

“In the Metaphysical Streets of the Physical Town”:  
Place and the Ordinary in Stevens’s “An Ordinary  
Evening in New Haven”

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Why did Wallace Stevens favor the unrhymed three-line stanzas that feature in his late long poems? Even as *The Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics* declares that “the tercet became the major form of the mature Wallace Stevens,” his use of that form has attracted little sustained or specific comment.<sup>1</sup> Even Helen Vendler, surely one of Stevens’s foremost interpreters, only remarks that “those triads, as everyone has recognized, somehow organized his mind in its long stretches better than any other alternative.”<sup>2</sup> It seems almost as though Stevens’s tercets are designed to be innocuous models of poetic moderation. On the one hand, they gesture to a venerable tradition, beginning with the terza rima of Dante’s *Divine Comedy*, and continuing, in the English language, through Donne, Shelley, and many more besides. On the other hand, Stevens eschews rhyme and varies line lengths at will, giving his version of the form a high degree of flexibility. “Notes toward a Supreme Fiction” (1942) heralds the triadic verse’s arrival as Stevens’s major form with great fanfare, for the reasons that the many critics who valorize the poem have identified: as a post-Romantic crisis poem, apocalyptic in tone, and exclusive of history and the everyday in its quest for transcendence, “Notes” does represent the culmination of a certain received view of Stevens’s poetics.<sup>3</sup> But why, then, should Stevens choose to retain the same form for his late masterpiece “An Ordinary Evening in New Haven” (1950), a poem that carefully, indeed, programmatically, reverses each of these traits? In answering this question, I will op-

1. T. V. F. Brogan, “Tercet,” in *The Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics*, ed. Roland Greene et al. (Princeton University Press, 2012), 1423.

2. Helen Hennessy Vendler, *On Extended Wings: Wallace Stevens’ Longer Poems* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1969), 3.

3. See, in particular, Harold Bloom’s *Wallace Stevens: The Poems of Our Climate* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1977), 167–218.

pose a deeply entrenched critical tradition that relegates “An Ordinary Evening” to the status of an inferior rewriting of “Notes toward a Supreme Fiction” and argue instead that “An Ordinary Evening” amounts to the centerpiece of Stevens’s oeuvre. As the historicist moment in criticism develops into a sustained engagement with the ordinary and the everyday, “An Ordinary Evening” offers a novel and sophisticated vision of the intersection between history and the everyday.

If the form of Stevens’s long poems attracted only scant comment even at the apogee of New Critical formalism, that neglect has probably been intensified more recently by the sustained historicist turn in literary criticism. In retrospect, it is clear that Stevens studies have been the site of an instructive skirmish in the larger new historicist campaign. James Longenbach and Al Filreis in particular have sought to oppose a Stevens embedded in “the actual world” to the “introspective voyager” that earlier criticism ingrained so deeply.<sup>4</sup> To have reinvigorated so persuasively a figure formerly notorious for his riddling syntax and mandarin aloofness represents a major triumph of historicist criticism, especially given how forceful is the argument set out by Marjorie Perloff in the essays “Pound/Stevens: Whose Era?” and “The Supreme Fiction and the Impasse of Modernist Lyric” for a Stevens who “rejects the past as deadly, but paradoxically dwells in it.”<sup>5</sup> The implication that Stevens fails to resolve that paradox, or at least to withstand it satisfactorily, is clear. Countless comparable successes quickly allowed the new historicism to attain something approaching consensus status across the discipline. More recently, however, critics from a variety of backgrounds signaled their intention to reinvigorate discussions of literary form, expressing versions of the complaint that, as Marjorie Levinson put it, “we have come to treat artworks as ‘bundles of historical and cultural content,’ a simpleminded mimesis replacing the dynamic formalism that characterized early new historicism.”<sup>6</sup> As Richard Strier notes, the disparagement of “formalism” began in part with the rise of the new historicism and in part earlier, with the decon-

4. See James Longenbach, *Wallace Stevens: The Plain Sense of Things* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), 293–306; and Alan Filreis, *Wallace Stevens and the Actual World* (Princeton University Press, 1991), xv–xix.

5. Marjorie Perloff, “Pound/Stevens: Whose Era?,” in *The Dance of the Intellect: Studies in the Poetry of the Pound Tradition* (Cambridge University Press, 1985), 19, 20, and “Revolving in Crystal: The Supreme Fiction and the Impasse of Modernist Lyric,” in *Wallace Stevens: The Poetics of Modernism*, ed. Albert Gelpi (Cambridge University Press, 1985).

6. Marjorie Levinson, “What Is New Formalism?,” *PMLA* 122 (2007): 561. Levinson borrows the phrase “bundles of historical or cultural content” from Mark David Rasmussen’s introduction to *Renaissance Literature and Its Formal Engagements*, ed. Mark David Rasmussen (New York: Palgrave, 2002), 1. See also Susan Wolfson, “Reading for Form,” *Modern Language Quarterly* 61 (2000): 1–16.

structive moment in American criticism exemplified by Paul de Man's essay "The Dead-End of Formalist Criticism."<sup>7</sup> De Man's antiformalism offers a particular challenge to my reading of Stevens insofar as by positing a deep "continuity between depth and surface" in "An Ordinary Evening," my position might be open to caricature as a mere reprise of "the reassuring notion of art as the reconciliation of opposites."<sup>8</sup> I will have more to say about this in due course; for now, suffice it to say that I agree with Strier in his description of an "indexical" as opposed to an aesthetic formalism, that is, "the belief . . . that formal features of a text, matters of style, can be indices to large intellectual and cultural matters."<sup>9</sup> This essay will argue that modernist studies' recent turn toward the ordinary and the everyday represents one way out of both the historicist and the deconstructive impasses and, moreover, that Stevens is not an incidental example for such an argument: rather, the distinguishing characteristic of "An Ordinary Evening in New Haven" is its self-conscious engagement with these questions.

In *Modernism and the Ordinary*, Liesl Olson argues that "Stevens valued the dependable routines of ordinary life over the rarer moments of inner clarity or imaginative vision, and his poetry deeply reflects this focus." Olson thus aligns her approach with Vendler, Filreis, and Longenbach, and against Perloff, insofar as Olson holds that the commonplace, not the abstract, is "the most defining feature of [Stevens's] finest work."<sup>10</sup> But the implicit aesthetic judgment in this claim deserves to be lingered over for longer than Olson allows, in view of the fact that Filreis and Longenbach agree with Perloff in making "Notes toward a Supreme Fiction" and not "An Ordinary Evening in New Haven" the central work of Stevens's mature period. Part of the issue here is what should count as history: in a sense, the historicists and Perloff engage one another through a definition of history that tends to privilege events and social movements that are large in scale. But part of the recent turn to the ordinary has involved a renewed awareness of history from below and, as I intend to show here, deep historically inflected frameworks like the built environment. Olson's account of Stevens's ordinary rightly privileges "the material rather than the spiritual, the local rather than the exotic, and the constant rather than the unknown"; to this list we might add the context rather than the

7. In Strier's gloss, de Man argues that according to its own premises, formalism leads inexorably to a recognition of the "deep division of Being itself" and thus to deconstruction (Richard Strier, "How Formalism Became a Dirty Word, and Why We Can't Do Without It," in Rasmussen, *Renaissance Literature and Its Formal Engagements*, 207–8).

8. Paul de Man, "Form and Intent in the American New Criticism," 23, and "The Dead-End of Formalist Criticism," 237, both in *Blindness and Insight: Essays in the Rhetoric of Contemporary Criticism* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1983).

