

The Man on the Dump Close Reading

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A thesis

submitted in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of

Master of Fine Arts

University of Washington

2024

Committee:

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Program Authorized to Offer Degree:

Department of English

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Abstract

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This essay reads Wallace Stevens' "The Man on the Dump" closely in an effort to clarify my personal poetics. Language itself—its materiality—stands at the forefront of this analysis. In general, the essay considers the relationship between medium and meaning, pointing to various ways Stevens uses language (sign, quotation, allusion, speech act, sound, etc.) and discussing the consequences of these choices. While denotative meaning is the ostensible goal (and a difficult one at that), much in the way that Stevens writes, what meaning can be derived from this analysis more often comes by the question of "how?" than "what?". Ultimately, instability and ambiguity are granted value, despite what concessions from these values must be made in demonstrating said value.

Introduction

In “The Man on the Dump,” Wallace Stevens presents a landscape filled with the detritus of poetry and language past, proceeding through irony toward a reticent sincerity. As something adjacent to an *ars poetica*, its imagined landscape and implied narrative mean to address problems of representation and imitation in art that date back to Aristotle. Recognizing the disjunction between sign and signifier, representation and reality, the poem’s treatment of this concern takes the form of embodied, subjective linguistic acts; rather than attempting to specify or concretize an answer—or even the question itself—the poem simulates an experience or encounter with the off-stage concerns it implies. Ultimately, what are the contours of the correspondence between reality and imagination?

If this summary of the poem seems to border on incompleteness, obscurity, or incoherence, this is partly due to its resistance to paraphrase. “The Man on the Dump” *does* more so than says, and so to say much about it at remove from the specific language it activates and enacts is a disservice. At its most fundamental level, the poem is about how it *feels* to use language, as well as the frustrated desire toward wholeness or equivalence that this action entails. While it is reductive to say what such a poem is “about,” to say that the poem is about spiritual and intellectual longing and a speaker’s earnest attempt toward belief feels to be, if not true, at least a pragmatic point of reference.

In terms of the methods of my criticism, I have diligently read “The Man on the Dump” for what signifiatory meaning can be made of it, gesturing toward denotative possibilities for pears, for Esthonia, for Cornelius Nepos, for a cocoanut, etc., which ultimately may stray from whatever “center” of the poem one might endeavor to impose upon it. I firmly believe that

reading the poem in this way is generative and productive—in short, all well and good. However, I would be remiss not to admit that this may at times feel like beating the life out of the poem’s horse, and then continuing the beating once that is done—of course, one knows that this is not what horses are for. To dissect anything, though, the thing has to be dead; its life is the cost of doing business.

However, if we are to believe that a horse is only the place it might take us, not the oats or hay it eats, not the ropes of its muscle straining and loosening in stride, not the wind in its nostrils—this could go on—we rob it of its dignity. The horse I am talking about, of course, is a poem. Luckily, language is much more resilient than any animate being. So, let “The Man on the Dump” be spread across the sky, as a patient etherized on a table.

For reference, the poem in its entirety:

The Man on the Dump

Day creeps down. The moon is creeping up.
The sun is a corbeil of flowers the moon Blanche
Places there, a bouquet. Ho-ho ... The dump is full
Of images. Days pass like papers from a press.
The bouquets come here in the papers. So the sun,
And so the moon, both come, and the janitor's poems
Of every day, the wrapper on the can of pears,
The cat in the paper-bag, the corset, the box
From Esthonia: the tiger chest, for tea.

The freshness of night has been fresh a long time.
The freshness of morning, the blowing of day, one says
That it puffs as Cornelius Nepos reads, it puffs
More than, less than or it puffs like this or that.
The green smacks in the eye, the dew in the green
Smacks like fresh water in a can, like the sea
On a cocoanut—how many men have copied dew
For buttons, how many women have covered themselves
With dew, dew dresses, stones and chains of dew, heads
Of the floweriest flowers dewed with the dewiest dew.
One grows to hate these things except on the dump.

Now, in the time of spring (azaleas, trilliums,
Myrtle, viburnums, daffodils, blue phlox),
Between that disgust and this, between the things
That are on the dump (azaleas and so on)
And those that will be (azaleas and so on),
One feels the purifying change. One rejects
The trash.

