The Blank Verse Moo of Wallace Stevens

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Writing to Marianne Moore on December 5, 1936—we hear the intellectual excitement of the young undergraduate trying to impress her mentor—Elizabeth Bishop makes an intriguing remark about Wallace Stevens. Discussing the 1936 version of *Owl's Clover*, she suggests that his is a cognitive poetry:

> what strikes me as so wonderful about the whole book—because I think there are a great many rough spots in it, don't you?—and I dislike the way he occasionally seems to make blank verse *moo*—is that it is such a display of ideas at work—making poetry, the poetry making them, etc. That, it seems to me, is the way a poet should think, and it should be a lesson to his thicker-witted opponents and critics, who read or write all their ideas in bad prose and give nothing in the way of poetry except exhortation or bits of melancholy description…[1]

Bishop isn't alone in her mixture of praise with dismay; Henry Weinfield, for one, 'sometimes… has the feeling that blank verse in Stevens' hands is too blunt and easily employed an instrument'.[2] One thing that strikes me about Bishop's letter is how she captures an embarrassment prompted not so much by an antiquated

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[1] *One Art: Letters*, edited by Robert Giroux (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1994), p. 48. Focussing on Stevens, not Bishop, this essay only touches upon her vexed affection for his work, and his influence on hers. For more on this, see the special issue of *The Wallace Stevens Journal* (Vol. 19, No. 2; Fall 1995) on the subject.

[2] *The Blank-Verse Tradition from Milton to Stevens: Freethinking and the Crisis of Modernity* (Cambridge: CUP, 2012), p. 220.

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quality in Stevens's blank verse as the way it already looks forward to its evolution into something else: I refer both to the late style, and something activated within the early poems themselves, as they think their way forward. The 'rough spots' she describes are made visible—hearable—by a type of rhythmical context the verse itself supplies; a context which reflects the parlous state of modernist verse but is also conditioned by more idiosyncratic requirements.

We might associate Stevens's blank verse with his well-known description of 'nobility' in *The Necessary Angel*:

> It is not an artifice that the mind has added to human nature. The mind has added nothing to human nature. It is a violence from within that protects us from a violence without. It is the imagination pressing back against the pressure of reality.[3]

Discussing Verrochio, Stevens accepts that old-style forms may seem 'nowadays… a little overpowering, a little magnificent'; a formulation which seeks to recoup with the second adjective what it jettisons with the first, because Stevens believes strongly in the magnificent.[4] This is one way we might read his obtrusive blank verse—as wilfully magnificent, a ceding of the language we use to think to a rhetoric which presses 'back against the pressure of reality'. Is this what Bishop refers to as the 'blank verse *moo*'? The lowing of cattle isn't magnificent; she is gently patronising, as elsewhere in her letters when she discusses indulgently the hubris of male poets.[5] Mooing is a kind of animal communication we think of as merely plaintive, contentless—when Bishop says that Stevens 'makes blank verse *moo*', there is both the suggestion that he is reducing it to helpless emotive utterance, and that he is compelling the form to do something it shouldn't. Not being old-fashioned, so much as ignorant of a traditional delicacy; the result is an uncontrolled bathos.

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[3] *Wallace Stevens: Collected Poetry and Prose*, ed. Frank Kermode and Joan Richardson (New York: Library of America, 1997), p. 665. Henceforth *CPP*.

[4] Ibid., p.647.

[5] One example is her letter of February 25, 1965 to Randall Jarrell—about her close friend Robert Lowell: 'I hope and pray he is all right. Naturally he's awfully busy; I just hope he isn't sick. He's had a wonderful spell of writing, certainly.' *One Art*, p. 433.

Bishop's is a throwaway remark and I don't want to convert her sprightly humour too utterly into mooing criticism. Yet I do think that this juxtaposition with Stevens on magnificence, and the necessary violence of the imagination, tells us something about his poetics. Bishop *recharacterises* his grandiosity in a way which doesn't simply put him down—her letter is full of praise, after all—but in fact renders rather likeable, capable of intimacy, a quality which we might otherwise experience as alien and pretentious. Stevens's pentameter carries itself, sometimes, as something natural—the shape of truth itself. At others, its artificiality is pointed up. He flits between contraries in his aphorisms, yet for the verse-rhythm itself to manifest switching dispositions is perhaps more problematic. The reason for this has to do with our affective involvement with the rhythm and metre of verse.

This is to say that the experience Bishop tries to share with Moore—in a slightly anxious fashion—might be understood as an intersubjective problem. A too-strong metre might begin to function as a way of unfairly compelling agreement; of persuading others to take the fulfilment of convention for the sound of truth. In 'A High-Toned Old Christian Woman', blank verse serves Stevens as a style of argument:

> Poetry is the supreme fiction, madame.
> Take the moral law and make a nave of it
> And from the nave build haunted heaven. Thus,
> The conscience is converted into palms,
> Like windy citherns hankering for hymns.[6]

In a mimetic sense, the blank verse is associated initially with the constructive activities of those who would 'take the moral law and make a nave of it', because the first line—the speaker's marvellous aphorism—isn't regular. Blank verse is therefore set up as a marker and producer of intersubjective difference. By the third line a kind of pseudo-logic—the speaker is too loud, too specific, as one is with a child—makes this process sound rather pedestrian: the heavy stress on 'Thus', inaugurating a new sentence at the end of the verse-line, insists on blank verse as a rather unsubtle mode of progression. Even the alliterative phrase

[6] *CPP*, p. 47.

'haunted heaven' appears jaded; perhaps Stevens wants to say that out of a followable process something mysterious and wonderful emerges, but the metre is too overt to accommodate a sense of the unforeseen. It sounds like he is making fun of the old woman, and the relationship between the poet and the reader is also vexed. It seems that we are in the woman's place—we are being spoken to, charmed, instructed; but it is also assumed that we share the poet's superior perspective.