9. Strier, "How Formalism Became a Dirty Word," 211.

10. Liesl Olson, *Modernism and the Ordinary* (Oxford University Press, 2009), 116.

event.<sup>11</sup> I agree with Olson about the primacy of “An Ordinary Evening” over “Notes,” but in view of their formal similarity, we clearly need a more dialectical account of their relationship than the either/or attitude that has so far tended to prevail. I do not intend simply to resile from a version of historicism in favor of a version of formalism; rather, I will follow the formal cues offered by “An Ordinary Evening” to pursue a wider range of historical referents than has previously been associated with the poem. Indeed, insofar as his poetry after “Notes” does represent an authentic advance in both Stevens’s oeuvre and in modernist poetics as a whole, it is to affirm both form and history, not to set one in opposition to the other.

## I

Stevens’s critics have often drawn attention to the unusual course of his writing career, particularly the relative lateness of his poetic maturity. James Longenbach’s notable account in *Wallace Stevens: The Plain Sense of Things*, for instance, is organized around two great periods of silence: following the poet’s departure from Harvard in 1900 and following the publication of *Harmonium* in 1923. This disjointed career makes it difficult to identify both continuities within Stevens’s own oeuvre and affinities between Stevens and his contemporaries. Longenbach structures his argument around one such continuity, the pervasive impact of war on the modernist generation, showing that Stevens, too, treated war as a major impetus to poetry. Longenbach thereby refutes the argument made by Marjorie Perloff, who cites Stevens’s letters of 1941–42 concerning the publication of “Notes toward a Supreme Fiction” and tabulates them against contemporary events surrounding the United States’ entry into the Second World War, to give the impression of a poet serenely indifferent to such momentous happenings.<sup>12</sup> Olson follows Longenbach in making the Second World War her main referent for a discussion of Stevens’s late poetry, arguing convincingly that the uncanny continuity of daily life amid “the climate of war” stimulates Stevens’s interest in the ordinary.<sup>13</sup> The ordinary, that is to say, intrudes into the debate over Stevens as something of a third term: neither history on the immense scale of the Second World War nor its denial or exclusion, the ordinary instead represents the site of a complex dialectic between continuity and discontinuity.<sup>14</sup> On this

11. Ibid.

12. Perloff, “Revolving in Crystal,” 42.

13. Olson, *Modernism and the Ordinary*, 126–27.

14. Siobhan Phillips usefully describes this dialectic in terms of “diurnal return,” the daily pattern of repetition with a difference that gives shape to our everyday lives, in *Poetics of the Everyday* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010), 22.

basis, I want to describe another recurrent theme in Stevens's oeuvre that culminates in "An Ordinary Evening in New Haven": his persistent interest in the ways that modernity refigures the human relationship with place.

In his essay "In the American Grid: Modern Poetry and the Suburbs," Peter Monacell argues that Stevens's poetry, like that of his contemporaries Hart Crane, William Carlos Williams, and Louis Zukofsky, addresses the suburbanization of American cities that took place between the 1910s and the 1940s.<sup>15</sup> His main example is "The Man with the Blue Guitar," a poem that has been read mainly with reference to the aesthetico-political debates of the 1930s. Alan Filreis reads the poem as a sort of dialogue between an aestheticist strain in modernism and its socialist-realist detractors, detecting a strategy whereby it appropriates the idiom of those detractors—crucially, the charged phrase "things as they are"—and turns it to its own poetic purposes.<sup>16</sup> Thus, Stevens pointedly insists that "Things as they are / Are changed upon the blue guitar": poetry, even in the abstract idiom signified by the ostentatiously Picassoesque blue guitar, changes the world too.<sup>17</sup> After thirty cantos couched mainly in that abstract idiom, Stevens introduces a representative figure to advance his argument (a move that remains a constant throughout his work):

From this I shall evolve a man.  
This is his essence: the old fantoche

Hanging his shawl upon the wind,  
Like something on the stage, puffed out,

His strutting studied through centuries.  
At last, in spite of his manner, his eye

A-cock at the cross piece on a pole  
Supporting heavy cables, slung

Through Oxidia, banal suburb,  
One-half of all its installments paid.

(*CP*, 149)

This figure, Filreis suggests, is the Crispin of "The Comedian as the Letter C" transformed into "a lineman for the electric company."<sup>18</sup> How to read this canto in the context of the polarized thirties, and with Stevens's fa-

15. Peter Monacell, "In the American Grid: Modern Poetry and the Suburbs," *Journal of Modern Literature* 35 (2012): 122.

16. Alan Filreis, *Modernism from Right to Left: Wallace Stevens, the Thirties, and Literary Radicalism* (Cambridge University Press, 1994), 253.

17. Wallace Stevens, *Collected Poetry and Prose*, ed. Frank Kermode and Joan Richardson (New York: Library of America, 1997), 135. Hereafter cited in text as *CP*.

18. Filreis, *Modernism from Right to Left*, 276.

mous remove from the depredations of the Depression, remains a difficult question. Could “fantoche,” meaning puppet, simply refer to the man’s being suspended from wires, as Filreis’s reading suggests? Or should we see the man’s equation with a puppet as a blameful attack on working-class agency? Or might it be a sympathetic account of working people as “puppets” whose fates are controlled and whose labor is exploited by the prevailing economic system? Whichever reading we incline toward, the worker-as-fantoche is a puppet in the sense that he is controlled by the poet, whose relationship with him far better approximates that of a god than any capitalist could.

To put it another way, the stanza offers a typically Stevensian comment on the aspirations of social realism: no amount of emancipatory intention on the part of authors can overcome the fictionality of their creations. To hold that the imagination is a “violence from within that protects us from a violence without” is not the same thing as to claim for imaginative art a direct social efficacy (*CP*, 665). To flesh out the context of this fraught moment, Filreis quotes Horace Gregory, poetry editor of *New Masses*: “Newer poetry is less affected by an early acquaintance with Joyce, Eliot and Pound and . . . is no longer concerned with mere verbal experiment”; a preferable style would have “a hard, clear surface.”<sup>19</sup> In denouncing elaborately rhetorical language, Gregory himself resorts to rhetoric: the metaphor of a “hard, clear surface” may seem apposite applied to a given piece of writing in retrospect, but it advocating a style free of rhetorical elaboration, Gregory can only resort to more metaphors. Filreis underscores the point by gleefully adducing a series of contemporaneous “social realist” poems that nonetheless fall back on traditional verse forms. Stevens’s way of charting a course between this particular Scylla and Charybdis is characteristically thoughtful, and it appears in the final lines of the *Oxidia* canto:

Ecce, Oxidia is the seed  
Dropped out of this amber-ember pod,

Oxidia is the soot of fire,  
Oxidia is Olympia.

(*CP*, 149)

Just how Oxidia is transfigured into Olympia, and what this ultimately means, are difficult questions. For Harold Bloom, Oxidia “is revealed to be a version of Olympia, but only as the soot of fire is also the fire”; in other words, Oxidia is a degraded modern Olympia in the manner of Joyce’s Dublin and Homeric Greece.<sup>20</sup> Misinterpreting the metaphor, Bloom seems unaware that a number of tree species rely on the extreme heat

19. *Ibid.*, 253–54.

20. Bloom, *Wallace Stevens*, 133.

of wildfires to crack their seedpods. The heat of Oxidia's industrial landscape fuels its transformation into Olympia. In other words, the metaphorical transposition of Oxidia into Olympia could be read as the culmination of the canto, rather than suffering from an irony imparted in the preceding lines.