That's the moment when the moon creeps up
To the bubbling of bassoons. That's the time
One looks at the elephant-colorings of tires.
Everything is shed; and the moon comes up as the moon
(All its images are in the dump) and you see
As a man (not like an image of a man),
You see the moon rise in the empty sky.

One sits and beats an old tin can, lard pail.
One beats and beats for that which one believes.
That's what one wants to get near. Could it after all
Be merely oneself, as superior as the ear
To a crow's voice? Did the nightingale torture the ear,
Peck the heart and scratch the mind? And does the ear
Solace itself in peevish birds? Is it peace,
Is it a philosopher's honeymoon, one finds
On the dump? Is it to sit among mattresses of the dead,
Bottles, pots, shoes and grass and murmur *aptest eve*:
Is it to hear the blatter of grackles and say
Invisible priest; is it to eject, to pull
The day to pieces and cry *stanza my stone*?
Where was it one first heard of the truth? The the. ¹

¹ Wallace Stevens, *The Collected Poems*, 214

Close Reading

Day creeps down. The moon is creeping up.
The sun is a corbeil of flowers the moon Blanche
Places there, a bouquet. Ho-ho...

Especially by early critics, Stevens has been accused of being a symbolic writer, which, while reductive and short-sighted, is a stance that can at the very least be sympathized with given these first three lines of “The Man on the Dump.” Helen Vendler rightly warns against “‘the decoding’ of these ‘symbols’... in the easy from of equivalence” in which “the sun ‘was’ reality,’ the moon ‘was’ imagination.” This ultimately “produced some commentary of extraordinary banality, in which poem after poem was to said to be ‘about’ the encounter between ‘imagination’ and ‘reality.’”² For the purposes of this reading, though, Stevens’ common usage of sun and moon as symbols, as well as his concern with the encounter between reality (appearance, everydayness) and imagination (“the expression of newness which will draw its terms from something in the world”)³ offers a useful heuristic from which to enter the poem and consider the internal and external relations of its parts.

In the beginning of “The Man on the Dump,” Stevens seems to posit some opposition between, keeping previously mentioned symbology in mind, imagination and reality. After all, down is the opposite of up, no? Then we have day and... the moon— metonymically opposed to day in its suggestion of night, to be sure, but not an opposite. While the opening line appears to gesture towards juxtaposition, the second line seems to instead suggest that the work being done

² Vendler, *Words Chosen Out of Desire*, 53

³ *Ibid.* 54

is the work of orientation—rather than setting two discrete entities in opposition to one another, the two are schematized as parts in relation to one another within a greater whole.

That the moon is named Blanche anthropomorphizes it so that whatever schematic work is done might be narrativized, which is to say transposed to human scale. The name “Blanche” signals the moon’s shining whiteness, but also also, with its sonic resonance, its blankness; it is at once a whole, glittering figure as it is a hole shining in the sky.

Although Stevens purports the sun to be a bouquet, a corbeil (as opposed to a corbeille) is, rather than a basket of flowers, an architectural term for a *representation* of a basket of flowers in stone. Here it seems useful to return to the moon/imagination sun/reality paradigm in considering what this abstraction or artifice of the sun might signify. Certainly, it seems plausible that imagination (the moon) constructs reality (the sun), “places there a bouquet.” At the same time as the sun is abstracted by the metaphor of the bouquet on the basis of shared similarities—brightness, its patterned radiance, its temporality, etc.—it is further abstracted into the stone corbeil, not the bouquet itself but a representation of it. Similar to the decision to place into relation (as opposed to juxtaposition) the sun and moon, Steven’s failure to distinguish the “real” from its copy (a bouquet and a stone representation of one) allows both aspects of the metaphor’s vehicle equal standing. Rather than placing imagination and reality into a hierarchy, Stevens gestures toward the poem’s subjectivity as an act of imagination—of making. Here, “Ho-ho...” and its elliptical dissolution reticently mark the poem’s subjective voice, whereby the content of the poem moves beyond thought itself toward its embodied and voiced procession.

