920s that prepared him for the aesthetic sophistication of the Key West cemetery. This familiarity also worked to legitimize "Like Decorations" as one poem in a long line of successful experiments with form. In much the same way that "Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird" seemed innovatively poetic in its mimicry of the multiple perspectives of a cubist painting, "Like Decorations," too, would seem similarly modernistic and innovatively poetic. "Like Decorations," like the earlier

"Thirteen Ways," in the ingenious unity of its sequential disjunctions simultaneously exhibits lyricism and modernist innovation.

Glen MacLeod, in the opening chapter of *Wallace Stevens and Modern Art*, discusses the parallels between the aesthetic developments of cubism and the poetic innovations of *Harmonium*. According to MacLeod, as part of the Arensberg circle in New York of the 1910s and 1920s, Stevens was engaged with the complex and radical aesthetic theories of Modern Art. Stevens's familiarity with the work and techniques of Braque, Picasso, and Duchamp was intimate; he spoke French with Duchamp in Arensberg's "salon," where a profusion of works by these artists hung (*Wallace Stevens and Modern Art*, 11). Clearly, Stevens had a privileged understanding of, and a direct relationship with, the complicated aesthetics and radically anti-art establishment intentions behind the cubist paintings, the collages, and the "readymades" of the post WWI aesthetic vanguard. "Like *Decorations*" not only reflects this background, but the pathos of the poem adds a new facet to the exclusively intellectual, emotionally neutral aesthetics of cubism.

According to MacLeod, discussions of Stevens's poetry in terms of cubism are common:

Critics have often discussed Stevens' poetry in terms of cubism. The analogy is appropriate if we think of cubism in general terms as the crucial break with the Western tradition of painting. Viewed from this perspective, it is the watershed

of modernism because it abandoned standard notions of perspective and spatial orientation. It is typically "modern" because it is experimental, radically self-questioning. (11)

As MacLeod notes, "so generalized an analogy, however, is not very helpful in defining Stevens's particular poetic qualities" (11). MacLeod then specifically considers the analogous aesthetic procedures of a typically cubist painting like *Nude Descending a Staircase* (1912) and Stevens's "Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird" (1917) as well as the analogous procedures behind Stevens's "Anecdote of the Jar" (1919) and one of Duchamp's readymades, *Fountain* (1917).

For MacLeod, "Thirteen Ways" is cubist in that its "separate, haiku-like stanzas suggest a variety of possible viewpoints like those in a cubist painting" (11). Furthermore, like "Thirteen Ways," "the individual stanzas [of Stevens's long poems] are not conceived of as part of a conventional narrative or dramatic sequence; instead, they are juxtaposed in varying relations of similarity and contrast like elements of a cubist painting. Their relation to one another is primarily spatial rather than temporal" (11-12). It might seem too obvious to mention, but the titles of the two poems, "Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird" and "Like Decorations in a Nigger Cemetery," immediately orient each poem visually rather than temporally. That each poem proceeds as a sequence of juxtapositions, rather than as a conventional narrative, only reinforces

their tabular format.

"A way of looking" at something may be either a visual or an intellectual perspective. Because cubism is at least as much an intellectual process as it is a visual or painterly process, genre distinctions are less important to a cubist artist than to, say, a realist artist; the primary concern for the poet, composer, painter, or sculptor who practices cubism is the aesthetic theory behind the work. In 1921, when his affiliation with the Arensberg circle was exerting a strong influence upon him, aesthetic theory was certainly the primary concern for Stevens. In order to explain the complicated mixture of free verse and quasi-iambic rhythms in Stevens's verse at this time, George Lensing, in *Wallace Stevens: A Poet's Growth*, quotes from a letter from Stevens to Ferdinand Reyher, which also demonstrates the importance he placed upon a poetry driven by "aesthetic theory":

The fact is that notwithstanding the large amount of poetry that is written over here at the moment there is practically no aesthetic theory back of it. Why do you scorn free verse? Isn't it the only kind of verse now being written which has any aesthetic impulse back of it? Of course there are miles and miles of it that don't come off. People do not understand the emotional purpose of rhythm any more than they understood the emotional purpose of measure. I am not exclusively for free verse. But I am for it. (102)

To a cubist, theory-driven poetry would seem more compelling than a poetry with "no aesthetic theory back of it." But in this letter to Reyher, Stevens is far from reciting cubist

doctrine. In addition to the primacy he gives aesthetic theory, he also recognizes the necessity of "emotional purpose," not one of the tenets of strict cubism.

In both "Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird" and "Anecdote of the Jar," the "emotional purpose" is largely an abstract, subjective affair of rhythm. We can say, for instance, that there is some emotive quality in section XI of "Thirteen Ways":

He rode over Connecticut
In a glass coach.
Once, a fear pierced him,
In that he mistook
The shadow of his equipage
For blackbirds. (CP, 94)

The piercing fear of this passage, however, is not pure emotion; rather, the fear is a result of rhythm, of vowel sounds, and of the intellectualization of an emotion which arises out of a mistaken sensual perception. The end-stop after "coach" and the pauses after "once" and "him" reinforce the halting rhythm of the line. The assonance of the two successive long-"e" sounds causes the line to drag out even further. The long-"e" sounds also contrast starkly with the surrounding, shorter vowel sounds. Among the repeated short-"i's," "a's," and "o's," "fear pierced" stands out all the more sharply. When we contrast this passage from "Thirteen Ways" to sections seven and twenty-three of "Like Decorations," we see that emotion is not just a side-effect of rhythm, but a direct result of content:

VII

How easily the feelings flow this afternoon
Over the simplest words:
It is too cold for work, now, in the fields. (151)

XXIII

The fish are in the fishman's window,
The grain is in the baker's shop,
The hunter shouts as the pheasant falls.
Consider the odd morphology of regret. (154)

Because the emotion of the earlier experiments with versified cubism and versified readymade is more a matter of rhythm than content, any pathos in them is incidental rather than intrinsic. Owing to the imitation of African-American grave adornment, however, "Like Decorations" attains an unprecedented level of pathos for a work of art so closely aligned with the emotionally neutral effects of Cubist works and readymades. Like most cubist works, "Like Decorations" offers multiple perspectives. Duchamp's readymades are more about the cognitive processes behind art--more about the arbitrary nature of the aesthetic assumptions we make in assigning artistic beauty--than they are about the "beauty" of the objects which comprise the readymades: the urinal of *The Fountain*, for instance, or the snow shovel of *In Anticipation of the Broken Arm*. Similarly, "Like Decorations" is more about the quality and status of poetry in the 1930s, especially Stevens's own poetry, than it is about the actual cemetery. The paradox of "Like Decorations" is that, along with the offensive title, comes genuine

innovation in modern Western art.