The bluntness of this metaphorical transposition reminds us, in an age of skepticism toward political rhetoric—mere rhetoric—that troping is a necessary tool of the political imagination as well as the literary; indeed, that the two can at times be one. Against the claim that “clarity of style”—by whatever definition—is the proper aesthetic principle for socially conscious literature, Stevens upholds the social agency of the imagination using the full resources of linguistic figuration available to it, which is not to say, however, that he resists entirely the argument that richness of expression might diminish the social agency of art by limiting its audience to an elite coterie. Indeed, this question took on a heightened urgency for Stevens in the context of the Second World War. In his postface to *Parts of a World* (1942), he claims, “it has been easy to say in recent times that everything tends to become real, or, rather, that everything moves in the direction of reality, that is to say, in the direction of fact. We leave fact and come back to it, come back to what we wanted fact to be, not to what it was, not to what it has too often remained. The poetry of a work of the imagination constantly illustrates the fundamental and endless struggle with fact” (*CP*, 251). The imagination is a means of pursuing “the struggle with fact,” a struggle that, in Stevens's account, unifies the epistemological struggle to establish just what the facts are with the political struggle to resist their determinism—in other words, “Things as they are / Are changed upon the blue guitar.”

That struggle is exemplified by the electrical wires that lead Filreis to identify the figure in the canto as a linesman for the electrical company. These must be, at once, the banal urban eyesore that they appear as, signifying the distance between Oxidia and the pastoral ideal and, as Filreis argues, the literal tethers connecting the poem with its antecedents. Of these, Filreis identifies two; first, Muriel Rukeyser's “The Tunnel” from *Theory of Flight*:

Speak to me  
world hissing over cables, shining among steel  
strands,  
plucking speech out on a wire, linking voices  
reach me now in my fierceness, or I am drowned.<sup>21</sup>

21. Muriel Rukeyser, *The Collected Poems of Muriel Rukeyser* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1978), 33.

And, through it, Hart Crane's *The Bridge*:

O harp and altar, of the fury fused,  
 (How could mere toil align thy choring strings!)  
 Terrific threshold of the prophet's pledge,  
 Prayer of pariah, and the lover's cry . . .<sup>22</sup>

Both of these examples differ significantly from Stevens in illustrative ways. For one thing, both poets make extensive use of apostrophe; for another, their language is markedly heightened: Rukeyser speaks in a state of "fierceness," while Crane evokes a "lover's cry" out of the "terrific threshold" of Brooklyn Bridge. Both poets transfigure their material into a kind of urban sublime through the intensity of their language: Crane's bridge becomes a kind of altar. For Stevens, however, the transfiguration of Oxidia comes about suddenly, and baldly: through the transformative power of the copula "is" alone.

To Filreis's genealogy of this passage we might add an even earlier example, a passage from Thoreau's journal written in 1851: "Yesterday & today the stronger winds of Autumn have begun to blow & the telegraph harp has sounded loudly. . . . The tone varying with the tension of different parts of the wire. The sound proceeds from near the posts where the vibration is apparently more rapid. I put my ear to one of the posts, and it seemed to me as if every pore of the wood was filled with music."<sup>23</sup> Unlike Rukeyser and Crane, who use poetry to coax their objects into transfigured states, Thoreau describes the telegraph as though it were an objet trouvé, as well as an immense technological marvel: "to have a harp on so great a scale—girdling the very earth—and played by the winds of every latitude and longitude," he exclaims, is all the more amazing because "we have yet attributed the invention to no God."<sup>24</sup> This passage adds considerable nuance to Thoreau's more well-known dismissal of the telegraph in *Walden*: "We are in great haste to construct a magnetic telegraph from Maine to Texas; but Maine and Texas, it may be, have nothing important to communicate."<sup>25</sup> Thoreau the curmudgeon is replaced by Thoreau the aesthete, whose fascination with the telegraph turns the accidental music of the wires into a distant echo of the Aeolian harp. In an attitude that

22. Hart Crane, *Complete Poems and Selected Letters* (New York: Library of America, 2006), 34.

23. Henry David Thoreau, *A Year in Thoreau's Journal, 1851* (New York: Penguin, 1993), 231.

24. *Ibid.*

25. Henry David Thoreau, *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers, Walden; or, Life in the Woods, The Maine Woods, Cape Cod*, ed. Robert F. Sayre (New York: Library of America, 1985), 364.

seems to belie his modern status as the patron saint of ecocriticism, Thoreau greets the telegraph—an immense vessel channeling the onrush of modernity—with avidity.

The telegraph epitomizes several aspects of the modernity that Thoreau worried over in his writing; above all, the altered status of place brought about by decoupling communication from transportation (“played by the winds of every latitude and longitude”). Instantaneous communication between geographically separate locales effectively inaugurates what later scholars would come to call the “dematerializing” or “disembedding” tendencies of modernity. “The implications of this alteration in the human condition unfolded only gradually over the next several generations,” writes Daniel Walker Howe, “but contemporaries fully realized that they stood in the presence of a far reaching change.”<sup>26</sup> Hence, only seventeen years after the first demonstration of the electrical telegraph, Lincoln could pun on the “mystic chords of memory, stretching from every battle-field and patriot grave to every living heart and hearthstone all over this broad land” in his First Inaugural Address, fully aware that they had been supplemented by another, equally mystical (at least in Thoreau’s telling), set of cords.<sup>27</sup>

The telegraph network anticipates the many other “grids” that structure our experience of modernity, like the power grid that looms in the “heavy cables, slung / Through Oxidia.” Anthony Giddens’s famous sociology of modernity offers a vocabulary for this state of affairs: modernity is characterized by the extension of so-called abstract systems, which lift social relations out of their local contexts and restructure them along indefinite expanses of space and time.<sup>28</sup> In her oft-cited essay “The Grid,” Rosalind Krauss, meanwhile, argues that grids in the visual arts “compe[l] our acknowledgement of a world beyond the frame”; likewise, these poetic grids remind us that under the conditions of modernity, place is emptied out. It is no longer possible to stand outside of abstract systems, and through them, every locale is potentially connected to any other.<sup>29</sup> Nowhere stands apart from the crisscrossing network of abstract systems that transform semantically saturated places of human dwelling into the infinite expanse of blank, a priori space, a distinction that Maurice Merleau-Ponty describes in terms of “geometric” and “anthropological space.”<sup>30</sup> “If a place can be de-

26. Daniel Walker Howe, *What Hath God Wrought: The Transformation of America, 1815–1848* (Oxford University Press, 2007), 696.

27. Abraham Lincoln, “First Inaugural Address,” in *Speeches of the American Presidents*, ed. Janet Podell and Steven Anzovin (New York: Wilson, 1988), 181.

28. Anthony Giddens, *The Consequences of Modernity* (Cambridge: Polity, 1990), 21.

29. Rosalind E. Krauss, “Grids,” in *The Originality of the Avant-Garde and Other Modernist Myths* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1986), 18; Giddens, *Consequences of Modernity*, 84.

30. Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Phenomenology of Perception*, trans. Donald A. Landes (New York: Routledge, 2012), 300.

fined as relational, historical and concerned with identity,” suggests Marc Augé, “then a space which cannot be defined as relational, or historical, or concerned with identity will be a non-place.”<sup>31</sup> The reduction of anthropological space to geometric space, or place to nonplace, becomes a recurrent concern of writers addressing themselves to the effects of modernity and provides a ready set of tropes in which to couch that theme.

Augé draws a distinction between a Baudelairian modernity in which the semantic significance of place persists (at least in the palimpsest of temporalities that make up many of the masterpieces of modernist literature) and a later “supermodernity,” which effaces the relational, historical, and identity-marking aspects of place.<sup>32</sup> Something like Augé’s supermodernity is apparent in the constellation of issues that worried Stevens throughout his work of the 1930s. To take only one example, “The Common Life,” first published in *Poetry* magazine in 1939, and then appearing in *Parts of a World* (1942), meditates on that emblem of the changes wrought on cities by modernity, the skyline:<sup>33</sup>

That’s the down-town frieze,  
Principally the church steeple,  
A blank line beside a white line;  
And the stack of the electric plant,  
A black line drawn on flat air.  
It is a morbid light  
In which they stand,  
Like an electric lamp  
On a page of Euclid.