The dump is full
Of images. Days pass like papers from a press.
The bouquets come here in the papers. So the sun,
And so the moon, both come, and the janitor’s poems

Of every day, the wrapper on the can of pears,
The cat in the paper-bag, the corset, the box
From Esthonia: the tiger chest, for tea.

Where the eye might proceed through a painterly landscape according to the metonymic relations of its compositional attributes (the viewer following lines of the sun's beams downward to what they illuminate according to the space of the canvas and the compositional weight of the object), Steven's landscape of the mind proceeds by thought's assertion. Figuratively, "the dump is full/ of images" does the work the sun might otherwise do. We arrive at the landscape of litany it illuminates. Here, in thought's landscape, syntax takes on the function composition might in a painting. Where the first three lines of "The Man on the Dump" concern themselves with orientation and relation of its parts by use of parataxis, in this section, the images just "come," each more or less isolated and discrete, in a way that is ultimately disorienting. The flowers of each day come and pass, cut and dry as newsprint.

The real and the imagined become indistinguishable, with the sun and moon appearing at once—an unsettling dislocation, although one cannot say which of the two is dislocated—just before the janitor's poems come. With the janitor stated as poet, it is not unreasonable to consider a reversal: that the poet, too, might be a sort of janitor, performing routine maintenance in the landscape of language and thought. This conception of the poet is, of course, not aspirational; to be one who spruces and freshens at the surface, beneath the ambit of structure or wholeness. Later in the poem, as Stevens tends his flowers and moves toward "what one wants to get near," one gets the sense that poetry, or art more broadly, though not necessarily doomed to mere image, copy, and everydayness, is certainly threatened by them. It seems possible that the janitor, with his poems of every day, prefigures poetry as a "philosopher's honeymoon," with both possibly being either steps toward or lesser iterations of Stevens' ideal poetry.

The concerns of the poem have turned to appearance, especially as related to everydayness. One can infer that if pears appeared in the janitor's poems "of every day," these would not be the pears from Stevens' "Study of Two Pears," of which "The yellow glistens./ It glistens with various yellows,"— the pears which are not "viols/ Nudes or bottles./ They resemble nothing else." , which "are not flat surfaces," and which ultimately "are not seen/ As the observer wills."⁴ In "The Man on the Dump," the reader is instead faced with the wrapper on the can of pears, the branding and advertisement stamped upon the shell within which the fruit is "preserved." One might even imagine inside an image of a pear which offers few if any of a pear's pleasures, although, having eaten a can of pears, one could aver with certainty that a number of aspects fundamental to the original pears' constitution have already been altered by its containment and preservation.

So too, in the dump, does the reader receive only the paper-bag within which the cat is assumed to be, unless, the cat is alive, squirming and wailing to be free of the vehicle by which the newsprint of each day is laid upon the dump for eternal rest. The corset merely implies a woman, and seems to represent the cast off object of desire. In "Chaos in Motion and Not in Motion," to "desire without an object of desire."⁵ While one could certainly imagine desiring the corset, any desire for the object could only ever be a fetish for its metonymic relation to the body, specifically its containment of it.

Similarly, the tiger chest for tea, really, is just a box from Estonia, where there are no tigers, and where it is too low and cold for tea. What tea there might have ever been, one can assume, has been steeped, drunk, and discarded before the wooden carcass arrives at the dump. All of this is to say, the representations are all wrong.

⁴ Wallace Stevens, *The Collected Poems*, 208

⁵ *Ibid.* 376

The freshness of night has been fresh a long time.
The freshness of morning, the blowing of day, one says
That it puffs as Cornelius Nepos reads, it puffs
More than, less than or it puffs like this or that.

As the second stanza begins, the poem returns to the day and night relation with which it opened. In this iteration, attention is called to the freshness of each, with repetition both on the level of word and stanza ironizing this freshness. With repeated use, freshness loses its freshness, having been “fresh” so long as to stale, and the modified images threaten to follow suit. As night is and has been fresh, and, well, so is the morning, the adjective’s ubiquity begins to flirt with impotence.