To better appreciate the aesthetic accomplishment of "Like Decorations," it will be useful to trace its origins in two poems that anticipate it. "Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird" (1917) and "The Comedian as the Letter C" (1922) share qualities of style and content that Stevens carries forward into "Like Decorations" in 1934. All these poems offer new definitions and assessments of beauty, or dislocate conventional concepts of beauty. Stylistically, "Like Decorations" combines the poetic procedure of Stevens's early imagistic experiments with the procedures of the longer modernist lyric. In the imagistic sharpness and condensation of each individual section, "Like Decorations" exhibits imagism. At the same time, however, the sheer length of "Like Decorations" (his longest poem since "Comedian" in 1922) as well as the overwhelmingly iambic nature of its lines make it typical of Stevens's longer modernist lyrics. As such, "Like Decorations" is both a hybrid of Stevens's two most predominant stylistic modes--imagism and modernist lyricism--and a further assay into one of his most predominant themes: the place of art in the real world.

"Comedian" deals directly with aesthetic development as Crispin's aesthetic sensibility develops, prompted by his travels in the Americas. Crispin becomes immersed in an aesthetic curriculum which causes him to continually change his conceptions of beauty. Though less programmatic than

Crispin's evolving conception of beauty, "Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird," too, demonstrates a departure from conventional aesthetics. Here Stevens suggests a cognitive approach in assigning beauty to the blackbird in lieu of the more conventional, sensual beauty of "gold birds":

VII
O, thin men of Haddam,
Why do you imagine gold birds?
Do you not see how the blackbird
Walks around the feet
Of the women about you? (CP, 92)

In this brief passage, the poet questions the men's rather conventional aesthetic judgement that gold birds are inherently more pleasing than blackbirds. The blackbird becomes more aesthetically pleasing by means of a cognitive process and not by means of how it appears to the sense of sight. As one section among thirteen, Stevens isn't using this portion of "Thirteen Ways" to assert the primacy of this one particular "way of looking." Rather, Stevens is simply showing that there are alternative ways to look for, to find, and to assess beauty.

"The Comedian as the Letter C" more directly handles aesthetic development as one of its themes and anticipates "Like Decorations in a Nigger Cemetery" in its evocation of Whitman. "The Comedian as the Letter C," Stevens's first long poem, follows the progress of Crispin as he develops from a European clown/valet to a suburban American father with several daughters. This is Stevens's ironic version of

the growth of a uniquely American aesthetic, perhaps a version of what Stevens saw as his own aesthetic development. As Crispin travels northward through the Americas, his aesthetic sensibilities conform to his changing surroundings, and this migration takes the form of an aesthetic curriculum. The portion of this curriculum which has the most bearing upon "Like Decorations" is when Crispin becomes a poetic figure reminiscent of Walt Whitman. At this stage of "Comedian," Crispin begins to eschew all former European aesthetic trappings. Stevens plunges Crispin into a world like Whitman's and combines the sensuality of Whitman with Stevensian irony:

Tilting up his nose,
He inhaled the rancid rosin, burly smells
Of dampened lumber, emanations blown
From warehouse doors, the gustiness of ropes,
Decays of sacks, and all the arrant stinks
That helped him round his rude aesthetic out.
He savoured rankness like a sensualist.
He marked the marshy ground around the dock,
The crawling railroad spur, the rotten fence,
Curriculum for the marvelous sophomore. (36)

At the same time that Stevens mimics Whitman's attenuated parallel structure, he's also commenting on what he considers to be its aesthetic rudeness. Stevens's assessment of Whitman is equivocal, but ultimately negative. Stevens seems to view Whitman as a necessary, but in the end a misguided, step in the course of American aesthetics, hence "marvelous sophomore." In a way, Whitman had solved Stevens's problem of linking art to life. Everything that Whitman experienced

sensually entered into his poetry, and, therefore, art and life were linked instantaneously. For Stevens, however, this manner of linking art to life comes at too high a cost. Whitman's "rude aesthetic" and its attendant all-encompassing and value-neutral sensuality, while it may celebrate the exuberance and diversity of a sprawling United States, also allows a "rankness" that for Stevens is ripe for parody. To put it simply, Whitman had no taste.

In Stevens's judgement, Whitman's aesthetic is too permissive in its purely sensual assessment of beauty, too potentially chaotic. One corollary of Whitman's aesthetic which Stevens avoids is its inherent egalitarianism. In short, Whitman's aesthetic allows for "low art." Because the senses don't discriminate, Stevens considers them untrustworthy aesthetic judges. Because the senses are indiscriminate, Stevens insists that the assessment of beauty should be a cognitive act rather than a sensual one. Or perhaps more accurately, cognition becomes a sense to be trusted. From here, we get at one of the clearest indicators of Stevens's modernism: his emphasis on the sensual beauty of cognition.

"Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird" evokes this sensual beauty of cognition throughout. It is not simply the sensual looking at the blackbird that is beautiful; it is the more cognitive "way of looking" that makes the blackbird beautiful and, hence, gives sensual pleasure. In contrast,

when Crispin impersonates Whitman he "inhal[es] the rancid rosin" and "burly smells" unmediated by cognition. Crispin is a "marvelous sophomore" because he is not yet taking an adequately cognitive approach toward beauty. These things are a part of him without the more aesthetically sophisticated cognitive distance with which Stevens regards the blackbird:

VIII
I know noble accents
And lucid, inescapable rhythms;
But I know, too,
That the blackbird is involved
In what I know. (94)

Here the blackbird is beautiful because it can be "involved / In what I know" without dominating the poet's cognitive and aesthetic wherewithal. Stevens is much more comfortable with cognitive involvement than with sensual absorption.

This shift of emphasis from the sensual to the cognitive aligns Stevens with Modernist abstraction, and it is also what allows his aesthetic to change and develop, to attain the dynamics of an aesthetic program. Here's why: an aesthetic which is based upon purely sensual criteria allows no room for development other than a keener honing of the senses. Once the primacy of the senses is acknowledged, the sensual aesthetic is cognitively fixed. For Stevens's Whitman, the senses are the aesthetic and that's that. Cognitively, the sensual aesthetic remains static while everything from the rank to the sublime becomes a part of the

poet, a kind of perpetual "Song of Myself." If everything the poet senses becomes a part of the poet, then there are two very broad outcomes which occur simultaneously: 1) The poet's self becomes a universe unto itself as it incorporates everything indiscriminately, and conversely, 2) the self also becomes infinitely diffuse among everything it senses. The task of linking art to life may be a furious motivation for Stevens, but he seems unwilling to accomplish the link at the expense of a discrete self, a self capable of aesthetic as well as racial discrimination.