My own perspective implies a range of assumptions about metre and rhythm and how they produce meaning. The scansion of verse is itself a delicately intersubjective procedure; a way of voicing one's intuitions while ideally leaving space for disagreement. In this essay I treat scansion as necessarily impressionistic; as accommodating a personal response aware of its potential disagreeability. Bishop's letter prose is equally aware of this distance between one's own aesthetic response and that of others—it is like buoyant, anxious, animated conversation as she says to Moore, of Stevens's verse: 'I think there are a great many rough spots in it, *don't you*?'—my italics—'and I dislike the way he occasionally seems to make blank verse *moo*'. The rhyme of 'you' and 'moo' reveals how that rich phrase is implicated in the interpersonal—it displays a stylish authority evolved of the desire to share one's convictions. That move to share what one experiences, and feels, cannot be entirely separated from a yearning for confirmation—'not from concepts, but from the concurrence of others.' I take this phrase from Kant's *Critique of Judgement*, which argues the relationship between the aesthetic and the cognitive—between 'poetry', as Bishop has it, and 'ideas'. Although there can 'be no rule according to which anyone is compelled to recognize anything as beautiful', says the philosopher, when we call an object beautiful, we nevertheless 'believe ourselves to be speaking with a universal voice, and lay claim to the concurrence of everyone'. When Bishop makes to Moore her judgement of taste, she appears to presume its 'universal communicability'; yet 'nothing… is capable of being universally communicated but cognition and representation in so far as it pertains to cognition.'[7]

[7] *Critique of Judgement*, trans. James Creed Meredith; revised, edited and introduced by Nicholas Walker (Oxford: OUP, 2007), pp. 47, 48.

Stevens is supposed to be a philosophical poet; Bishop's letter suggests that the cognitive properties of verse might relate to—in fact depend upon—those 'rough spots' which evince not crystalline perfection but the variable intensity of human work. Focussing on the books released at this point—*Harmonium*, *Ideas of Order* and *Owl's Clover* (1936)—this essay tracks through scansion the interplay of technical felicities and embarrassments which constitutes the intelligence of Stevens's early verse. He is best appreciated, I think, through a version of traditional scansion which risks stating, if not imposing, an interpretation not every reader will share; which will nevertheless, I hope, constitute the grounds of fruitful disagreement. Perhaps his 'moo' has to do with how his verse diverges from, then restores, the iambic beat with an earnestness which raises the possibility of alternative readings, and then forecloses them. It may be less a case of what he does with blank verse, than what blank verse does with him—although in saying this I do not mean to be dismissive, but to suggest a more sophisticated understanding of the way in which metre, activated within the idiosyncrasies of a poet's practice, might function in some places as an escape from thinking, and elsewhere as an intensification of it. When Stevens writes that the 'poetic process is psychologically an escapist process', he means to escape from a denuded reality.[8] Yet thinking itself may also be something to escape, although—to vary Eliot—perhaps only the philosophical poet knows what it means to want to escape from it. While Bishop describes a reciprocal relationship—'ideas at work—making poetry, the poetry making them'—she does not posit a simultaneity; not verse and philosophy become one.

Although I relate Stevens's style now and then to the language of the imagination which he deploys in his critical prose, I am ultimately concerned with effects of metre, rhythm, tone and syntax which do not find their validation in either Popean mimesis or the underlining of conceptual principles. In their preface to the important book of essays on Stevens, *The Act of the Mind*, Roy Harvey Pierce and J. Hillis Miller argue that his 'work surely constitutes its own kind of an intellectual history'. As a result, the desire 'to take seriously Wallace Stevens' claims as a philosophical poet' determines 'the rationale of this volume: to take that work on its own terms and to inquire both into the conditions under which the terms

[8] *CPP*, pp. 661-2.

are made operative and into the mode of operation itself.' [9] I concentrate on his 'mode of operation'—which we might want to appreciate, traverse, critique, inhabit, while delaying explication of the kind Pierce and Miller suggest. If Stevens is genuinely, as he and his admirers claim, a philosophical poet, then this achievement must be located within the complex network of affects one lives through in the actual reading of the verse—as its molecular texture is apprehended by the hearing mind. I also find the early Stevens perhaps most interesting in the lapses, not the highlights, of his mastery—those moments where, in revealing its desire to be taken seriously, his blank verse emits a rich and shareable vulnerability.

Because 'A High-Toned Old Christian Woman' begins with an assertion, 'take' makes it sound for a moment as if the speaker is giving the woman an instruction, rather than ventriloquising the logic she lives by. As the word is repeated—with a strong enjambment which portrays the sound of blank verse as a type of truth—Stevens manoeuvres himself into a position of authority:

> We agree in principle. That's clear. But take
> The opposing law and make a peristyle,
> And from the peristyle project a masque
> Beyond the planets. Thus, our bawdiness,
> Unpurged by epitaph, indulged at last,
> Is equally converted into palms,
>
> Squiggling like saxophones. And palm for palm,
> Madame, we are where we began.

It is not unusual to add an extra unstressed syllable at the beginning of a blank verse line. Yet while I would read the second line in this fashion, the first appears to demand an initial stress—a meeting of minds is evoked by the sound connecting 'W*e* agr*ee*' and 'That's cl*e*ar'. The blank verse is now on the side of poetry's 'opposing law', which of course it always was: more pseudo-logic—another 'Thus'—attempts to persuade the old woman of the speaker's position.