Days blow by, as the “papers from a press” in the first stanza. “One says” indicates Stevens’ offhanded regard for this passage of time conceived of in this way. Days pass as Cornelius Nepos, who was respected in Stevens’ time for the style of his Latin writing but not its contents, reads. In this way, Cornelius Nepos is similar to the janitor, who writes of everyday, concerning himself more with surface than substance. Days pass, too, in undefined comparison, passing, as something—anything—proximal might, “like this or that.” And so, this passage of time, as well as the life that its passing marks, in an un contemplated and unconceived state, becomes bereft of meaning, of substance, very much unlike Stevens’ pears, which resemble “nothing else,” but gain meaning by this gesture to their absolute specificity

The green smacks in the eye, the dew in the green
Smacks like fresh water in a can, like the sea
On a cocoanut—

As green and the dew in it “smack,” the poem introduces a sort of small violence that was always already pasted over by the commonness of “smack” as an idiomatic expression (“it smacks of X or Y”). Accompanying this violence is repetition in increasing frequency, much in the way that the common, repeated use of smacks led to its idiomatic usage (robbing it of its earlier connotation). It seems useful to think of this use of repetition, especially in terms of landscape, as a collage technique, with which is accompanied the violence of erasure entailed in pasting over what was once eminent, coherent, and whole. “The green smacks in the eye” because it is out of place in the poem, an adjective bereft of anything modified. While it is stated later in the poem that it is spring, in this world at the dump consisting only of objects imagined in time, there is no place for what we assume by this vague gesture to be nature. The flowers of the first stanza were only metaphor, and the tea imagined.

It is only based on the “dew in the green” we might assume that it is grass being perceived, and one wonders, in the litany of the poem, at the reticence to name such a thing. While grass is as common or everyday as the preceding images, it is, rather than an object, a living thing and a part of nature. It is worth considering this lack of artifice or manufacture (and any accompanying beauty) that differentiates it might be undone were it named in language. Instead, Stevens abstracts from the grass language for his perception of it purposefully representing a subjective and internal experience of it rather than the thing itself. I posit that this is an effort to preserve that freshness of fresh dew in the grass, which might otherwise be undone, objectified, turned to cliché—from signified to sign—by this repeated smacking against the eye that “dew in the grass” would enact as language on a page.

Similarly, the fresh water, especially on the same line as “like the sea,” recalls the song of the ocean in “The Idea of Order at Key West.”⁶ In the can of language, the sea has been sterilized and silenced—and its freshness, already ironized, certainly will not remain.

Between “the fresh water in the can” and “the sea/ On a cocoanut,” there is a reversal that seems to be of interest. Where in the first, the water “smacks,” sloshes, and slaps against metal walls, in the second, water beats against the natural body of the coconut. For many readings, I felt compelled to read—and the difference, I believe, is of the utmost significance—the sea *of* a cocoanut—the sloshing and smacking of water inside the fruit; this was based on the assumption of a continuity between the two images. It seems to me that, instead, there is an elided *or rather*, which would (possibly overly) clarify the speaker’s having found the apter image. At this moment, quickly turned away from by an em dash, there seems to be a gesture toward some similarity between what is inside the speaker (who I read as identifying with the coconut) and the world outside, and that the external force especially longs and urges toward reconciliation, as water beads into dew. This similarity might lie, especially as it aligns with the containment of the can of pears, the bag, or the tiger chest for tea, in some dual relationship with water that runs parallel to language, in which it is at once the container and the contained—it does as it undoes. While water is constricted in the can and slaps against its walls, were it on the outside, as the sea is on the coconut, it would do the same, ultimately demonstrating a sort of inescapability of containment in representation.

 how many men have copied dew
For buttons, how many women have covered
 themselves
With dew, dew dresses, stones and chains of dew, heads
Of the floweriest flowers dewed with the dewiest dew.
One grows to hate these things except on the dump.

⁶ Ibid. 136

So, when the speaker continues in repetition toward “the floweriest flowers dewed with the dewiest dew,” sincerity, longing, and desire mingle with humor, irony and skepticism, the former making the latter even more poignant and biting. The dew, which might otherwise have some spiritual or sentimental significance, is damaged by being copied and appropriated into decoration and dress. What begins with button turns to full articles of clothing, to stones to still and chains to bind, until it is the heads themselves, which, in their ambiguity, could mean merely the covering of oneself with the heads of flower heads, but could also figuratively signify actually replacing one’s own head with the heads of flowers—flowers which have grown stale and impotent by repetition. While it is certainly an imposition on the poem to connect these “stones and chains” to the iterative punishments of Prometheus and Sisyphus, especially due to the tonal levity at this early stage of the poem, the problems of language and representation presented do not seem entirely dissimilar.