The heady diffusion of the self with which Whitman is so at home makes Stevens uneasy. And as we have seen, "Like Decorations" is, to a degree, Stevens's attempt to mitigate the uneasiness he feels in his identification with the cemetery's decorators, an identification that Whitman would have readily accomplished by singing about the decorations and the decorators as though they were parts of himself. Still, like the blackbird, the cemetery and all that it represents are involved in what Stevens knows. In the same manner as "Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird," "Like Decorations in a Nigger Cemetery" signals a cognitive approach in the title by which the ensuing fifty sections must be read and interpreted. That Walt Whitman appears in the first section of "Like Decorations" demonstrates that Stevens has found a way to rein in the sensualism of Whitman and house it under the roof of a more modern, more distanced,

and--for Stevens--a more comfortable, more aesthetically tenable, cognitive approach.

In order to appreciate the amount of cognitive distancing that occurs in a relatively short space, it will be useful to look at the title and the first section of the poem together as they appear on the page:

LIKE DECORATIONS IN A NIGGER
CEMETERY
[for Arthur Powell]

I
In the far South the sun of autumn is passing
Like Walt Whitman walking along a ruddy shore.
He is singing and chanting the things that are a
part of him,
the worlds that were and will be, death and day.
Nothing is final, he chants. No man shall see the
end.
His beard is of fire and his staff is a leaping
flame. (150)

The cognitive distance is accomplished here by two similes: the first, in the title; the second, in epigram I. This rapid succession overloads the figurative stance of the poem from the outset. A paraphrase of the relation between the two similes should demonstrate the complexity adequately: The Southern sun of autumn is like Walt Whitman "singing and chanting the things that are a part of him," and this figure is somehow like a decoration in a "nigger cemetery." A further complication occurs in the comparison of the sun to Whitman. Not only are the similes initially overloaded, but the terms of the second simile are reversed. In the development of the comparison, the vehicle, Whitman, takes

over this section and occludes the tenor, the sun. From this it seems that Stevens is more concerned to conjure Whitman than to describe the sun. By conjuring Whitman's indiscriminate sensuality from a safe cognitive distance, Stevens can regard the cemetery's decorations without fear of aesthetic contamination. Stevens can derive pleasure from the decorations and even identify with the decorators to a certain extent, but because the pleasure takes place within the sphere of cognition, Stevens's self, unlike Whitman's, remains discrete. While the actual decorations of the cemetery would become parts of Whitman, and while Whitman would identify with the decorators to the point of absorbing them within himself or dispersing among them, Stevens's involvement is cognitive and aesthetic.

The high degree of figurative attenuation along with the appearance of Whitman at the outset of this poem signify the lengths to which Stevens must go in order to accommodate something which he considers as artistically "low" as "decorations in a nigger cemetery" and raise it up in his poetry to "High Art." If Stevens were to apply Whitmanian sensual absorption to the grave adornments, then the figure of the black could become a part of Stevens's self, and the boundary between black and white would be breached. Stevens's more distanced cognitive involvement allows him to keep the figure of the black wholly other.

Certainly the figurative overloading and reversals of

figurative language that we find in the opening of "Like Decorations" are nothing new for Stevens. Stevens viewed the obliquity that these devices create as a poetic necessity because they resist explanation. For Stevens, a work's resistance to easy explanation is clearly a sign of "High Art." In the same letter to Hi Simons in which Stevens writes about his "fury of the desire to get somewhere with [his poetry]," he discusses his resistance to explanation:

A long time ago I made up my mind not to explain things, because most people have so little appreciation of poetry that once a poem has been explained it has been destroyed: that is to say they are no longer able to seize the poem. ...I think that the critic is under obligation to base his remarks on what he has before him. It is not a question of what an author meant to say but of what he has said. In the case of a competent critic, the author may well have a great deal to find out about himself and his work. (346)

This passage helps us to further clarify the dynamics of the sensual pleasures of cognition. For Stevens, despite the aesthetic importance he places upon a cognitive rather than a sensual approach, the cognitive acts of analysis and explanation detract from the pleasure one should find in a poem. Because overloaded and reversed figurative language resists explanation, it produces the kind of cognitive effects that Stevens's aesthetic values. The ambiguity that results from Stevens's intentional obliquity at the start of "Like Decorations" undermines his own intentions for this poem, and he is aware of this. As he writes to Simons, "it is not a question of what an author mean[s]." On the

surface, this statement, along with what Stevens views as the "obligation" of a critic "to base his remarks on what he has before him," can be taken as falling squarely in line with the doctrines of the New Criticism, where authorial intent holds no sway. But for Stevens the application of these New Critical premises has a pleasurable and decidedly non-New Critical result: "the author may well have a great deal to find out about himself and his work." By fostering obscurity, Stevens leaves his texts open. Such openness allows not only critics but Stevens himself to make discoveries about himself and his work. The intense ambiguity of "Like Decorations" causes the poem to operate partially within the mode of self-discovery. Because of Stevens's acknowledgement of the irrelevance of an author's intentions, upon returning to the ambiguities and reflecting upon them, Stevens, like the hypothetical author he mentions in his letter to Simons, "may well have a great deal to find out about himself." With the eradication of authorial intent, Stevens's relationship to his poetry comes to resemble that of a critic's or any other reader's. He too is left to interpret his own ambiguities and make discoveries. In fact, he cultivates ambiguity and, thereby, makes the discoveries both more hard-fought and more profound. There is, perhaps, one important difference, however, between what Stevens discovers and what a reader discovers. The self that Stevens discovers is his own. One aspect of the

aesthetic pleasure of cognition is momentary self-recognition. For Stevens the self can be as ambiguous and open, as hard to know as an obscure poetic text. In part, the poetic text gives pleasure because it is a tool for self-knowledge. In "Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird," Stevens records an instance of a self that is cognizant of its own ambiguity:

II

I was of three minds,
Like a tree
In which there are three blackbirds. (92)

In its presentation of Whitman, the opening of "Like Decorations" multiplies the ambiguity more drastically than this section of "Thirteen Ways." In this portion of "Thirteen Ways," the simile, by providing an apt vehicle, serves to simplify the complexity of being "of three minds": a tree with three blackbirds. Whitman, on the other hand, serves as a vehicle for further complexity: "he is singing and chanting the things that are a part of him." In the already complex figurative field of "Like Decorations," the appearance of Whitman expands the terrain that Stevens's self can occupy without any sort of self-diffusion among the decorations or any absorption of the decorations into Stevens's self. The Whitman of "Like Decorations" is a cognitive vehicle that can experience the decorations of the cemetery intimately. Or, put another way, Whitman does what

Stevens considers as dirty work. The decorations can become a part of the poem's Whitman while Stevens maintains an unsullied cognitive distance.