In an essay on Stevens's 'qualified assertions', Helen Vendler seeks to avoid the tonal reductiveness of critics who, in extracting a doctrine from his work, ignore

[9] *The Act of the Mind: Essays on the Poetry of Wallace Stevens*, ed. Roy Harvey Pierce and J. Hillis Miller (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins Press, 1965), p. ix.

the 'irony and playfulness' which accompanies his philosophy. She mentions the 'constraint, the sadness, the attempts at self-conviction, the enforced nobility', focussing on Stevens's use of the indicative mood. In looking at the early verse, I am concerned with more indelicate effects, and with their dependence not simply on 'diction and syntax' but the blank verse line.[10] Vendler notes of Stevens's use of the imperative that nothing 'implies that it will be complied with'; here both the old Christian woman and the reader are pressured by the blank verse to comply.[11] The speaker contains the old woman's position, articulating it himself in the first few lines before moving on to his own like, yet unlike vision of poetry's redemptive masque. His language is an example of the bawdy excess it celebrates; yet it also seems important that the metrical emphasis which had belonged to old-style beliefs is reclaimed on behalf of a more anarchic aesthetic. We witness the development, as Natalie Gerber has it, of one type of 'modern American poetry as an organic and resistant shaping force'.[12] Yet the poem also provides us with a window into the over-the-top impressiveness of Stevens's blank verse at this time; we are touched by an insistence which must express itself, even if in hectoring terms. In this the metre resembles the aphorisms which it often underlines, existing on the border between provocation and communication. As Stevens writes in his notebooks, it may be 'of more value to infuriate philosophers than to go along with them.'[13] Yet the value of provocations lies in their affront to received understanding—their implicit claim that were things thought of differently, a better conversation might be possible. Without this belief, there is no value in being infuriating. There is a risk of blank verse itself becoming something we are compelled to 'go along' with, or be alienated by.

Several aphorisms from the notebooks may help light up 'A High-Toned Old Christian Woman'. A word, and an idea, from the poem recurs when Stevens

[10] 'The Qualified Assertions of Wallace Stevens', *The Act of the Mind: Essays on the Poetry of Wallace Stevens*, pp. 163, 166. Material from this essay reappears in *On Extended Wings: Wallace Stevens' Longer Poems* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1969).
[11] Ibid., p. 172.
[12] 'Stevens' Mixed-Breed Versifying and His Adaptations of Blank-Verse Practice', *Wallace Stevens Journal*, Vol. 35, No. 2, Fall 2011: 188-223, p. 191.
[13] *CPP*, p. 906.

remarks in his 'Adagia' that 'the imagination wishes to be *indulged*' (my italics).[14] Yet the poem reveals the strain involved in convincing another person that not only are their values interestingly paralleled by yours, but that their imagination is structured by the same desires; that Kant's 'universal voice' might speak for both parties. Stevens also writes that 'the aesthetic order includes all other orders but is not limited to them'—an argument made by the speaker of the poem and also enacted by the blank verse identified with Christian beliefs to begin with, and then with the 'supreme fiction' of poetry.[15] The excess Stevens desires—the need to be assertive, exuberant, fantastical—must be paradoxically characterised as a type of necessary resistance. His blank verse comes to represent—what he says about the imagination in his essay on 'The Relations Between Poetry and Painting'—'a vital self-assertion in a world in which nothing but the self remains, if that remains.'[16] Except there are times when it appears to satisfy the demands of *his* self, not the reader's—an intersubjective experience is aimed for but not achieved. 'A High-Toned Old Christian Woman' demonstrates that the pressure of reality is felt not only in icy recognitions of secular mortality, but is also vested in other people's responses to oneself.

Stevens sometimes treats blank verse as the sound, the reassuring reality, of a hypostatised poetry: then we might ask if he is trying to prove this to the reader, or himself, or simply reproducing the form as a kind of technical exercise which too utterly substitutes for the difficulties of communication the experience of competence. If he *is* competent, that is—as we have already seen, Stevens's early blank verse is insecure in its absoluteness. We might look, with this in mind, to the beginnings of his poems. Paul Valéry wrote that the gods give poets 'the first line for *nothing*, but it is up to us to furnish a second that will harmonize with it'.[17] The early Stevens is a poet of imposing first lines, in which iambic pentameter often comes through avidly. There is a sense of assertion, also of discovery; of blank verse as a gift, an inheritance, a formidable resource. Here is 'Stars at Tallapoosa':

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[14] Ibid., p. 901.
[15] Ibid., p. 905.
[16] Ibid., p. 748.
[17] *Selected Writings of Paul Valéry*, ed. Anthony Bower and J. Laughlin (New York: New Directions, 1950), p. 140.

x / x / x / x / x /
The lines are straight and swift between the stars.
x / x / x / x / x /
The night is not the cradle that they cry,
x / x / x / x x / / x /
The criers, undulating the deep-oceaned phrase.
x / x / \ / x / \ /
The lines are much too dark and much too sharp.

x / \ / x / \ / x /
The mind herein attains simplicity,[18]

William Empson described Stevens in a *Listener* review of March 1953 as 'a master of what is perhaps needed most for poetry in English, a long delicate rhythm based on straight singing lines.'[19] The first line has the straightness but not the delicacy, as Stevens—in the opinion of Robert Buttell—sets a transcendent art against the emotional and rhythmic undulations of Walt Whitman's 'Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking'.[20] Yet the fusion of strength and delicacy is achieved by the start of the second stanza. The final line quoted possesses a sturdiness of self-reference; it is not simply the night scene wherein the mind 'attains simplicity', but the iambic verse itself. We see here Stevens's urge to fuse blank verse with a language of philosophical dispassion. He relishes how individual words interact with the metre—those like 'herein' nuance the pentameter they accommodate with unavoidable half-stresses. It is a textured 'simplicity' that is achieved, and which seems to develop out of the submission within the first stanza of the pentametric norm to Whitman's more variable rhythm.