Now, in the time of spring (azaleas, trilliums,
Myrtle, viburnums, daffodils, blue phlox),
Between that disgust and this, between the things
That are on the dump (azaleas and so on)
And those that will be (azaleas and so on),
One feels the purifying change. One rejects
The trash.

While its tone evinces a very different orientation toward its concerns, “The Man on the Dump,” with this reference to spring as the poem “begins” again, is reminiscent of Eliot’s opening of “The Waste Land”:

April is the cruellest month, breeding
Lilacs out of the dead land, mixing
Memory and desire, stirring
Dull roots with spring rain.⁷

⁷ T.S. Eliot, *The Waste Land and Other Writings*, 38

Steven's gesture toward Eliot can and should be read at least partly as ironic, not only on the basis of its tone—the cavalier “and so on,” the ambiguity of his deictic “this” and “that,” the trash—but also because of how firmly Eliot's work had been canonized by the time this poem was written.

Where Eliot instrumentalizes lilacs as a symbol of fertility, beauty, purity, what have you, Stevens' “azaleas, trilliums/ Myrtle, viburnums, daffodils, and blue phlox” are activated as linguistic material rather than meaning-markers. While the flower as category is common to poetic diction, these are not poetry's roses, lilies, sunflowers, tulips, daisies, with which one can easily identify past usages and significations—no, these flowers are something altogether different, and move beyond even the obscurest imaginable objective correlative. Furthermore, they move beyond Modernist imagism; one must consider only the garden-bed knowledge necessary to actually simulate the image of myrtle, viburnum, or phlox in the mind.

For the purposes of the poem, one could imagine any number of uncommon flowers being substituted for these, for the purpose is merely a gesture toward “flower” as category, as indicated by “azaleas and so on.” However, this is not what has happened. If one reads Stevens in good faith, and it is my hope the value of doing so has been thus far demonstrated, one cannot chalk this decision up to being an arbitrary choice on Stevens' behalf. Instead, when concrete, logical, denotative sense fails to formulate, it is worth considering that one might be searching for sense in the wrong scale—that by pure sound and the music that comes of it in combination, that fundament of poetry beneath the level of constructed and construable thought, sense beyond sense takes hold.⁸ In this way, life arrives at the dump in the detritus of these signifiers; although the decorative names have become disconnected from what they represent, one can find beauty in the names themselves.

⁸See Ancu's, *The Metaphysics of Sound in Wallace Stevens*.

After all, this is the moment precedes the poem's all-important pivot, as the speaker moves from "that disgust and this," which echoes the disdainful monotony of days passing like papers from a press, of the blowing past of days more than, less than, like this or that. When Stevens writes "One feels the purifying change. One rejects/ The trash," he writes with the utmost clarity and sincerity. This is a moment of emotional, spiritual, and poetic clarity that finds its expression in simple language. As Helen Vendler notes, Stevens is often accused of difficulty (according to her, falsely, although the issue seems to me slightly more nuanced and complicated than she suggests).⁹ Here, one can see why that might be the case.

We could easily make the case that, quote-unquote "The Man on the Dump," begins at "Now, in the time of spring..." and everything preceding that is *koan*—or worse. Instead, I argue in favor of the acrobatics of the poem's procession through the ironic litany of its landscape. It is in this first half that the poem presents its predicament—linguistic, emotional, spiritual, poetic—with faithfulness to its predicament-ness. It is only by contemplating—and more importantly, simulating—this predicament that whatever answers, furtherances, acceptances, or gestures toward wholeness follow might accrue real significance. I have broken at this moment of transformation, which, if nothing else, is the point.

Here, one cannot help but think of *Parts of a World* and the apparent substitution of its intuitive article which imagines multiple worlds and their subjective constructions in the mind of a viewer. This way of being is what comes from rejecting the trash—the assumed, un contemplated, eroded, mimicked detritus of language and thought past.

That's the moment when the moon creeps up
To the bubbling of bassoons. That's the time
One looks at the elephant-colorings of tires.