The necessity for such distance is ethically suspect. But "Like Decorations" is remarkable for the complex way it presents a self in the act of constructing boundaries and assessing its relationship with foreign material. As such, the poem provides a detailed and complicated map of a self in the process of discrimination. As the barrage of fifty obscure poetic fragments continues, the parameters of the self take on further and further definition with each successive frame of mind in each successive epigram. In these fifty poetic fragments, Stevens, like Whitman, "is singing and chanting the things that are a part of him." Because Whitman is a sensualist the things of which he sings become a part of his self. Because Stevens is a modernist, the things of which he sings become perspectives, different frames of mind. This difference is crucial; it shows that while Stevens's self remains discrete, his mind is capable of multiple perspectives and, hence, vast indeterminacy.

The fifty sections of "Like Decorations" take the ambiguity of the poet's fifty minds several steps beyond the "three minds" of "Thirteen Ways." While the second section of "Thirteen Ways" describes what it is *like* to be of three minds, "Like Decorations" presents the fifty *possible* minds of a discrete self in transition. Perhaps section XXXI of

"Like Decorations" attempts to describe the high level of indeterminacy of Stevens's "furious mind":

A teeming millpond or a furious mind.
Gray Grasses rolling windily away
And bristling thorn-trees spinning on the bank.
The actual is a deft beneficence. (CP, 155)

While section II of "Thirteen Ways" employs a conventional, if ingenious, simile to describe what it's like to be "of three minds," this passage from "Like Decorations" avoids simile altogether and even attempts to avoid metaphor. Somehow figurative language seems inadequate to describe the furious state of the poet's mind. Of course, the "or" implies a metaphoric interchangeability between the "teeming millpond" and the "furious mind." But because the interchangeability is expressed in a fragment, we see that the expressive potential of conventional metaphor is unsuited to the poet's state of mind.

Conventional metaphor depends upon an assertion of equivalence between semantic quantities which are unlike one another. Most commonly, some form of the verb "to be" signifies a metaphorical equivalence of terms. But the first two clauses of section XXXI lack predication. The second fragment, like the first, also deals with the landscape-- "Gray grasses rolling windily away / and bristling thorn-trees spinning on the bank"--and further qualifies the poet's state of mind. Perhaps in the random undulations and in the common direction of the grasses' rolling, in the bristling

and spinning thorn-trees, we are meant to see further analogies between a landscape in flux and the poet's mental processes. Again, with no predicate to complete the comparison, any figurative equivalence is implied rather than asserted. But the poet still wants us to know what it's like to think like him. The avoidance of predication results in a mode of description which is more tangential than conventional metaphor and more closely analogous to the cognitive process of the rest of "Like Decorations."

With the final line of section XXXI, we come to a complete sentence and a further radicalization of conventional figuration. Are we to take this line--"The actual is a deft beneficence"--as a metaphorical utterance or as an assertion of fact? Does the "is" signify a metaphorical equivalence or a denotative equivalence? Well, in each case, both. The indeterminacy of the final line causes us to see that "is" simultaneously signifies both metaphorical equivalence and denotative equivalence. Signification is an inherently metaphorical process because meaning depends upon the equivalence of unlike terms just as metaphor does. When the similar dynamic of meaning-making and metaphor-making is taken to the extreme, as Stevens so often does, metaphors are as much facts as facts are metaphors. If we take the flux of the landscape to be "the actual," then the landscape is as much a metaphor for Stevens's mental processes as it is a presentation of an

actual frame of mind. The "deft beneficence" is that the landscape allows the poet to communicate the actual workings of his mind. As Stevens collapses the distinction between employing metaphor and defining reality, the characteristically poetic process of metaphor¹⁷ also becomes a process for defining the real.

While there are many more direct ways for poetry to make claims upon the real, of which Whitman's unbridled sensualism is certainly one, there are none more categorically Stevensian than the collapse of the figurative with the real. When we contextualize this Stevensian collapse, it begins to look less like a linguistic trick and more like a necessary step in Stevens's poetic adjustment from the 1920s to the 1930s.

In order to maintain continuity between the aestheticist poetry of *Harmonium* and the more socially conscious poetry of *Ideas of Order*, Stevens had to find a way for the overloaded figurative language and the resulting ambiguity that he cultivated in his verse to lay claims upon the real world. Wanting to avoid--at all costs--a complete renunciation of the poetry of *Harmonium*, somehow he had to remain himself while adjusting his poetics. If Stevens had fully capitulated to his detractors' demands and started writing a

¹⁷David Lodge, in *The Modes of Modern Writing*, cites Jakobson in identifying metaphor as the primary mode of poetry: "Prose, which is 'forwarded essentially by contiguity' tends toward the metonymic pole, while poetry...emphasizes similarity [and] tends toward the metaphoric" (80).

"socially-conscious" poetry more in line with their literary imperatives, then he would have lost continuity with his past and would have admitted *Harmonium's* irrelevance not only in the literary milieu of 1930s, but to the 1920s also. In the Great Depression, when the political strategies applied to social issues were applied to aesthetics as well, the aestheticism that typified Stevens's verse in the 1920s came under heavy fire from the left for its elitist stance or its irrelevance to the real world. James Longenbach characterizes Stevens's predicament nicely by quoting and commenting on the literary "prescriptions" of Philip Rahv and William Phillips at the *Partisan Review*. Rahv's and Phillips's prescriptions represent the type of politico-aesthetic orthodoxy against which Stevens was reacting:

"The mood of the thirties required objectivity, realism, and an interest in the social manifestations of individual life." Such prescriptions marginalized not only Stevens but poetry itself. Not even Edwin Rolfe could compete with the social resonances of the proletarian novel. (*The Plain Sense of Things*, 135)

By retaining a good portion of *Harmonium* in the 1930s, Stevens is not just making a case for his poetry, but for all poetry. Section XXXII, demonstrates Stevens's advocacy for both his own poetry and the state of poetry in the 1930s:

Poetry is a finikin thing of air
That lives uncertainly and not for long
Yet radiantly beyond much lustier blurs. (CP, 155)

If we read the "lustier blurs" as the fervently politicized aesthetic stances that replaced one another with such

rapidity in the 1930s, then "Poetry," in the generalized sense with which it is used here, stands in direct opposition to the literal translation of politics into aesthetics. In its application of radically indeterminate figurative language to the real world, "Like Decorations" enacts this tension between the extremely literal qualities of politicized aesthetics and the inherently figurative genre of "Poetry."