The condition described matter-of-factly by the first end-stopped sentence of the poem is shown to contrast with something else—the play with the word 'they' reveals a desire, perhaps, to subordinate this second, oppositional force. Because

[18] *CPP*, p. 57.
[19] *Wallace Stevens: The Critical Heritage*, ed. Charles Doyle (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1985), p. 372.
[20] Buttell does not describe a straightforward confrontation; my reading here is indebted to his understanding of Stevens's 'assimilation of some of Whitman's tone and manner.' *Wallace Stevens: The Making of Harmonium* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1967), p. 227.

we initially associate the pronoun with the 'stars', Stevens must incorporate into the third line a clarification—in fact no clarification at all, but an aesthetic complication, a savourable richness of rhythm. The appearance of the 'criers' is a key moment: not only for the little intonational ruffle of the repetition, but also because the diphthong itself repeats with a soft modification the placement in every other line of a noun featuring the *i* sound as the second syllable of an iambic first foot. 'Criers' might conform were it spoken as one syllable—I will go on to discuss Stevens's use of elision—but here we are prompted to pronounce the word so as to register both its closeness to and difference from the 'cry' of the previous line. The caesura which follows confirms the sense of variation within regularity; the four syllables of 'undulating', like those of 'simplicity', are reconcilable with the metre but this time at greater cost. Besides the comma before the word, we also hear a subtler pause after it, and do not promote 'the' into a stress—after which the two stresses on 'deep-oceaned' complicate the rhythm. 'Phrase' points towards a flexible music, not the mathematical perfection of the uninflected monosyllables of the first line. Slant-rhyming with 'stars', it suggests for a moment that this might not be blank verse at all, but a species of fluidly rhyming stanza. Even 'simplicity', after all, achieves a kind of old-fashioned rhyme with 'cry'—the effect is delicate, as it links back to a previous end-word without crudely repeating its sound.

This attainment is only possible, however, after the activity of the lyric 'criers' is put aside once more by the fourth line, which strongly resembles the end-stopped sentence of the first. 'Sharp', like 'dark', assonates with 'stars', but does not rhyme with it; the acoustic interaction between these words and 'phrase' is complex. As the pentameter accommodates three-stress sequences which have been part of its heritage since Donne, we are made to think afresh about the relationship of form to accidence; there is an interplay of metrical felicity with acoustic blur. Because of this, the aforementioned assertion—'The mind herein attains simplicity'—does not appear, over the stanza-break, ungainsayable. It is not complacent but a pressing back, as the assonance connecting *lines, night, cry* and *criers* achieves the full repetition of *lines*, then links to *mind* with a type of acoustic logic which bridges the stanzas and looks to connect, as Bishop has it, poetry (the double-meaning of those 'lines' is unavoidable) and ideas. The isolable quality of Stevens's verse-line,

with its yearning toward the actionable impressiveness of an aphorism or commonplace, is always in tension with the metre and rhythm which binds it into a larger and more conflicted texture.

I understand the 'blank verse moo' in terms of those moments when Stevens's tolerance of such interplay breaks down; when his assertiveness becomes too dominant, whether we understand the resulting sound as magnificence, or, as Bishop has it, a bathetic 'moo'. This poem evinces an impatient need to communicate. Stevens's blank verse must operate under the pressure to find the words which would suffice as a description of, or a response to, a shared predicament; its magnificence is predicated upon this need. The alternative would be the self-absorbed grandiosity already discussed. If Stevens's 'blank verse moo'—allowing for Bishop's mischievous recharacterisation—represents a migration of his spirit of assertion into the verse-rhythm itself, such assertions are made with an audience in mind. The need to devise statements about our predicament is complemented by the need to share them; a yearning which is recorded within the peculiarity of his blank verse and shared by the scansion with which I attempt to communicate his effects.

Harvey Gross and Robert McDowell describe the poet's 'effort to bring, without philosophical pompousness, the indefinable to definition'.[21] Yet there are moments when he appears to be talking about a metaphysical richness we already safely possess, rather than something we do not have but want desperately to acquire, or a more awkwardly dormant inheritance which, in Emersonian terms, we must with difficulty rediscover. At times what the verse actually says about ongoing difficulties is countermanded by a sing-song pentameter which appears to have already got what it wants, and to feel rather cosy about it. Take the final line of 'Lions in Sweden'—'The vegetation still abounds with forms'.[22] Another four-syllable word emphasises the metre in what can only be called a poetic feel-good moment; reassurance approaches complacency. ('Still' is a key word here meaning-wise, yet the way it interacts with 'abounds' and is fitted into the pentameter is

[21] *Sound and Form in Modern Poetry*, 2nd edn. (Michigan: The University of Michigan Press, 1996), p. 203.
[22] *CPP*, p. 102.

stilted, as Stevens affirms a curiously *prosodic* abundance.) Other lines are perversely carved—Bishop might have groaned as she read, in *Owl's Clover*, how 'The year's dim elongations stretch below / To rumbled rock'.[23]

My point here is that the 'rough spots' or weaknesses Bishop identifies in Stevens become evident when we read him with a particular disposition towards metre and rhythm which he himself encourages us to adopt. It is not only when he writes gorgeous nonsense—like the 'tink and tank and tunk-a-tunk-tunk' of 'A High-Toned Old Christian Woman'—that sound appears more important for him than straightforward sense.[24] Rather, it is in some of his most admired and putatively 'philosophical' verse that metre becomes the dominant producer of meaning. When Bishop finds fault, she isn't simply saying that Stevens places melody above content. She understands that these things are always finely and unpredictably connected. It is, rather, that something undefinable has gone wrong with that connection; the weighting, in a less simplistic fashion, is off; something to do, as she suggests, with the way ideas make poetry, and poetry makes ideas, has been sabotaged or gone to seed.