(CP, 204)

The modern city’s rectilinear shapes are laid out here in “the webs / Of wire, the designs of ink” like a perspective drawing, as the poem puns on “line” to denote a line of poetry, a geometric figure, and the familiar electrical or telegraphic wire. As in Augé’s Baudelairian modernity, a “church steeple” and the “stack of the electric plant,” or tradition and modernity, stand suspended in counterpoint. This altered landscape coincides with a diminution in human relations: “The men have no shadows / And the women have only one side.” Moreover, all of this is rendered in explicitly geometrical terms: “Like an electric lamp / On a page of Euclid.”

31. Marc Augé, *Non-places: Introduction to an Anthropology of Supermodernity*, trans. John Howe (London: Verso, 1995), 77–78.

32. *Ibid.*, 110.

33. “The Common Life” appears in *Poetry* as part of a clutch of six poems, collectively titled “Illustrations of the Poetic as a Sense,” and featuring poems such as “A Dish of Peaches in Russia,” “Arcades of Philadelphia the Past,” and “Of Hartford in a Purple Light”: all meditate on questions of place. Wallace Stevens, “Illustrations of the Poetic as a Sense,” *Poetry* 54, no. 4 (1939): 177–83.

The title “The Common Life,” of course, looks forward to the importance that the term “commonplace” will assume in “An Ordinary Evening in New Haven.” In a letter about the poem to Hi Simons, Stevens confides, “I wanted to share the common life.”<sup>34</sup> Olson identifies Stevens’s commonplace in “a mood and style: the plain mood of New Haven and what the poem recognizes as an ‘endlessly elaborating’ style.”<sup>35</sup> But “common life” and “commonplace” remind us that Stevens was much given to puns based on splitting words; the commonplace, then, becomes a literal question—more literal than most readers of the poem have allowed—of the *common place*: the environments within which everyday experiences take place. The nature of these common places—particularly, but not exclusively, New Haven—and what it means to dwell in them under the condition of modernity emerge as the central themes of “An Ordinary Evening in New Haven.” In this respect, Stevens exemplifies a wider modernist anxiety about the fate of place in modernity. But Stevens’s late poetry transcends the antimodern pessimism of his earlier work in its quest for reconciliation with modernity, like Thoreau sustaining his sense of wonder through the accidental music of the telegraph wire.

## II

As I suggested in my introduction, “Notes toward a Supreme Fiction” has generally been read as a more consequential work than “An Ordinary Evening in New Haven,” but I want to suggest that, instead, it can be profitably read as a prototype of the later work. As such, much of what can be said about the formal arrangement of “Notes” can be applied to “An Ordinary Evening”; indeed, as he works out the lineaments of his major form, Stevens is more explicit than ever about his formal choices. Thus, in a letter to Katharine Frazier of the Cummington Press on May 14, 1942, he carefully describes how “Notes toward a Supreme Fiction” should be arranged: “there will be 30 poems, each of seven verses, each verse of three lines. In short, there will be 21 lines of poetry on each page.”<sup>36</sup> Perloff gets to the crux of the issue by noting that with “one poem per page, ten poems per section, seven tercets per poem, the three group titles on separate pages,” the poem possesses what she describes as “a geometric perfection.”<sup>37</sup> The only significant departure in “An Ordinary Evening” is that it abandons named canticles and employs six tercets per poem; indeed, the change

34. Wallace Stevens, *The Letters of Wallace Stevens*, ed. Holly Stevens (New York: Knopf, 1966), 352.

35. Olson, *Modernism and the Ordinary*, 138.

36. Stevens, *Letters*, 406–7.

37. Perloff, “Revolving in Crystal,” 43.

from an odd to an even number of tercets per stanza only adds to its grid-like organization. Stevens's emphasis on the geometric framework of "Notes" is reflected in the design of the volume, the title page of which features two perpendicular lines, a yellow circle, and a point. The circle and point seem to refer to the poem's first canto, a meditation on "The inconceivable idea of the sun" (*CP*, 329). But they also represent a sort of geometrical typography: any number of geometrical figures reduced to their constituent parts of line, curve, and point (fig. 1). Moreover, by juxtaposing these lines with the text (the title, author, date, and in particular "The Cummington Press, Cummington, Massachusetts," which intersects one of the lines), the geometry of the text itself emerges. Moreover, the arrangement of the title page draws attention to one central geometrical figure: the spine, constitutive of the book itself.

We can, indeed, we ought, to go further than Perloff in exploring the geometry of the poem and its implications for how we read it. We can do so by conducting a sort of thought experiment: if we take the poem out of the linear sequence imposed on it by book printing and imagine it instead extended in two dimensions. We might visualize the poem divided into three decads of ten cantos each (with the first or final canto set aside as a kind of capstone), or five groups of six cantos, and so on. In other words, the poem invites us to think of it as a kind of grid, and consequently encourages a nonlinear approach to reading it. The first canto declares the poem's intention to present "The vulgate of experience" and suggests that it will take the form of a "never-ending meditation," dramatized in the first stanza by the lines "Of this, / A few words, an and yet, and yet, and yet—" (*CP*, 397). (Note that the "and yet's" come in threes.) We should recall here that, unlike "Notes toward a Supreme Fiction," which was composed with book publication in mind, "An Ordinary Evening in New Haven" was composed to be read aloud at the Connecticut Academy of Arts and Sciences' sesquicentennial meeting in November 1949. The poem thus seems to embrace the potentially infinite elaboration of speech, "the living *logos*," particularly in its invocation of "the endlessly elaborating poem" (of which, it must be said, "An Ordinary Evening" is implied to be only an approximation).<sup>38</sup> Stevens read an abbreviated and slightly resequenced version of the poem, also suggesting that a grid-like modularity was part of the poem's conception.<sup>39</sup> At the same time, we must read Stevens's unrhymed tercets as distant descendants of Dante's *terza*

38. See Jacques Derrida's classic account of the privilege traditionally accorded to speech as "living *logos*," in "Plato's Pharmacy," in *Dissemination*, trans. Barbara Johnson (University of Chicago Press, 1981), 75–84.

39. Stevens, *Letters*, 636, 662.

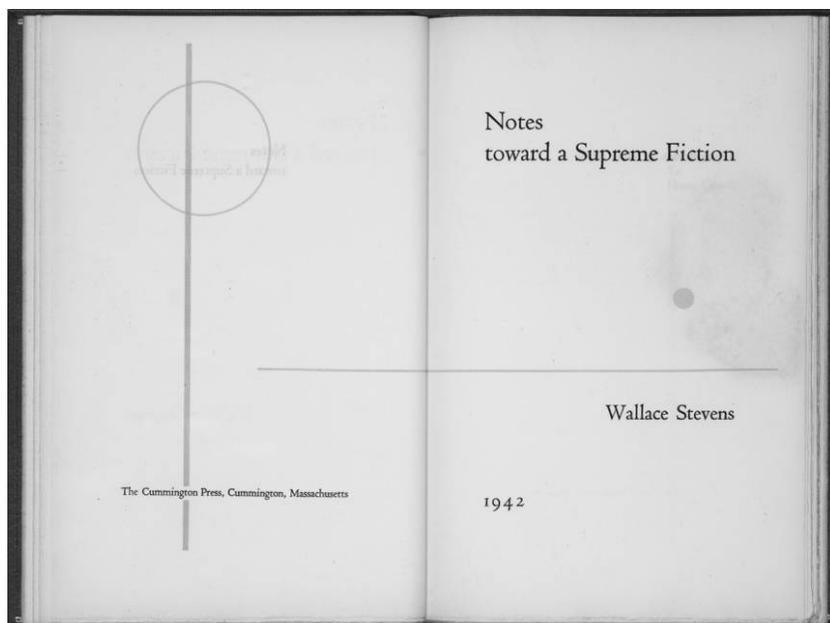


Figure 1. Title page of Wallace Stevens, *Notes toward a Supreme Fiction* (Cummington Press, 1942), RB 440579, The Huntington Library, San Marino, California. Color version available as an online enhancement.

rima, a form that through its interlocking *aba, bcb, cdc* rhyme scheme also “suggests processes without beginning or end, an irresistible *perpetuum mobile*.”<sup>40</sup> Stevens’s meditative mode might then be thought of as a secularized version of Dante’s testimony to God’s infinite nature through poetic form.