Stevens's innovations in figurative language are a way for him to simultaneously adjust his poetic to the 1930s while maintaining continuity with his past and attaining or asserting his relevance in the present. "Like Decorations" bridges Stevens's poetic past and his poetic future. Couched within the overwhelming figurative overload at the outset of "Like Decorations," are also subtle signs which tell us Stevens is as concerned with making poetic headway as he is with maintaining contiguity with his former poetic waypoints. In the opening, Whitman sings and chants about both the past and the future, "the worlds that were and will be, death and day" (150). Then comes the line which launches the rest of the poem and prepares us for forty-nine more epigrams: "Nothing is final, he chants. No man shall see the end" (150). In this line's emphatic negation of anything as "final" or as determinate as an "end," we can read both a rallying cry for, and a warning of, what is about to follow: intense indeterminacy and a seemingly endless (forty-nine

more!) stream of cognitive perspectives.

As the fifty epigrams of "Like Decorations in a Nigger Cemetery" proceed, they can be seen as both a funeral procession for the poet of *Harmonium* and a birth announcement for the poet of *Ideas of Order*. This liminality finds expression in the trope which holds the poem together: autumn. A good portion of the poem's sections are suffused with autumnal imagery. And the trope of autumn characterizes the pathos of "Like Decorations." For Stevens, autumn is a liminal trope, bringing the harvest, but also signaling the death associated with winter. The liminal imagery of autumn carries a large load: it situates the poem as a process of seasonal, personal, political, and poetic transition.

The poem, located squarely in the present, assesses the poet's poetic past and anticipates his poetic future. "Like Decorations" enacts the liminality of a poet in the act of aesthetic and political transition. In the poem, Stevens looks back to where he has been and looks forward to what could be. This liminality accounts not only for the cognitive and aesthetic sophistication of the poem, but, due to Stevens's emotional investment in the process of saving and revamping his poetic, also for its pathos.

And as if this weren't enough, this autumnal liminality which "unites" a poem of fifty cobbled-together fragments, also contextualizes it and characterizes it as a depression-era poem. Alan Filreis, in his discussion of "Like

Decorations" identifies this seasonal trope as Stevens's way of "naturaliz[ing] the Great Depression, much as at The Hartford depression-era catastrophic homelessness was depoliticized...[as] a threat analogous to the 'perpetual' cycle of periodic flooding or storming" (*Modernism from Right to Left*, 101). Filreis goes on to say that while this seasonal trope could be seen as an attempt, solely on Stevens's part, to depoliticize the depression by using "natural imagery" to signify depression-era politics, "some [will be surprised to know] that many radical poets of the period similarly played it both ways" (101):

Stevens, in "Like Decorations," using the same rhetorical strategy [of comparing the depression to a hostile season], makes it explicit. Thus the particular use of imagist and Romantic natural tropes in "Like Decorations" (seasonal cycle, inevitable decline, sharply perceived change, down-turning) contrasts favorably with the same tendency in the work of dozens of self-described political poets I have read, who implicitly claim to have made pointed political reference while nonetheless using a fully natural imagery. (101)

As Filreis indicates, autumn signifies broad political transitions for other poets of the 1930s besides Stevens. For many, the coincidence of the Dust Bowl with the Great Depression would cement the association of a hostile climate with hostile social, economic, and political conditions.

Stevens presents a good number of liminally autumnal images in the opening sections of the poem--II, IV, V, and X. Each section's liminal images collapse distinctions. As we have seen, the literary climate of the 1930s presented quite

a conundrum for the poet concerned with aesthetic beauty. According to the predominant politico-aesthetic trends, the beautiful was alternately characterized as inherently unethical, naively apolitical, or socially irrelevant. With each collapse of distinctions in "Like Decorations"--in order to make room for a beautiful *and* a socially current poetry--Stevens attempts to undercut such arbitrary poetic mandates.

In section II we find a transition from the "sigh" of the "night-wind" and the "sleep" of "heaven" to the "shout" of the rising sun:

Sigh for me, night-wind, in the noisy leaves of the oak.
I am tired. Sleep for me heaven over the hill.
Shout for me, loudly and loudly, joyful sun, when you
rise.

(CP, 150)

Section II locates the poet somewhere between exhaustion and exuberance, between an earth exhausted at the end of the growing season and the exuberance of the harvest. The liminal quality of autumn is in these lines, but the autumnal imagery is subtle here. The leaves of the oak are "noisy" and ready to fall, but despite the exhaustion of the land the sun remains brilliant. The connections between the state of the landscape and the state of Stevens's poetry are quite evident here. The poetics which typified *Harmonium* have exhausted themselves, but, like the landscape, they are in transition and will rise modified and resplendent in the fruit they bear: *Ideas of Order*.

Similarly displaying liminal autumn imagery and

concerned with transition, section IV locates the poet's "fortune" "in between" "the mat of frost" and the "mat of clouds":

Under the mat of frost and over the mat of clouds.
But in between lies the sphere of my fortune
And the fortunes of frost and clouds,
All alike, except for the rules of the rabbis,
Happy men, distinguishing frost and clouds.
(CP, 151)

Perhaps an apt title for this section would be "Mr. Stevens's Philosophical Reflections on the Way to the Hartford Accident and Indemnity Company." In terms of Stevens's use of radical figuration, the opening fragment of section IV--"under the mat of frost and over the mat of clouds"--like the "teeming millpond" of section XXXI, is representative of the poet's thought processes. The fragment here signifies Stevens's inability to explore completely the cognitive realms beneath the frost and over the clouds. Taking him through Hartford's autumn landscape, Stevens's walks to work offer him fleeting chances to delve into the philosophical matters which lie "under the mat of frost," or rise up to lofty notions "above the mat of clouds." But he must get to work, where "the sphere of [his] fortune" lies, and so leaves the finer theological distinctions to those with a more philosophical and spiritual vocation than insurance: "the rabbis / Happy men, distinguishing frost and clouds."

But before we read this section as a condensed version of Frost's "Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening," we should

recognize a further complication in this section. While the speaker of "Snowy Evening" keeps his "promises" rather than indulging his fascination with "lovely, dark and deep" woods, Stevens's obligations at the office and the rabbis' more lofty philosophical distinctions are not mutually exclusive. The poet's fortune "and the fortunes of frost and clouds" are "all alike," and all lie within the same "sphere." "Except for the rules of the rabbis"--which, despite the rules' orthodoxy, are not without authority or intellectual rigor--what goes on at the office, under the frost, and over the clouds are so interrelated that while making distinctions among them becomes a philosophical luxury, such philosophical distinctions still retain their merit. Whether anyone takes the time to ponder them or not, the rabbis' philosophical distinctions nevertheless pertain to the office as much as they pertain to frost and clouds.