The 'unusually regular blank verse' of 'The Comedian as the Letter C', writes Eleanor Cook, functions as 'an indirect comment on its plot'—the ironised travails of Crispin, a portrait of the artist as a young man.[25] The poem begins with a rather gauche pronouncement:

> Nota: man is the intelligence of his soil,
> The sovereign ghost. As such, the Socrates
> Of snails, musician of pears, principium
> And lex. Sed quaeritur: is this same wig
> Of things, this nincompated pedagogue,
> Preceptor to the sea?[26]

The first line isn't regular; the second is, with a kind of metrical logic—'As such, the Socrates'—which reveals Stevens's delight in names which can be fitted into,

[23] Ibid., p. 590.
[24] Ibid., p. 47.
[25] *A Reader's Guide to Wallace Stevens* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton UP, 2007), p. 47.
[26] *CPP*, p. 22.

or produced out of, the surface of blank verse, like 'Ramon Fernandez' in 'The Idea of Order at Key West', or as in the exotic location of 'Sea Surface Full of Clouds'—'In that November off Tehuantepec'.[27] The sub-clause 'musician of pears' varies the rhythm, but the beat is reaffirmed by the Latin terms which follow, and the subsequent polysyllables which appear to demand a metrical pronunciation. Less subtle than Wordsworth in *The Prelude*, Stevens cedes the contours of individual words to the establishment of a rigorous metre, turning secondary stresses into primary ones; the tolerance of nuance achieved in 'Stars at Tallapoosa' is less evident here. Yet we might defend this blank verse as richly ironic. For the metre and rhythm of these lines is intricately bound up with the way in which Stevens oscillates between a philosophical description of man's place in the universe, and the perhaps necessarily aggrandising way in which we need to think of ourselves. 'Nincompated pedagogues', we are sometimes absurd phrase-makers whose self-knowledge is always on the verge of diminishing into self-regard.

Later in the poem we are told that 'Sepulchral señors, bibbing pale mescal'—where the blank verse norm mischievously tempts us to mispronounce 'señors'—'should make the intricate Sierra scan'.[28] This makes clear the connection for Stevens between blank verse and ideas, as does the revision of the poem's first line at the start of part IV, *The Idea of a Colony*: 'Nota: his soil is man's intelligence. / That's better. That's worth crossing seas to find.'[29] The new phrasing is 'better' because it adheres more closely to the rhythm of blank verse—the ambiguous change of meaning may, Cook argues, suggest a reversal of man's dominance over nature which approaches 'geographical determinism', or, as Frank Kermode has it, the happier contention that 'order is to be discovered in the world, not imposed upon it by the human mind.'[30] Either way, a big point—about how free we really are, how determined by our surroundings—is condensed into a small revision towards clearer blank verse. This is complicated by the fact that blank verse itself is

[27] Ibid., p. 82. Gerber's approach finds the first line of 'The Comedian as the Letter C' regular—an instance of 'self-conscious virtuosic blank verse'. 'Stevens' Mixed-Breed Versifying', p.191.
[28] *CPP*, p. 31.
[29] Ibid., p. 29.
[30] *A Reader's Guide to Wallace Stevens*, p.49; *Wallace Stevens* (London: Faber, 1990), p. 43.

ultimately a form of constraint—and liberation—which the poet has chosen. Stevens's awkwardnesses in this area link with a more general shift, within Anglo-American poetics, from closed to open forms; there is the question as to whether his blank verse is an underlying framework allowing for divergence—which functions as a liberation from the aforementioned constraint—or a pattern which is occasionally rediscovered and then disappears again. The uncertainty of the verse itself as to the answer may explain the 'rough spots', to borrow Bishop's phrase—yet this reveals a thought process, as the verse moves from line to line, about the relationship between the free play of the intelligence and cultural forms. Returning to the quotation from *The Idea of a Colony*, we find in the second line a remarkably dextrous pentameter, which skilfully deploys the word 'that' as first an unstressed, then a stressed syllable, to preserve the sound of a living voice.

This is a voice which wants to tell us what is the case, but also sounds rather like it is talking to, and trying to reassure, itself. We register an assertiveness that acknowledges the pressure of human need, without thereby jettisoning its authority; Stevens had not yet learned to mask consistently his urge to assert in a conditional mode which, after all, might in fact be a way of increasing, not reducing, one's authority through qualification and revision.[31] Blank verse provides the authority of tradition, as well as the suggestion of a more transcendental order which has always been one of the ways in which it strikes the ear; Stevens's varying competence might be seen as a simply technical lapse or as a more culturally telling inability, as a modern poet, to fully inhabit the form. Although Bishop does not experience this difficulty in quite the same way, her remarks about his 'blank verse moo' fuse critique with sympathy.