Indeed, Stevens draws explicitly on the language of the book of Revelation to describe “Reality [as] the beginning not the end, / Naked Alpha, not the hierophant Omega . . .” and concludes that “Alpha continues to begin. / Omega is refreshed at every end” (*CP*, 400). These lines juxtapose the usual linearity of the long poem with a layer of circularity. The poem presents itself as an ongoing, potentially endless meditation. In contrast with “Notes,” which at least gestures toward logical exposition with its succession of named canticles, “An Ordinary Evening” seems determined to forestall a conclusion, even in its final lines:

40. L. J. Zillman and C. Scott, “Terza Rima,” in Greene et al., *Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics*, 1423.

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

(*CP*, 417)

These lines defer any final resolution of their meaning through a cluster of rhetorical techniques. First, the strongest verb in these lines, “traverse,” is in the simple present tense. As George T. Wright notes in his seminal paper on the topic, when the simple present appears without the temporal, conditional, or metaphysical qualifiers that usually accompany it in ordinary speech, it does a special kind of rhetorical work. By describing “a physical action perhaps repeatable but taking place once as far as we can judge” in a line of poetry, the simple present conjures a “realm outside our normal conscious time world, where every event must be assigned a more precise temporality.”<sup>41</sup> In other words, the simple present takes us outside of linear time. Second, the final lines of the poem—“a shade that traverses / A dust, a force that traverses a shade”—form a chiasmus, a rhetorical trope formed by the arrangement of repeated words in the form a/b/b/a, in this case shade/traverse/traverse/shade. This is only one of seven chiasmic formulations in the poem. The essence of the chiasmus as a rhetorical figure is reversibility: it establishes equivalence between its terms and holds them in perpetual stasis, arresting the process of linear progression.

The codes of reading that one ought to apply to a poem, particularly in the intermediary form of a long lyric (intermediary in the sense of being neither short nor properly epic), have always been ambiguous; no theory of the lyric appears in Aristotle’s surviving works, and partly as a result, the Western tradition has treated the lyric as a zone of formal experimentation second only to the novel. So it may be that we should not expect narrative as such in the first place, though it seems intuitively right that a long lyric ought to involve the orderly development of an idea, as opposed to the more epiphanic nature of the short lyric. “An Ordinary Evening,” however, has a peculiar inclination to paraphrase itself, suggesting that no single formulation is final but rather provisional and substitutable. An example of this occurs in one of the poem’s most famous passages:

Real and unreal are two in one: New Haven  
 Before and after one arrives, or, say,  
  
 Bergamo on a postcard, Rome after dark,  
 Sweden described, Salzburg with shaded eyes  
 Or Paris in conversation at a café.

(*CP*, 414)

41. George T. Wright, “The Lyric Present: Simple Present Verbs in English Poems,” *PMLA* 89 (1974): 565.

These disparate locales are held together by the conjunction “or,” parataxis establishing equivalence between the disparate entries of a list. Indeed, “and” and “or,” which appear twice in these lines, rather than “but,” or “so,” or “for,” are in a sense the presiding conjunctions of the whole poem. The connective syntax that would impart an order or hierarchy, establishing the basis of an argument, is absent. Parataxis implies that, at least within the context of the passage in which they appear, these words or statements are substitutable with one another. The next stanza,

This endlessly elaborating poem  
 Displays the theory of poetry,  
 As the theory of life . . .  
 (CP, 415)

joins the notion of substitutability with the idea of meditation. The rhetoric of meditation, as opposed to argument or dialectic, suggests exactly this “endless elaboration” (rather than any conclusion) is the point. As Olson argues, “Stevens’s fabulous wordplay is part of his ‘never-ending meditation.’”<sup>42</sup> We can describe this in formalist terms by noting that the poem conspicuously counters what Roland Barthes described as poetry’s inherent tendency toward the syntagmatic imaginary by invoking a certain paradigmatic uncertainty.<sup>43</sup> The paradigmatic and syntagmatic orders, routinely described as “axes,” are, of course, often imaged as a kind of grid. This, it seems to me, is the formal work of the grid in “An Ordinary Evening in New Haven”: to instantiate this paradigmatic/syntagmatic uncertainty. And, as such, it chimes with Krauss’s claim that grids “explicitly reject a narrative or sequential reading of any kind.”<sup>44</sup> When the poem counters syntagmatic progress with paradigmatic uncertainty, it exploits a realm of linguistic potentiality as opposed to one of action. It evokes, in Stevens’s own phrase, “the pleasures of merely circulating.”

“By virtue of the grid,” argues Krauss, “the given work of art is presented as a mere fragment, a tiny piece arbitrarily cropped from an infinitely larger fabric. Thus the grid operates from the work of art outward, compelling our acknowledgement of a world beyond the frame.”<sup>45</sup> That is to say, any particular instance of the grid can potentially be extended in all directions along an infinite plane. Similarly, the paradigmatic axis has the potential of an infinite recycling of terms, just as the syntagmatic axis allows any for-

42. Olson, *Modernism and the Ordinary*, 146.

43. The classic statement on the paradigmatic and syntagmatic axes of language is Roland Barthes’s *Elements of Semiology* (trans. Anette Lavers and Colin Smith [New York: Hill & Wang, 1973], 58–62), which overlays paradigm and syntagm with Jakobson’s distinction between metaphoric and metonymic language.

44. Krauss, “Grids,” 13.

45. *Ibid.*, 18.

mulation, in principle, to be infinitely extended. So, in short, the rhetorical strategies that the poem employs to circumvent linearity are reflected in its grid-like formal organization. That said, it must be acknowledged that whereas Krauss emphasizes the grid's capacity to extend beyond the limits of the frame, Stevens's design, like the lines on the title page of "Notes," stops decorously short of this rupture. Moreover, these characteristics bear witness to the poem's concern with the commonplace, in that (as Olson argues) the ordinary is characterized by the circular logic of repetition, habit, and routine rather than teleological, linear time. Stevens wrote in a letter to Bernard Heringman that, with "An Ordinary Evening," he wanted to "get as close to the ordinary, the commonplace and the ugly as it is possible for a poet to get."<sup>46</sup> While the conjunction of the commonplace and the ugly (shades of "The Common Life") can embarrass the critic who attempts to make the case for ordinariness as a positive aesthetic value, the most revealing aspect of Stevens's comment is the implicit point that poetry itself stands in opposition to the ordinary. Lyric attention, that is to say, has a transfigurative effect on the objects it represents, and therefore the poetry of the ordinary needs to devise strategies to mitigate those effects. Forestalling the tendency implicit in all artistic representation to impose narrative order is one such strategy.