While it has no images of autumn, section V contains another collapse in distinction and so--like section IV's collapse of the work-a-day with lofty philosophy--aids Stevens's attempt to show the close relationship between the nebulous and the immediate: the future and "what is full of us":

If ever the search for a tranquil belief should
The future might stop emerging out of the past, ^{end,}
Out of what is full of us; yet the search
And the future emerging out of us seem to be one.
(CP, 151)

With some modifications, section V of "Like Decorations" restates the assertion of the first section--"No man shall see the end" (CP, 150). As Alan Filreis thoroughly documents in *Modernism Right to Left*, along with the 1930s came a remarkable amount of politico-aesthetic platforms from *New Masses* and *Partisan Review* which, despite frequent policy revisions, purported to offer, once and for all, definitive poetic programs for blending adequately ethical aesthetics and right-thinking political radicalism (*Modernism Right to Left*, 198-206). Out of these various platforms came scathing, reductive reviews of not only Stevens, but Moore, Cummings, Monroe, and Williams. Considering the amount of bashing he took as a result of certain critics' fervent subscription to these platforms, Stevens is being generous by characterizing them as "search[es] for tranquil belief[s]."

No immediately discernable political resonances occupy the fragment that comprises section X of "Like Decorations." Rather, this section is suffused with the pathos of autumn's liminality and resonates with the indeterminacy of a poet caught "between" an ambivalent landscape and his own ambivalent emotions:

Between farewell and the absence of farewell,
Between the final mercy and the final loss,
The wind and the sudden falling of the wind.
(CP, 152)

In the epigram previous to this one Stevens has asserted that,

In a world of universal poverty
The philosophers alone will be fat
Against the autumn winds
In an autumn that will be perpetual. (CP, 152)

In section X, Stevens subjects himself to the same wind in which the philosophers are so at home, and the result is far from philosophical "fatness." The "incompleteness" of section X is too pronounced for us to infer a professed kinship between the poet and the philosophers, and instead, the fragment signifies that the "autumn winds" of a "world of universal poverty" have reduced the poet's rhetoric to mere fragments of thought and emotion.

If the autumnal imagery of "Like Decorations" carries political significance for Stevens, it carries a good deal of personal significance as well. And that personal significance resides in the overarching comparison of his poetry to "decorations in a nigger cemetery." In the analogy to African-American folk art, the title begins the sequence with an assertion of the low artistic status and marginality of Stevens and his poetry. For Stevens, much of the personal significance of "Like Decorations" is in his confrontation with the reality of his marginal status as a poet. Section XVIII presents just such a confrontation:

Shall I grapple with my destroyers
In the muscular poses of the museums?
But my destroyers avoid the museums. (CP, 153)

By likening his poetry to something as artistically marginal as African-American grave adornments, Stevens's rhetorical

strategy, like his "destroyers," avoid[s] the museums" (153). For a poet capable of the poetic muscularity on display in poems like "Sunday Morning" and "To the One of Fictive Music," "Like Decorations" as a whole strikes a decidedly un-"muscular pose." While poems like "Sunday Morning" and "Fictive Music" display the kind of powerful and conventional rhetorical eloquence worthy of the stateliness of museum pieces, Stevens must fight for his poetic relevance on a battlefield other than a museum. The strain of populism that the social exigencies of the 1930s brought to literary criticism necessitates a change of battlefield from the elitist's museum to the people's streets and countryside.

In "Like Decorations" Stevens adjusts his strategy to a new battlefield. The neo-Romantic eloquence of "Sunday Morning" is unsuited to the 1930s poetry wars, which require guerilla tactics. With epigram III Stevens acknowledges the disorderliness of the hostile autumnal and ideological context into which he deploys the poem:

It was when the trees were leafless first in November
And their blackness became apparent, that one first
Knew the eccentric to be the base of design. (151)

By noting the sudden "blackness" of the newly "leafless" November trees, Stevens suggests depression-era gloom and doom. And just as quickly he shifts from a direct consideration of the depression's "black" conditions to a more general consideration of the "eccentric...design" of the depression's ideological fallout. With its fractured

eloquence, the "eccentric design" of the structural trope of "Like Decorations" as a whole reflects the chaos of the depression itself. There is a submerged and complicated simile here. The complex pattern of the trees in section II is like the pattern of the whole poem and is also like the complex ideological pattern of the 1930s. No longer obscured by leaves, the complexly intertwining branches of the trees are fully disclosed. Similarly, no longer obscured by the economic prosperity of the 1920s, the ideological complexities of the depression emerge starkly. Because the poetic structure of the poem so closely resembles the ideological structure of the depression, the poem's complicated poetic structure, like its era's complicated ideological structure, is capable of doing battle on several fronts simultaneously: the personal, the political, the aesthetic, and the poetic. Compellingly, the structural trope of "Like Decorations," which derives from the purely aesthetic innovations of an elitist, and irrelevant artistic vanguard of the 1920s, also presents a realistic poetic collage of the ideological complexity of the 1930s.

Most importantly, however, the varied field of significance of "Like Decorations" owes a larger debt to the tradition of African-American grave adornment mimicked by the poem's structural trope. By emulating the aesthetic process of the Key West cemetery's decoration, Stevens hits upon a powerfully flexible poetic structure. The structure is

flexible and powerful enough to simultaneously enact the many levels of transition that the 1930s required of Stevens and his verse. The personal, poetic, aesthetic, and political transitions enacted by the profuse liminal imagery in the poem create a realistic collage of Stevens's multivariied imbrications with the ideological turmoil of the depression. Robert Farris Thompson describes the fragments which adorn African-American graves as "an intricate field of mediatory signs" (*Africanisms in American Culture*, 167). The same phrase could describe the fifty poetic fragments which comprise "Like Decorations," which provide an unprecedentedly full and significantly varied reflection not only of the politicization of poetry in the 1930s but of the emotions that accompany the personal and ideological transit of a poetic self from the 1920s into the 1930s.

The pseudo primitive of which you speak is, I am afraid, unconscious. An expression like "animal eyes" expresses a feeling, an impression. I don't know what to make of this question except to say that I am not aware that this sort of thing has any philosophic function. It is purely stylistic.

--Wallace Stevens, Letter to Ronald Lane Latimer,
October 22, 1935

Key West is extremely old-fashioned and primitive.

-- Wallace Stevens to Elsie Stevens, February 23, 1934

I can only say that I detest orientalism: the sort of thing that Fromentin did, which is the specific thing, although I like it well enough the way Matisse does it.

--Wallace Stevens to Barbara Church, August 27, 1953

V.