Remembering Kant's organisation of the problem, we might link Bishop's discomfort to how Stevens appears sometimes to ask us to *collaborate* with him in the affirmation of a metrical authority which moderns can no longer take for granted, either as a viable aesthetic or an embodiment of sacred values. Just as her

[31] In an interesting endnote, Charles Altieri says of late Stevens that he 'does not like exclamations. I think he thought exclamation rhetorically tries to force the audience to feel and hence is embarrassingly forward. His dream is to have indicatives function with the force of exclamations.' *Wallace Stevens and the Demands of Modernity: Toward a Phenomenology of Value* (Ithaca and London: Cornell UP, 2013), p. 267.

remark to Moore presumes a taste consensus which cannot be decisively argued—and as my scansion itself operates under the assumption that its codified intuitions become thereby shareable—Stevens seems to assume on the part of the reader a receptiveness to a strong, even bonging blank verse which might simply evidence too nakedly his own desires. Bishop's letter is about *Owl's Clover*, the long poem in which Stevens tells us

> x / x / x / x \ x /
> There is a man whom rhapsodies of change,
> x / x / x / x / x /
> Of which he is the cause, have never changed
> x / x / x / x / x /
> And never will, a subman under all[32]

The generation of cod-Nietzschean vocabulary out of blank-verse affirmation; this is not Stevens at his subtlest.[33] I scan these lines to make clear what might seem a counterintuitive assumption; in normal speech, we would not utter the phrase 'there is a man' in quite this fashion. I read the line this way because the rest of Stevens's verse supplies a context which makes this interpretation unavoidable. We see here one of his most important devices—the way in which he aligns metrical and sense-stresses on the word 'is':

> Imagination is the will of things. . . .
>
> 'Colloquy with a Polish Aunt'

> It is the word *pejorative* that hurts.
>
> 'Sailing After Lunch'

> Always everything
> That is is dead except what ought to be.
>
> *Owl's Clover*[34]

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[32] *CPP*, p. 587.

[33] As Bart Eeckhout observes, much of Stevens's poetry 'from especially the early and middle periods shares a number of concerns with the radical work of Nietzsche'. These lines echo Nietzsche's interest in what Eeckhout calls 'the social need for heroes', as well as 'the existential value of fictions, illusions, and metamorphosis…the unsuspected powers of rhetoric.' 'Stevens and Philosophy', *The Cambridge Companion to Wallace Stevens*, p. 111.

[34] *CPP*, pp. 68, 99, 570.

The final quotation occurs in *Owl's Clover* at the start of 'Mr. Burnshaw and the Statue', several sections prior to the Nietzschean 'subman', whose phrasing inaugurates 'Sombre Figuration'. We see here how, over the course of individual poems, as well as the duration of his oeuvre, Stevens teaches us to read his key word 'is' in a particular way; also how his spirit of assertion is renewed at critical junctures. 'When we think of syntax in Stevens' poetry', writes Beverly Maeder, 'we may think primarily… of the pervasiveness of the polymorphous verb *to be*.' It can 'be used to express absolute existence, as when you say something just "is," or "there is" something'; yet there are times—she is talking specifically about 'The Snow Man'—when Stevens 'seems to question the stability, solidity, and reference of existential statements' even while making them.[35] The three examples above demonstrate his use of the verb 'is' to craft deceptively complex utterances about feelings, the nature of reality, and the distance between. Emphasising it with the metre, he acknowledges the need we have to make observations about ourselves and universe; the extent to which we require beautiful phrases with which to live. Truth-content and style are wedded in what might be taken as either a mutually supportive or subversive relationship; the most primary verb of metaphysics, *to be*, and one of the most archetypal verse traditions, are made repeatedly to coincide, as if he were asking over and over again: what is the relationship between style and truth, poetry and ideas?[36]

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[35] 'Stevens and linguistic structure', *The Cambridge Companion to Wallace Stevens*, p. 161.

[36] This device reaches its peak intensity in a stanza J. Hillis Miller cites from the late work 'The Auroras of Autumn'. Here we find, in his words, a 'cry of ecstatic discovery' of being itself:

> It is like a thing of ether that exists
> Almost as predicate. But it exists.
> It exists, it is visible, it is, it is.

(*CPP*, p.361.) Robert B. Shaw aligns Stevens's 'loosening of the iambic pentameter line' with 'his increasing use—especially in longer poems—of the unrhymed tercet.' Yet in this case, although 'is' does not take a stress in the first line or, initially, in the third, we witness at the close of the stanza the recrudescence of the iambic beat which is for Stevens utterly involved with this kind of affirmation. For the Hillis quotation, see 'Wallace Stevens' Poetry of Being', *The Act of the Mind: Essays on the Poetry of Wallace Stevens*, p. 158; for the Shaw, *Blank Verse: A Guide to Its History and Use* (Athens: Ohio UP, 2007), p. 157.

In identifying this device I don't mean, as Randall Jarrell did with Auden, to recharacterise as mere rhetoric verse which manifests, Bishop claims, a real, if periodic form of poetic thinking.[37] Recurrences of vocabulary and rhythm do not necessarily mean that a writer has stopped thinking, and, to repeat Vendler, Stevens's tone is often subtler than his paraphrasing critics recognise; he likes to tinge ironically the earnestness which is elsewhere his bread and butter. This is not the case in the sixth poem of 'Le Monocle de Mon Oncle'. This sequence is usually classed as blank verse, and indeed the hard outline of the metre is sometimes too much:

x / x / x / x / x /
There is a substance in us that prevails.[38]

Again, Stevens's characteristic 'there is' prevents me from reading the first foot as a standard trochaic substitution; my scansion records the pressure exerted upon the reader by his habitual practice, as philosophic song coarsens into clenched assertion. For, given what he's saying, it seems this time that the identification of need has been replaced simply with the expression of that need—and the result is Bishop's 'moo', or at least what I understand by her remark. This line sounds like a war-time broadcast—perhaps Stevens feels the conflict between reality and the imagination to have actually reached that point. Harvey Gross and Robert McDowell suggest (of his later verse) that 'Stevens never wrenches his tone to accommodate the meter'; here we have metre more than conditioning tone—really insisting on itself.[39] Stressing 'is', we understand the statement as opening up the possibility of disagreement, but that alternative perspective arrives already negated, and the reader might also bridle at the assumption that he or she shares the doubts the poet wishes to assuage, and experiences the same need for counter-affirmation.