⁹ Vendler *Words Chosen Out of Desire*

Imagination's moon, promised in the poem's first line, no longer "is creeping," but "creeps." This presentness, as well as the specific mention of "time," signal the importance of the poem's first half, by which one "grows to hate these things," allowing for the rejection along an eventual string. In this moment, poet and reader are both exactly "between the things/ That are on the dump... And those that will be." The moon's unexpected fanfare, rather than the trumpets one would expect to blare, comes in the form of "bubbling bassoons." Although one might easily associate the sound of trumpets with military music, much like Stevens' myrtle, viburnums, and blue phlox, the significance of the bassoon might be more difficult to access. Unlike Stevens, I had no idea what a bassoon actually sounds like, so I turned to Philharmonia:

The bassoon's double reed gives it a rich, slightly buzzing quality in the lowest notes and a sweet nasal sound higher up. Bassoons can be extremely expressive as solo instruments and their warm vibrato enables them to sound remarkably human, a little like a resonant baritone singer.¹⁰

Certainly, the playfulness of the alliteration and consonance could have been reason enough for Stevens' choice of instrument. However, its coherence within both the stanza and the poem seem argument enough for consideration, as the ultimate good for the man on the dump is to "see/ As a man," allowing the self to become instrumentalized, to become one who "beats and beats for that which one believes."

Now that imagination's moon has risen, meaning can be made through metaphor on a more fundamental level; where the sun as a corbeil of flowers operates on the level of cognition, the metaphor of the tires' elephant coloring operates on a more primary level: that of perception. While this is not as obviously a metaphor in its construction, as "The sun is a corbeil of flowers" is, the directness of its comparison raises it above the level of simile. In fact, the level of surety

¹⁰ Philharmonia, *Bassoon*

in the figuration allows for the elision of the verb one might expect. Consider how differently the line would read were it written “One looks at tires that are elephant-colored.” This internal, subjective, simulated experience is of the utmost importance, both poetically and spiritually for Stevens, as Northrop Frye points to in a commentary on Stevens’ “The Motive for Metaphor”:

The motive for metaphor, according to Wallace Stevens, is a desire to associate, and finally to identify, the human mind with what goes on outside it, because the only genuine joy you can have is in those rare moments when you feel that although we may know in part, as Paul says (1 Cor. 13:9), we are also a part of what we know.¹¹

The implicit value of this orientation toward the world is that it allows one to see the connections in the world, and by making those connections, one becomes connected.

Everything is shed; and the moon comes up as the moon
(All its images are in the dump) and you see
As a man (not like an image of a man),
You see the moon rise in the empty sky.

The surfaces of things fall away, the films, gilts, and patinas of the dump’s images, and things become themselves as the moon comes up as the moon. The wrapper and the can are sloughed from the pears, the cat is out of the paper-bag, the tea leaves the tiger chest, and the women are disrobed of their dew dresses, stones and chains. Here, the poem successfully deflates a dubious ecstasy of truth and realization by the terseness of its language. Stevens’ landscape in this rapturous moment eschews the lushness and mannerism one might expect; all of a sudden, the dump’s landscape feels rather austere. There is only a man, who is just a man, following the rising of imagination’s moon through an abyss. Any number of allusions, in this emptiness, could be read onto the moon in its rising—could it be a lilac, breeding out of the dead land?

¹¹ Denis Donoghue, *The Motive for Metaphor*; in *The Hudson Review*

One sits and beats an old tin can, lard pail.
One beats and beats for that which one believes.

That's what one wants to get near. Could it after all
Be merely oneself, as superior as the ear
To a crow's voice?

Returning to the idea of music discussed in relation to the flower catalog and the bassoon, in this moment of triumph, the speaker turns to the most primitive of instruments, willing music from the dump's refuse. The can has an obvious correlative in the can of pears from the first stanza, but is marked in difference by the grotesqueness of the lard one imagines inside it, even in its absence. In the deteriorated and orderless landscape of the dump, there is nothing to do but make noise with what materials are left. The orientation of the one who beats—one's purpose—is completely subjective; the cause for celebration is that one has come to believe in anything at all. The poem recognizes the difficulty of this, and the speaker seems to retreat from it, saying "That's what one wants to get near," as if belief in this sense is asymptotic. Given this stance and its skeptic distance, one sees further the importance of the perceptual metaphor.