Between Zeitgeist and Direct Influence:
Race, Primitivism, and The Analogy between
"Like Decorations in a Nigger Cemetery"
and Matisse's *The Red Studio*

Linda Leavell, in the introduction to her intergeneric study of Marianne Moore, *Marianne Moore and the Visual Arts*, discusses the limitations and the benefits of examining the extraliterary influences of the visual arts upon poetry. Leavell acknowledges one of the reasons "considerable skepticism surrounds interartistic comparisons": "to use the terminology of one discipline...to describe another seems imprecise" (2). But for "those," like Leavell and myself,

"who are drawn empirically to interartistic comparisons to clarify our thinking," the benefits of such critical endeavors outweigh the limits. And as Leavell deftly demonstrates in her study of Moore, such comparisons need not be imprecise. Leavell quotes Wendy Steiner, the foremost theorist on interartistic comparisons, on the chief value of intergeneric critiques: "the interartistic comparison inevitably reveals the aesthetic norms of the period in which the question is asked" (*The Colors of Rhetoric*, 18). Leavell notes that many interartistic comparisons are imprecise because they define the source of a period's aesthetic norms either too narrowly by tracing "direct influence" or too broadly by attempting to define a "Zeitgeist."

Were it not for the degree that both Stevens and Matisse subscribe to the modernist aesthetic norm of Primitivism, the analogy between "Like Decorations" and *The Red Studio* (1911) would be pure speculation. Instead, because certain parallels in the contexts of Matisse and Stevens exist and also because they demonstrate in their respective deployments of Primitivism similar conflations of the decorative with the feminine and the nonwhite other, we can define the source of their works' similarities. The context of international modernism, where both artists actively participate, and their engagement with the discourse of aesthetic primitivism help us to more precisely locate the reasons for the correlations between Stevens and Matisse:

somewhere between *Zeitgeist* and direct influence, in the similar aesthetic norms in each of the artists' contexts.

There is no evidence that Stevens influenced Matisse or that Matisse influenced Stevens. The two never met. Stevens never went to Europe, and of Matisse's two visits to the United States, only the second, in autumn 1930 to serve on the Carnegie International Jury, was prolonged. Also, because *The Red Studio* predates "Like Decorations in a Nigger Cemetery" by twenty-three years, it's more accurate to talk of Matisse's effect on Stevens rather than the other way around. It is safe to say that Stevens knew much more of Matisse than Matisse knew of Stevens. Late in his life, the poet, due to his relationships with the Henry Churches and his Paris art dealer, Paul Vidal, was more engaged in the European art scene than Matisse was engaged with American poetry. In Stevens's letters he makes three passing comments regarding Matisse, of which the third epigraph of this chapter is the most substantial. In another, Stevens identifies Matisse, along with Picasso, as a defining influence on the art world (*Letters*, 622).

The one contact with Matisse that could be characterized as "direct" would be Stevens's connection with the "Arensberg Circle" in the 1910s and the 1920s. In the Arensberg's Greenwich Village "salon," where at least one work by Matisse hung (*Mlle. Yvonne Landsberg*, 1914), Stevens spoke French with Arensberg and Duchamp (*Wallace Stevens and the Visual*

Arts, 10-11). Throughout his life, Stevens remained an avid gallery visitor, and no doubt he viewed some, if not all three, of the Matisse exhibitions to occur in New York during his lifetime. But due to the unsubstantial and general nature of Stevens's brushes with Matisse, establishing "direct influence" is not a productive method for comparing the Matisse's effect upon Stevens.

But while any direct influence is out of the question, one contextual parallel between the two, despite being an ocean apart, is quite striking. Key West was to Stevens as French North Africa was to Matisse.

Just as Stevens drew "raw" material from his trips to the South, so did Matisse from his trips to the French colonies of Morocco and Algiers, where, as one biographical sketch notes, Matisse collected "rugs, shawls, and pottery" (Matisse, 28). Matisse employs these "Oriental" decorative patterns as background to his many nude and semi-nude *Odalisques* as well as to his European female figures set in decorative, domestic interiors. Matisse conflates the feminine, the other, and the primitive with the decorative. Aesthetically, the process works in this way: The artist locates "primitive" images in a less "civilized" culture; This culture, due to its proximity to the primal, directly reflects its primitive nature in the crudeness of its art. Women, the post-impressionist and modernist logic runs, due to the proximity of femininity to the natural world, provide

the readiest access for a European artist to the primitive. Decoration is to the sexual other as the ethnographic is to the racial other. To paint women in proximity to decoration is to capture the primitive, but also to alter it, to raise it up to high art.

This process of conflating the decorative, the oriental, and the feminine is evident in Matisse's *Odalisque with Red Trousers* (1921). The model reclines laconically on a striped chaise which sits close to the floor. She is semi-nude, arms above her head. Her fair skin and rounded form contrast with the several exaggerated, "Oriental" decorative patterns behind her. The horizontal stripes of the chaise provide a simple geometric field against which to view the more organic, rounded, and subtly shaded contours of her face and, revealed by her open blouse, her breasts and belly. Her bright red trousers contrast with the fair flesh tones of the upper half of her body and the off-white of her blouse, and her skin looks all the fairer for its proximity to the bold colors of both her trousers and her background. Across her hips, the trousers' blue sash--the center of the entire composition--divides the lower and upper halves of her body into symmetrically balanced compositional units. With her hands behind her head, and with her ankles together and her knees apart, each half of her body forms a triangle with the elbows and the knees in near-balance with one another.

Despite this near-balance, clearly the composition's

emphasis is on the model's lower half. While the upper half of the model's body reclines away from the viewer, the model's legs open toward the viewer, and the dark lines which form the contours of the trousers arc downward from the model's legs to converge in a single diagonal line at the groin. This diagonal line at the groin intersects the trousers' blue sash at a right angle to form the "crux" of the composition, an "X" in the painting's center which corresponds exactly with the model's vagina. Like the exotic decorations in the background, the folds of the trousers suggest a crudely exaggerated vaginal imagery, and with its lower half partially obscured by the trousers, the blue sash suggests what is referred to in classical sculpture as the "pubic triangle." In *Odalisque with Red Trousers*, the "Oriental" and the proximity of "primitive" decorations to the feminine other combine to create a field of heterosexual masculine desire.

All the elements of the composition--the odalisque, her trousers, the chaise, the decorative patterns in the background--are surrounded and supported from beneath by a field of red. For Matisse, red dependably signifies the male presence of the artist. Just as the odalisque's genitals are the center of the composition of *Odalisque with Red Trousers* (1921), the center of attention in Stevens's "Exposition of the Contents of a Cab" (1919) is Victoria Clementina's decorative "breech-cloth" (OP, 41). This correlation of motif between the two modernist works

signifies that both artists operate within the broad aesthetic norms of "Primitivism." While the background for Matisse's *Odalisque* is exotically "Oriental," the setting for "Exposition" is probably an exoticized Harlem, where so many white aesthetes made pilgrimages to pay homage to the "primitive" vitality of a re-born African-American community just two generations after slavery. In an earlier treatment of "Exposition," I discussed the significance of the decorations of Victoria Clementina's undergarments--"netted of topaz and ruby / And savage blooms"--in terms of the tension in Stevens's poetry between the cognitive and the sensual and in terms of Carol Duncan's Man/Culture-Woman/Nature dichotomy.¹⁸ In "Exposition," as in *Odalisque*, we see how the feminine other and the decorative become conflated to form a primitive fantasy of male dominance and libidinal excess.