Eleanor Cook's classic study of Stevens's language approaches this aspect of the poem from a slightly different perspective; she is concerned to show that the poem is, in her terms, anti-apocalyptic (marking a strong contrast with both "Notes" and "The Auroras of Autumn"). The key to her reading is a pun in the name of one of its few characters (if they can be called that), "Professor Eucalyptus." "Eucalyptus," a botanical term invented in the eighteenth century, means "well covered." The contrast with "apocalypse," from the ancient Greek *apokalypsis*, or "uncovering," is clear.<sup>47</sup> Cook is concerned not to place too much weight on this dichotomy, though. To avoid doing so, she evokes Stevens's own attempt to break through it by introducing a third term:

These fitful sayings are, also, of tragedy:  
The serious reflection is composed  
Neither of comic nor tragic but of commonplace.  
(CP, 408)

Cook's reading of the poem's antiapocalyptic orientation is, in effect, another way of describing its approach to the ordinary, although she herself does not make this connection explicit. As Frank Kermode has demon-

46. Stevens, *Letters*, 636.

47. Eleanor Cook, *Poetry, Word-Play, and Word-War in Wallace Stevens* (Princeton University Press, 1988), 269–72.

strated, we expect narrative to be, to some degree, apocalyptic in the broad sense of moving toward a revelatory conclusion. The constructor of that narrative manipulates an economy of knowledge that, at its conclusion, sets all preceding events into a comprehensible totality. In that sense, it might be appropriate to think in terms of narrative expectation, in an expanded sense, even in the case of lyric poetry. According to Kermode, linear sense making serves to reassure us that our own lives possess a coherent structure and direction: “If there is one belief (however the facts resist it) that unites us all, from the evangelists to those who argue away inconvenient portions of their texts, and those who spin large plots to accommodate the discrepancies and dissonances into some larger scheme, it is this conviction that somehow, in some occult fashion, if we could only detect it, everything will be found to hang together.”<sup>48</sup> The ordinary takes place prior to, or beneath (as in George Perec’s “infra-ordinary”), these retrospective assemblies of experience, and by resisting the urge to order things teleologically, literature comes closer to representing it.<sup>49</sup>

The grid suspends the style of sense making that Kermode describes. Moreover, it connects the poem with a broad stream of modernist aesthetics in the visual arts from Kazemir Malevich to Piet Mondrian.<sup>50</sup> Grids figure prominently in the work of these artists as, among other things, forceful declarations of their works’ modernity. Krauss encapsulates the argument by describing the grid as that which announces modern art’s hostility to narrative. In the context of painting, this manifests itself by obliterating the illusion of perspective. Rather than mapping the space of a room or a landscape—that is, ordering representations of space to approximate our experience of it—the grid maps only the painting itself.<sup>51</sup> Thus painterly illusion gives way to a stark assertion of the painting’s materiality. The effect of Stevens’s conscientious instructions about the layout of “Notes toward a Supreme Fiction” to the Cummington Press is similar in effect. The aesthetic space of the poem, in other words, is mapped directly onto the physical space of the page. According to Krauss, “These

48. Frank Kermode, “The Man in the Macintosh, the Boy in the Shirt,” in *The Genesis of Secrecy: On the Interpretation of Narrative* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1979), 72.

49. Georges Perec, “Approches de quoi?,” in *L’infra-ordinaire*, ed. Maurice Olender (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1989), 9–13.

50. Stevens was acquainted with Mondrian’s work, mentioning with approval his commitment to abstractionism in a letter to Barbara Church on January 25, 1949 (*Letters*, 627). Glen McLeod makes the case at length for Mondrian’s influence on “Notes toward a Supreme Fiction,” in “‘Notes Towards [sic] a Supreme Fiction’ and Abstract Art,” *Journal of Modern Literature* 16 (1989): 37–48. Edward Ragg notes that “Stevens knew Klee, Kandinsky and Mondrian variously insisted that abstraction enabled access to spiritual domains” (*Wallace Stevens and the Aesthetics of Abstraction* [Cambridge University Press, 2010], 212).

51. Krauss, “Grids,” 9.

two planes—the physical and the aesthetic—are demonstrated to be the same plane: coextensive, and, through the abscissas and ordinates of the grid, coordinate. Considered in this way, the bottom line of the grid is a naked and determined materialism.<sup>52</sup> But this materialism is often contradicted by the attitudes of those artists who use the grid in their work. For Mondrian and Malevich, the materiality of the painting is not the point at all; rather, “from their point of view, the grid is a staircase to the Universal.”<sup>53</sup> One prominent example of this spiritualist perspective is to be found in Malevich’s *Manifesto of Suprematism* of 1915, which declares that pictorial abstraction is a means of representing pure feeling untethered to the objects of the material world. Similar sentiments are reflected in Mondrian’s manifesto, *Neo-plasticism in Painting*.<sup>54</sup> The grid is the quintessence of abstraction, and therein lies its spiritual dimension.<sup>55</sup>

As a result, the grid takes on crucial importance for modernist aesthetics. In the context of a secularizing world, as described in Max Weber’s classic thesis of modernity as disenchantment, artists faced an increasingly stark choice between material and spiritual forms of expression. According to Krauss, “the curious testimony offered by the grid is that at this juncture” various canonical modernist artists “tried to decide for both.” Krauss attributes the longevity and ubiquity of the grid in modernist art to its power to make us “able to think we are dealing with materialism (or sometimes science, or logic) while at the same time it provides us with a release into belief (or illusion, or fiction).”<sup>56</sup> This supposed binary between materialism and belief maps quite naturally onto Stevens’s famous definition of poetry as the conflict between reality and imagination. But whereas “Notes toward a Supreme Fiction” (“Soldier, there is a war between the mind and sky” [*CP*, 351]) and “The Necessary Angel” (“A violence from within that protects us from a violence without” [*CP*, 665]) suggest that this conflict is intractable in nature, the meditative mode of “An Ordinary Evening in New Haven” tests out several provisional kinds of reconciliation.

But why then, when the poem deals with such enormous abstractions as reality and the imagination, should it signal so insistently its interest in a

52. *Ibid.*, 10.

53. *Ibid.*, 11.

54. See Kazimir Malevich, *The Non-objective World: The Manifesto of Suprematism* (Mineola, NY: Dover, 2003); and Piet Mondrian, *The New Art/the New Life: The Collected Writings* (London: Thames & Hudson, 1987).

55. Yves-Alain Bois adds important nuance to Krauss’s arguments in his discussion of Mondrian, where he argues that Mondrian’s grid compositions still possess pictorial depth but not of a kind that can be recuperated in an illusionistic way. His chief example, *New York City* (1942), “is a painting, but also a diagram, a battle plan against the ‘longitudinal’ section of representation” (Yves-Alain Bois, *Painting as Model* [Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1990], 183).

56. Krauss, “Grids,” 11.

particular place? Moreover, what might the specific locale of New Haven have to do with the fundamental problems of modernity that Stevens began to address in *Parts of a World*? The answer must have to do with the peculiar sense of unhomeliness that emerges in poems like “The Common Life” and that takes on even broader proportions in his late poetry. In “Of Modern Poetry” (1940), the specifically modern poem is the one that catches “the mind in the act of finding / What will suffice” (*CP*, 218). Sufficiency, perhaps as opposed to sublimity, marks our modern state as one of being caught within various strictures. Sentiments like this recur in Stevens’s other reflections on poetry, as in this oft-quoted canto from “Notes”:

From this the poem springs: that we live in a place  
That is not our own and, much more, not ourselves  
And hard it is in spite of blazoned days.