Although belief comes into the poem, Stevens leaves that belief as belief itself; given the problems discussed earlier with naming and other forms of linguistic representation, one can see why. "That's what one wants to get near," is, in effect, the last statement of the poem, which proceeds from there in an interrogative mode. The first in this series of questions, "Could it after all/ Be merely oneself, as superior as the ear/ To a crow's voice" interrupts the very line that "That's what one wants to get near" falls on. This question, in the first part of its formulation, seems to ask whether one can merely believe in oneself, evincing a sort of Cartesian doubt. Given the fondness for the tin can's harsh clatter, it seems possible that the ear is not superior to

the crow's voice, but ultimately, it seems that gesturing toward the question of that hierarchy is more important than placing one thing above another on it.

Did the nightingales torture the ear,
Peck the heart and scratch the mind? And does the ear
Solace itself in peevish birds? Is it peace,
Is it a philosopher's honeymoon, one finds
On the dump?

As Stevens' seems to have gestured toward Descartes and Enlightenment thinking in his first question, in this second question, he moves on to Romanticism, engaging with Keats. However, this gesture, along with the rest of the poem, seems to speak more broadly to the poetic tradition as a whole rather than being a slight against Keats' writing specifically. Nonetheless, despite being himself a romantic in many ways and having with a longstanding relationship to Keats,¹² it seems necessary for Stevens to attempt to differentiate his way of knowing and being in the world from those past, forging a new way. With Keats as the premier representative of the ode as poetic mode, it seems possible that Stevens also rejects pastoral and elegy, mentioning peace and the dead, especially in the traditional way that these modes offer language to experience that is always already less than the experience (of peace or mourning) it purports to represent.

In this way Stevens' reason for ironizing Keats' "Ode to a Nightingale" likely stems from a recognition of the way that poem fails to dignify the perceptual reality of the world in its imaginings. In that poem, obviously, there is no nightingale, and here Stevens imagines the reality of an encounter with that bird, of course, to very different effect. This idea does much to clarify Stevens' idea of the relationship between imagination and reality, as well as to characterize what those categories might or might not entail. For Stevens, imagination does not

¹² Vendler in *Words Chosen Out of Desire*—"Anecdote of the Jar" is an obvious example, but her discussion of "The Snowman" seems especially noteworthy.

simply mean “making things up” and the perceptual metaphor or the elephant-colorings of tires would serve as a positive example.

Stevens seems to offer clues toward what his conception of reality and literature might be in the following question. When he asks if the dump is “a philosopher’s honeymoon,” it seems to be a denigration of philosophers. He appears to consider flirting with skepticism, relativism, nihilism, and that there might be pleasure in it, but still, this will not lead to any belief worth beating his tin can for. The something that is there, if it exists at all, is not meant for treatment as much as experience. In this way, abstraction, as opposed to the tendency of language and poetry to concretize its subjects, becomes necessary; to create anything in adjacency, to believe, requires iterative acts of the imagination—to continue to do as what is done is undone in its doing.

Is it to sit among mattresses of the dead,
Bottles, pots, shoes and grass and murmur *aptest eve*:
Is it to hear the blatter of grackles and say
Invisible priest; is it to eject, to pull
The day to pieces and cry *stanza my stone*?
Where was it one first heard the truth? The the.

Although an associational reading, one can imagine the mattresses of the dead to be the place where poets past dreamed the objects that would eventually end up in the dump. While the dew dreamed on the grass might once have been fresh, it is no longer, and yet, might there not be something worth honoring about what once was fresh. Keats’ nightingale is very different from Stevens’, but Stevens’ recognition that his will always exist in relation to the other allows him to create something that is, while not singular, nonetheless new. Although this inescapability of the dump is very serious, the off-handedness with which these mattresses of the dead and other literary artifacts are treated gives hope where it feels there would otherwise be none. Similarly, if these mattresses of the dead are actually the dead’s graves, there is humorous deflation in calling

graves “mattresses of the dead” that continues the levity begun with ironizing Keats. One arrives at the *aptest eve* late in the game, but with a fuller understanding of its rules.