One example of Stevens's identification of decoration with the feminine is "Floral Decorations for Bananas" (CP, 54), where the sexual interplay between the phallic bananas and the vaginal flowers" offers us a striking comparison to the similar interplay of Matisse's red, masculine field with his feminine *Odalisque*. "Floral Decorations" begins, "Well, nuncle, this plainly won't do," and goes on derisively to critique the table decorations of an imagined floral arranger

¹⁸In Chapter II above, pp. 40-44.

or interior decorator:

You should have had plums tonight,
In an eighteenth-century dish,
And pettifogging buds,
For the women of primrose and purl,
Each one in her decent curl.
Good God! What a precious light! (CP, 54)

This "table...set by an ogre" causes the speaker to reveal broader assumptions--prejudices, really--about North and South based on what one would think to be trivial aesthetic contrasts in home decor. While the North sets the table primly with "plums.../In an eighteenth-century dish," the South offers excess in the "bananas hacked and hunched." The women of the South contrast accordingly, "all shanks/ And bangles and slatted eyes," as opposed to the "decent" curls of "the women of primrose and purl." The concluding stanza, in a gesture common to Stevens, associates sexual excess with the tropical aspects of the South's table decorations, and the speaker is starting to get carried away:

And deck the bananas in leaves
Plucked from the Carib trees,
Fibrous and dangling down,
Oozing cantankerous gum
Out of their purple maws,
Darting out of their purple craws
Their musky and tingling tongues. (CP, 54)

By this final stanza, the speaker, who began derisively and insisted on plums, primrose, and purl, is now calling the shots with imperative phrases: "Pile the bananas on planks"; "deck the bananas in leaves...." The question then remains whether the southern table decorations themselves or the

aesthete's own prejudices have seduced and subsumed him.

"Floral Decorations for Bananas" eventually leads to a deeper aesthetic issue for modernism--whether things like floral decorations of tropical fruit inherently signify sexual excess or whether the viewer imports such ideas by drawing on his or her own prejudices or assumptions or relying too heavily upon the period's aesthetic norms.

Both *The Red Studio* (1911) and "Like Decorations" (1934) are more meta-artistic works than either *Odalisque with Red Trousers* or "Exposition of the Contents of the Cab" and "Floral Decorations for Bananas." Both *Red Studio* and "Like Decorations" reduce the painter's and the poet's previous work to decorative motifs, and both artists quote that previous work in a field of signification closely associated with their respective biographies.

For Matisse, red dependably signifies the masculine sexual energy of artistic creation. In *Carmelina* (1903), Matisse paints his reflection in the mirror behind the nude; he's wearing red. By 1911, and the self referential *Red Studio*, Matisse's red grows from a small, though central, reflected splotch of red to the dominant, masculine field which surrounds and defines the work hanging in his "red" studio. This is also the same red that defines the *Odalisque with Red Trousers* (1921). In *The Red Studio*, by quoting his own nudes--*Le Luxe II* (1908), *Plate with Nude Figure* (1907), and *Large Nude* (1911, destroyed) among others--Matisse

abstracts the subject matter of these paintings--the women --to the point that women are reduced to decorative motifs themselves.

For Stevens, as we have seen, the autumnal imagery that suffuses "Like Decorations" signifies the poet's political, emotional, and poetic transition from the 1920s to the 1930s.

Stevens's title appropriates and relocates the aesthetic discourse of Primitivism. To a large degree the innovative structural trope of "Like Decorations" relies upon the aesthetic sophistication of Primitivism, which was championed by many in the Western world's aesthetic vanguard beginning just after the turn of the century--most prominently by Stein and Picasso. The Primitivism of "Like Decorations" is innovative insofar as it adapts an established European aesthetic discourse to a strictly American context. For an American reader this adaptation by Stevens gives the aesthetic discourse of Primitivism the kind of local immediacy that a Picasso cannot.

It's difficult, if not impossible, for Western artists to practice Primitivism and not reduce their subjects so drastically that they efface any lasting human effect. Perhaps Jean Toomer's *Cane* (1923) provides the most successful exception to this rule. But when Stevens attempts Primitivism he reveals that he can only understand the aesthetic discourse by way of deeply ingrained American racism. And now readers may immediately disqualify the poem

for aesthetic consideration because of its reliance upon racist discourse to describe the "primitive" quality of its fifty fragments.

But by comparing "Like Decorations" to *The Red Studio*, perhaps we can better understand how the headlong pursuit of aesthetic innovation can lead to dreadful ethical results. Or, perhaps more accurately, how such headlong pursuits of the aesthetic vanguard have a way of dredging up and exposing those places--signified by the aesthetic norms of the period and the culture from which such norms arise--where the culture and its artists need to do their Ethics homework. For it is these same aesthetic norms that made the handling of race--however inadequate--a component of Stevens's poetry. Somehow for Stevens, the Modernist imperative for aesthetic innovation had the power to efface the issues surrounding "race" and reduce "race" to a figurative trope for libidinal excess, fecundity, ignorance, the decorative, and the primitive. The racism was effaced due to the generally accepted profundity of the aesthetic norm of Primitivism.

Certainly there is much more about Stevens that made him ill-equipped to handle race in an ethical fashion. But primarily Stevens demonstrated insensitivity toward racial matters in his poetry because his ideas about art--his aesthetics--are the place from which his poetry issues and to which it returns. To a poet like Stevens, whose goal is to link art to life in essential ways, the ethnographic displays

just such a link. And, to the end, Stevens understood racial issues only aesthetically. The sad truth for Stevens is that "decoration" is as derisive a term as "nigger."

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Biography of the Author

John Millett, the child of Maine "snowbirds," grew up in Florida, Maine, and assorted Denny's along I-95. In keeping with this pattern from his childhood, these are also the places where he acquired his schooling and even a B.A. and an M.A.: University of Florida, University of Southern Maine, University of Maine, and assorted Denny's along Interstate 95.

John's interest in poetry began out of a compulsion to write it. In order to get out of, or make sense of, uncomfortable predicaments like term papers, low GPA's, and squabbles with teachers, family, and pets, John writes poetry. Winning three poetry contests allowed John to buy a new set of tires for his Isuzu Trooper, which he both loves and abuses as he continually drives over the bumpy roads between Orono and Belfast. John heartily recommends that everyone own a Trooper.

For a few years, in order to legitimize his interest in poetry, John decided to pretend to be a scholar. This thesis is a result of that pretension.

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