[37] See *Randall Jarrell on W.H. Auden*, ed. Stephen Burt and Hannah Brooks-Motl (New York: Columbia UP, 2005).
[38] *CPP*, p. 12.
[39] *Sound and Form in Modern Poetry*, p. 216.

This poem goes on to mention 'fluctuations' which correspond to the 'undulating' of 'Stars at Tallapoosa', as well as the 'ambiguous undulations' in the famous ending to 'Sunday Morning':

> / \ x / x / x x x /
> Deer walk upon our mountains, and the quail
> / x x / x \ x / x /
> Whistle about us their spontaneous cries;
> / / x / x x x / x x
> Sweet berries ripen in the wilderness;
> / x x / x / x x x /
> And, in the isolation of the sky,
> x / x / x / x / x /
> At evening, casual flocks of pigeons make
> \ / x / x / x / x /
> Ambiguous undulations as they sink,
> / x x / x / x / x /
> Downward to darkness, on extended wings.[40]

'In isolation', writes Frank Kermode, 'this stanza has such quality that to call Stevens the greatest twentieth-century master of blank verse seems a tiresome understatement'.[41] The first line opens with a spondee, after which I hear a little pause; a lively speech-sound suggests that we suppress the metrical stress on 'and'. The second line features a reversed first foot, but is otherwise delicately regular; the long syllable of 'their' is stressed, outlining the phrase 'their spontaneous cries'. Spontaneity and metre, natural impulse and creative form, are intelligently fused; here, as in the later words 'casual' and 'ambiguous', I understand Stevens as eliding syllables to enhance the iambic beat. Runs of unstressed syllables lighten the next two lines, so the potentially portentous grammar, which turns on a second semi-colon and a stressed 'and', doesn't overpower.

'At evening, casual flocks of pigeons make'—this is regular, yet the word 'casual' captures something of its relaxed atmosphere; the comma after 'evening' helps the intonation contour leading into the enjambment avoid the 'blank verse moo'. The ear, looking forward already to the next line, doesn't frame and petrify

[40] *CPP*, p. 56.
[41] *Wallace Stevens*, p. 39.

this one; there is a curious sense of the first half of a absent couplet which we already know won't be fulfilled and stabilised by an arriving rhyme. 'Ambiguous undulations' is a potentially awkward phrase recuperable as a relished tongue-twister; although 'ambiguous' normally takes a stress only on the second syllable, my scansion records an emphasis on the first syllable also, as a third spondee is suggested by those opening the first and third lines. Here I am inclined to postulate, in Kant's phrase, a 'universal voice'—eliding the relation between my voice, the poem's voice, and yours—which slows as the particular word that is right for the occasion is found and savoured; the effort to specify happily acquiesces, with a sense of its own rigour, in the perception of the 'ambiguous'. 'Undulations' reaches back to the potentially disturbing word 'isolation', as the moving pigeons redeem the empty sky; it's another four-syllable word that preserves the iambic beat which comes through to stress 'on' in the beautiful closing phrase. The suppressed *w* of 'ambiguous'—had we pronounced it, too, with four syllables, and not followed the lead of 'spontaneous', a word readier for elision—emerges subtly to structure the final line; sandwiched within the alliterative phrase 'do*w*n*w*ard to darkness', it then combines with a half-rhyme on 'sink' to marvellously limn those 'extended *w*ings'.

My reading neglects some aspects of acoustic texture, syntax and diction—and 'content'—to make a point about Stevens's blank verse at its best. His pentameter, confronted by both beautiful and unbeautiful disorder, doesn't always bear up to it in the same way. He sometimes relishes—as Bishop doesn't—what 'The Comedian as the Letter C' describes as 'the strict austerity / Of one vast, final, subjugating tone'. Yet ultimately he wishes with his blank verse to reveal—this is how 'Le Monocle de Mon Oncle' describes love—'an ancient aspect touching a new mind', not, as *Owl's Clover* puts it, merely 'A mood that had become so fixed it was / A manner of the mind'.[42] Although he did make scattered remarks on the subject—'my line is a pentameter line, but it runs over and under now and again'—Donald Justice points out that 'Stevens never volunteered anything

[42] *CPP*, pp. 24, 13, 569.

approaching a theory of versification as a guide to his own practice'.[43] Yet potential self-descriptions of his blank verse may be found throughout. Forgoing prose explication of his prosody, he preserves the range of conceptual significations possible to metre in his oeuvre. These quotations reveal the various meanings blank verse has for Stevens. And also a certain amount of self-regard—a need for the verse technology to be acknowledged and appreciated by the reader; for metrical verse to wear the look of reality itself.

We have learned to appreciate a range of metrical variations; it would be difficult to find anyone who still agrees with Jonson that Donne, 'for not keeping of accent, deserved hanging'.[44] Hardy was told that his paused and reversed feet 'did not make for immortality'—and it's true that the poetry produced as a result did not feature a thoroughly denatured voice but a stylisation of affirmedly mortal speech.[45] In the sixth poem of 'Sunday Morning', Stevens asks 'Is there no change of death in paradise?', breaking the rhythm with one of his more famous aphorisms:

> Alas, that they should wear our colors there,
> The silken weavings of our afternoons,
> And pick the strings of our insipid lutes!
> / x x / x x / x / x \
> Death is the mother of beauty, mystical,
> Within whose burning bosom we devise
> Our earthly mothers waiting, sleeplessly.[46]

The change-up is particularly hearable given the absence of a stress, on this occasion, on 'is'—the tone of the assertion is different this time. It is almost impatiently blurted—achieved in the moment out of the pressure to make oneself clear. The metre is dactylic—the line seems to look forward to the shape of the closing word, 'mystical', which also appears improvised of its alliteration with 'mother', and the other sound-elements it shares with words in the previous lines.