(*CP*, 332)

A second version of this melancholy assessment appears at the end of “The Auroras of Autumn” (1947), where it takes on a historical dimension:

We were as Danes in Denmark all day long  
And knew one another well, hale-hearted landmen,  
For whom the outlandish was another day  
Of the week, queerer than Sunday. . . .

(*CP*, 361–62)

Searching for “what will suffice” in “a place that is not our own,” haunted by the memory of an earlier, unalienated existence as “hale-hearted landmen”; this is Stevens’s myth of modernity, the central problem to which his late poetry would continually address itself.

In “An Ordinary Evening in New Haven,” modernity becomes manifest in the figure of reality as a hotel:

We keep coming back and coming back  
To the real: to the hotel instead of the hymns  
That fall upon it out of the wind. We seek

The poem of pure reality, untouched  
By trope or deviation, straight to the word,  
Straight to the transfixing object . . .

(*CP*, 402)

The hotel imparts a sense of impermanence and contingency, while our insensibility to the “hymns / that fall upon it out of the wind” suggests a present in which Thoreau’s telegraph harp has ceased to be heard. As the context of the passage makes clear, pursuit of the “poem of pure reality” on its own is a mistake; it must find “For its counterpart a kind of coun-

terpoint" (*CP*, 406). Whereas Perloff had associated "geometric perfection" with Stevens's desire to exclude the real from his poetry, in "An Ordinary Evening," the "poem of pure reality" that goes "straight to the word" is rectilinear. Accepting that the poem tends to proceed by juxtaposition, how, then, does Stevens complicate the poem of pure reality?

To venture an answer to this question, and by extension to that of the poem's tercets, I will return to the historical and contextual approach that I took in section 1. The most persuasive effort in this direction on the topic of the grid is Hannah Higgins's recent *Grid Book*, which situates the grid in the broadest possible historical frame, from prehistory to the present. Where cities are concerned, Higgins makes a case study out of ancient Miletus, rebuilt on a grid plan over three centuries after an earthquake in 479 BCE, and, in doing so, draws an analogy between the modernist pictorial grid and the urban grid. Higgins quotes Alan Waterhouse's *Boundaries of the City*: in Miletus, "everywhere the grid boundaries confirmed the sense of being embraced by the landscape, carrying the eye beyond the confines of the street to the revered forests, outcrops, and hills shaped in the image of the deities."<sup>57</sup> In other words, the grid reconciles the opposites of built and natural environments, orienting the city to its surrounding landscape. Waterhouse takes the view of myth that originates with structuralist anthropology, that it functions to reconcile symbolic opposites, and reads the grid as an extension of this general tendency. In Higgins's phrase, "the Hellenistic [grid] expressed both rational and irrational ideas, or perhaps an irrational belief in rational form."<sup>58</sup> Higgins's comment looks forward to the age of reason, in which grid plans took on a utopian aspect on the assumption that urban form could profoundly influence human behavior.

In the modernist period, these utopian aspirations were not the sole preserve of abstract painters: the architect Le Corbusier, too, embraced the grid. Surveying this history from Miletus to the twentieth century, Le Corbusier writes: "Where the orthogonal is supreme, there we can read the height of a civilization. . . . When man begins to draw straight lines he bears witness that he has gained control of himself and that he has reached a condition of order."<sup>59</sup> This is not the place to offer a comprehensive history of the urban grid; even Higgins's study stops far short of that. Moreover, in an era when many of the fears and aspirations of modernity had clustered around the United States of America, Le Corbusier declares that "we must have the courage to view the rectilinear cities of Amer-

57. Alan Waterhouse, quoted in Hannah Higgins, *The Grid Book* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2009), 59.

58. *Ibid.*, 60.

59. Le Corbusier, *The City of Tomorrow and Its Planning*, trans. Frederick Etchells (New York: Dover, 1987), 43.

ica with admiration. If the aesthete has not so far done so, the moralist, on the contrary, may well find more food for reflection than at first appears.<sup>60</sup> The grid is thus at once historical and transhistorical, the kind of paradox that both Le Corbusier and Stevens would embrace. It emerges as the result of a determined human effort to order the built environment and comes in and out of favor throughout history. At the same time, however, the grid instantiates the fundamental order of the universe as described in Euclidean geometry. By “the rectilinear cities of America,” Le Corbusier means gridded cities like New York, Chicago, and Los Angeles, where the grid was chiefly a matter of facilitating easy transportation and efficiently parceling out real estate. But the earliest American grid cities were designed in mind of spiritual considerations as well.

The earliest of the gridded cities founded in colonial North America was New Haven itself. The city was established in 1638 by the Reverend John Davenport, a wealthy Puritan merchant, and is, according to James Kornwolf, “exceptional among early New England towns in having been conceived as a ‘model’ community with a perfectly square, nine-block gridiron plan dominated by a central village green and with pragmatically arranged streets leading out from the town to the harbor and the surrounding countryside.”<sup>61</sup> The generous public green, with the community’s place of worship at the center of it, gives material expression to the spiritual aspirations of the Puritan settlers for a sober, ordered, and communally-focused dwelling place (fig. 2). New Haven itself, then, represents the desire to make the physical world and the spiritual world congruent. Indeed, as Cook points out, Stevens’s poem exploits a pun on New Haven and “New Heaven” that went to the heart of the aspirations of its Puritan founders.<sup>62</sup> In fact, the poem balances its “geometrical perfection” with a lavish amount of trope (“turning”) and deviation, just as a city elaborates on its plan through the glorious contingency of the built environment. Form, in effect, becomes a form of historicization. And in making it so, Stevens resituates the problem of modernity in a much broader historical frame.

In choosing a gridded city as the subject of his sustained meditation on the ordinary, Stevens develops beyond the reactionary antimodernism of *Oxidia* or “The Common Life.” Rather than epitomizing the diminution of place in modernity, as it did earlier, the grid city now becomes the site of reconciliation between the conflicting demands of matter and spirit, or heaven and earth:

60. *Ibid.*, 10.

61. James D. Kornwolf and Georgiana W. Kornwolf, eds., *Architecture and Town Planning in Colonial North America*, vol. 2 (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2002), 1009.