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[43] Letter to Katherine Frazier, May 19, 1942. *Letters of Wallace Stevens*, ed. Holly Stevens (London: Faber, 1966), p. 407; *Oblivion: On Writers and Writing* (Ashland, OR: Story Line Press, 1998), p. 13.
[44] *Notes of Ben Jonson's Conversations with William Drummond of Hawthornden* (London: F. Shoberl, 1842), p. 3.
[45] *The Life of Thomas Hardy* (London: Macmillan, 1962), p. 301.
[46] *CPP*, p. 55.

Coming at the end of the line, it keeps the aphorism from protruding too much; the eloquence momentarily achieved begins to diminish. Then we are dropped back into iambs, which in this case evoke the imaginative poverty the words describe. The arc of the pentameter will be disturbed by a second line-closing dactyl, yet over the course of the mooing line which separates them—with its only conventionally intense 'burning bosom'—the 'mystical' quality of death may be said to give way to the merely human response of the mothers waiting 'sleeplessly'.

Harvey Gross and Robert McDowell claim 'that all his work after *Harmonium* represents variations on a single theme'; we might think of Stevens here as either besotted with one idea, or consciously intrigued by the affective possibilities available to elegant variation, practiced on a grand scale. At his best, those change-ups he puts into his blank verse accomplish a comparable effect, of avoiding monotony while intimating the existence of a central truth which we cannot always keep hold of and must seek over and over to grasp with an intelligent passion.[47] When variations of this kind surprise—we might even think of poems, at such points, as *self*-surprising—we may connect them with a kind of poetic thinking. Or with possibilities of connoisseurship which affirm the intelligence of both the poet and the reader—an effect I don't mean to criticise, because poems can't subvert and disturb all the time; there is such a thing as radical affirmation. Yet Bishop's 'rough spots' are something different. These are, one feels, not deliberate effects but accidents. When we discover such glitches in the work not of poets whom we want to dismiss—we might be happy, then, to find a crotch to kick—but those we wish to keep close at hand, it can be deeply disturbing; especially if we think of what they've written as communicating a kind of truth which now seems imperilled by its presentation. By the revelation, as we read, that what we take for truth may derive from style, so that as style diminishes, so does the truth-claim. As such, we are made to think by such infelicities about the relationship between poetry and thought.

I have already identified a few 'rough spots' of this kind. It is important to understand, however, that a certain dissonance was always part of Stevens's

[47] *Sound and Form in Modern Poetry*, p. 211.

technique. A line from the first poem of 'Le Monocle de Mon Oncle' reveals the pressure he puts on the pentameter:

> "Mother of heaven, regina of the clouds,
> O sceptre of the sun, crown of the moon,
> x / \ / x / \ / x / x
> There is not nothing, no, no, never nothing,
> Like the clashed edges of two words that kill."
> And so I mocked her in magnificent measure.[48]

We should take 'magnificent measure' as ironic—the third line reveals an incoherence provoked into being and unhappily prolonged by the pentameter it cannot escape. This poem presents, as Charles Altieri observes, *Harmonium*'s 'first contextualised human speaker', who 'must offer himself as an expressive and purposive agent—the volume finally offers an agent responsible for producing meanings for the fluidity of the senses.'[49] As the eloquence of the previous lines begins to fray—and recomposes itself—the iambic beat is heard obtrusively. The allocation of different levels of stress to the same word suggests here a kind of imprisonment—and a corresponding attempt to break free.

The effort, ultimately, is to re-envision blank verse as a type of philosophical logic, even as it continues to function as a guarantor of what Stevens famously described as 'the essential gaudiness of poetry'.[50] Gaudiness is excessive, and it has long been recognised that his imagery, lexis and effects of alliteration and assonance contribute to this vital overplus. That his early blank verse does the same has been more difficult, however, for critics to appreciate. There are two reasons for this. First, as the product of modernism, his early style occurs at a threshold moment; Bishop's 'blank verse moo' could not be identified in a centuries-long tradition of blank verse which did not come into being under the challenge of free verse, and does not have to justify its ways to the contemporary ear. Second, the stylistic effects mentioned above are clearly identifiable as deliberated quirks whereby Stevens draws attention to the materiality of his verse.

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[48] *CPP*, p. 10.
[49] *Wallace Stevens and the Demands of Modernity*, p. 62.
[50] Letter to William Rose Benét, January 6, 1933. *Letters of Wallace Stevens*, p. 263.

An over-strong blank verse is not so easy to validate along these lines. We might experience, instead, what we cannot but feel to be 'rough spots', technical flaws which reveal the poet's failure to negotiate the modernist transition as ably as we would like; a more fundamental irresponsiveness, also, to the psychophysiological realisation of verse-rhythm in the ear of the reader. Frank Kermode claims of Stevens's obscurity that he,

> more than most poets perhaps, needs the power 'to confer his identity on the reader'…his whole theory of poetry resembles those of other post-Symbolist poets in that it provides for communication of meanings, either above or below the level of intellect. And his own provision depends upon this conferment of identity, this power to make a reader at home with the presiding personality and the personal geometry of a *mundo*.[51]

Registering his 'blank verse moo'—whether or not we want to find a way of recuperating it as consciously or unconsciously meaningful—we experience, from syllable to syllable and line to line, the poet's conferment of a specifically metrical identity. We feel disconnected from a rigorous stylisation which needs to understand itself in terms of cravings both we and the poet share. For it should be understood that as readers of poetry, we bring to bear on our hearing of verse-rhythm not only the influence of stylistic trends but also the most intimate contents of the personality. When it came to Stevens's early blank verse, Elizabeth Bishop—for one—did not feel at home.

[51] *Wallace Stevens*, p. 94.