62. Cook, *Poetry, Word-Play, and Word-War*, 270.

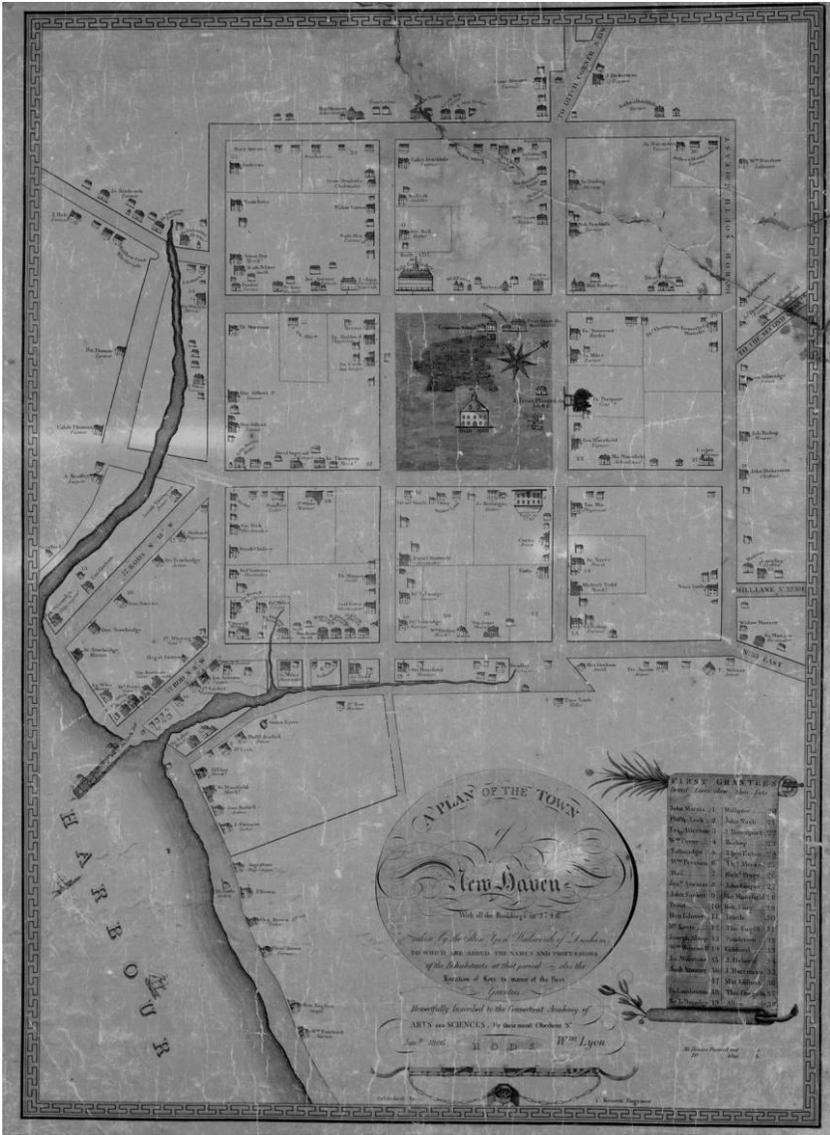


Figure 2. New Haven, detail from an 1806 engraving by William L. Lyon based on a 1748 drawing by James Wadsworth, Yale University Library Map Collection, New Haven, CT. Color version available as an online enhancement.

The instinct for heaven had its counterpart:  
 The instinct for earth, for New Haven, for his room,  
 The gay tournamonde as of a single world

In which he is and as and is are one.

(*CP*, 406)

The instincts for heaven and earth are separately delineated before being reconciled in a single world, a world in which “as and is,” or simile and identity, or imagination and reality, are one. In other words, the poem recurrently seeks what we might call a kind of *aufhebung*: a dialectic pattern of opposites contained together in a higher synthesis. This must be germane to Stevens’s choice of the tercet (as opposed, for instance, to the quatrain). While programmatically adhering to a thesis/antithesis/synthesis structure would render the poem deathly boring, insinuating it at the level of form provides a typically elusive (indeed, Stevensian) cue for how the poem ought to be read, while frequent use of enjambment retains syntactic flexibility. The same principle finds a slightly different formulation earlier in the poem, in canto 12:

The poem is the cry of its occasion,  
 Part of the *res* itself and not about it.  
 The poet speaks the poem as it is . . .

(*CP*, 404)

*Res*, Latin for “thing,” invokes Descartes’s *res extensa*, or corporeal substance. As befits a poem devoted to the middle way, “An Ordinary Evening” is both Platonic and not: dialectic in method but determined thereby to collapse Plato’s separate worlds of reality and appearance. Olson observes that Stevens’s characteristic poem “does not signify something; it is part of that something.”<sup>63</sup> By attending to the grid’s careful balance between abstraction and reference, realism and literary artifice, form and history, we can see how “An Ordinary Evening” presents itself as a metaphor for not having metaphors. It is its form that underwrites the poem’s repeated claim not to be a poem at all: a part of, and not about, the world.

What the poem eventually yields, then, is a vision of the material, ordinary world’s sufficiency, almost beyond language:

In the land of the lemon trees, yellow and yellow were  
 Yellow-blue, yellow-green, pungent with citron-sap,  
 Dangling and spangling, the mic-mac of mocking birds.

In the land of the elm trees, wandering mariners  
 Looked on big women, whose ruddy-ripe images  
 Wreathed round and round the round wreath of autumn.

63. Olson, *Modernism and the Ordinary*, 147.

They rolled their r's, there, in the land of the citrons.  
 In the land of big mariners, the words they spoke  
 Were mere brown clods, mere catching weeds of talk.

(*CP*, 415)

The “big women” are certainly descendants of the “fat girl terrestrial” who figures reality at the end of “Notes toward a Supreme Fiction,” as well as, perhaps, distant relatives of the ample-figured women in Picasso’s interwar paintings. Here, what might be read as a return to the elaborate, metaphoricity familiar from Stevens’s earlier poetry instead figures reality as a kind of plenitude. Perloff connects the canto with a passage from Stevens’s letter to Hi Simon of January 12, 1940: “Of course, I don’t agree with the people who say that I live in a world of my own; I think that I am perfectly normal, but I see that there is a center. For instance, a photograph of a lot of fat men and women in the woods, drinking beer and singing Hi-li Hi-lo reminds me that there is a normal that I ought to try to achieve.”<sup>64</sup> The ordinary, that is to say, need not be a version of “reality grimly seen” but can, with the aid of the imagination, become a source of spiritual succor. Stevens’s decision to end the abridged version of the poem with this canto reminds us that there is an irreducible element of the aesthetic—what the poet would call “the imagination”—to every poem. As Stevens wrote to Henry Church on January 21, 1946, “for myself, the inaccessible jewel is the normal and all of life, in poetry, is the difficult pursuit of just that.”<sup>65</sup> Despite its indulgent imagery, the canto also offers a telling glance back to the particularities of place: the birds’ cry of “mic-mac” being a homonym for Mi’kmaq, an Algonquin-speaking people whose nation once occupied parts of the northeastern United States.

This essay has shown how the formal organization of “An Ordinary Evening in New Haven” instantiates its subject, the “common place” of New Haven. The challenge for any work of art that seeks to represent the ordinary is that once the ordinary is taken into the charmed circle of art, within the frame or upon the page, as it were, it is thereby transfigured and ceases to be ordinary. Having worked through the challenge of social realism in the 1930s, Stevens positions the ordinary beyond, or perhaps above, realism. Far from marginalizing its context, as Perloff claims, “An Ordinary Evening” instead models the weaving together of form and history that art can accomplish. That resolution, moreover, is accomplished in a properly dialectical fashion, not in the manner of the enervated eclecticism, the theoretical parataxis, that so often hobbles contemporary literary criticism. Stevens’s response to the aesthetic and political contradictions of modernity is to substitute sufficiency for sublimity, spurning the idea of

64. Stevens, *Letters*, 352.

65. *Ibid.*, 521.

a utopian or apocalyptic transformation. At the same time, “An Ordinary Evening” discards the aspiration to represent the ordinary in favor of insinuating itself into the ordinary, or allowing the ordinary to insinuate itself into the poet and poem. Stevens invokes the utopian “rage for order” of the grid but counters it with the specificities of place and history, acknowledging the constraints under which all our attempts at making meaning are conducted. Like the geometric figures on the title page of “Notes toward a Supreme Fiction,” the poem stops short of rupturing the frame, seeking instead reconciliation between representation and referent. In “The Dead-End of Formalist Criticism,” de Man sneered that “the foremost characteristic of contemporary criticism is the tendency to expect a reconciliation from poetry; to see in it a possibility of filling the gap that cleaves Being.”<sup>66</sup> But Stevens recognized in his last great work that the unhappy, indeed, apocalyptic, consciousness of ontological division can be salvaged by the dependable recurrence of the ordinary, a vantage point from which the “itself” in “Being itself” recedes into irrelevance. By drawing “the sorrowful time of patience, i.e. history” into the form of the poem, the grid, and New Haven, become the poet’s metaphors for not having metaphors, figuring the resolution of opposites that his poetry can fleetingly achieve.<sup>67</sup>

66. De Man, “Dead-End of Formalist Criticism,” 245.

67. *Ibid.*