When one reaches the italicized words in the poem, it is easy to think of them merely as poeticisms—linguistic play that fulfills a sort of categorical function. This reading is certainly valid, but it feels worth considering, if one were to attempt to draw out semantic meaning, what might turn up, and how might that change the way the poem is understood, even if it does not seem possible to reach a definitive, stable meaning?

Invisible priest for example, could be seen as working in alignment with the moon. Of course, the moon is visible, but considering the moon as the light source that spurs the human drive to imagine, this invisible priest can be imagined as the embodiment of that moon’s force. That this force would be invisible (barring electrical blinks and spurts in an MRI or something like that) seems intuitive, but why priest? Certainly, there are many professions that would serve as suitable enough stand-ins: puppeteer, conductor, crossing guard. However, it seems significant that the figure chosen carries religious/spiritual weight. While priests are Christian, considering a poem like “Sunday Morning,” whatever spiritual value imagination’s moon might be imbued with would come not from codified belief, but in its iterative and active employment.

Another argument for linking *invisible priest* to the moon is that *stanza my stone* seems comparatively strongly linked to the sun, which would reference the relationship between the two established at the poem’s opening. Not only is it day that is “pulled to pieces,” but also, stone could very well reference the corbeil the sun was stated to be. This “pulling to pieces” of reality could reference the earlier argued fondness for perceptual metaphor, wherein imagination and reality work in tandem. Notably, the sun was a corbeil “the moon Blanche/ Place[d] there,”

which is to say that this imagination is ultimately the valued creative force, not only for its own creations, but also the way it illuminates reality in contradistinction.

Stanza my stone, then, would tightly link poetry and representation, with imaginative force lending it a spiritual tint. This would complicate the relationship between reality and imagination further, as the stone, aligned with the sun, becomes the agentive force in connecting to the stanza, which is the creation of the poet. However, it is worth considering that poetry, like the corbeil, as representation ultimately ends up being itself rather than what it purports to represent; the poem as corbeil is an act of concretizing the curves of imagination's flowers.

The stone of the stanza, if we choose to continue lending it the religious or spiritual significance that *invisible priest* suggests, could take on a number of Christian meanings, such as the stone sealing Jesus' tomb, the rock from Matthew 16:18 (And I tell you, you are Peter [from *petra*], and on this rock I will build my church), the rock that split when Jesus died in Matthew 27:51—see especially 1 Peter 2:5-8.¹³ I think these resonances of *stanza my stone* are beautiful, but codifying its meaning into singularity would run counter to the poem's ethos. For a similar

¹³ This is far beyond the pale of necessity, but nonetheless interesting:

5 you also, like living stones, are being built into a spiritual house[a] to be a holy priesthood, offering spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ. **6** For in Scripture it says:

“See, I lay a stone in Zion,
a chosen and precious cornerstone,
and the one who trusts in him
will never be put to shame.”

7 Now to you who believe, this stone is precious. But to those who do not believe,

“The stone the builders rejected
has become the cornerstone,”

8 and,

“A stone that causes people to stumble
and a rock that makes them fall.”

They stumble because they disobey the message—which is also what they were destined for.

reason, the stanza's stone is always already not Sisyphus'—and yet it is in the necessity of its continued, iterative, interactive resistance. It is the belief one wants to get near—that thing so wholly itself that it is beyond being called by its right name, beyond being called at all, leaving only article and aleph—the the.

Conclusion

In large part, I have chosen to analyze the “The Man on the Dump” not only because of Stevens’ technical inventiveness in illuminating the problems of a poet or poet-figure, but also because of the way the poem argues for the necessity of poetry. While the desire for belief is often frustrated by the media available for its interrogation and expression, the recognition that belief is actively and continuously constructed, as opposed to achieved, is of the utmost significance.

With language as the primary medium of thought, it is the most powerful tool available to us to engage with the reality of our world—of our various material, social, cultural, political, emotional, intellectual, metaphysical, and spiritual dilemmas. As these very real things in the world are constantly in flux, so too is the language we might use to simulate or represent them within ourselves toward any sort of understanding and reconciliation. In other words, as reality continually freshens and what representations we have made of it stale, the most fundamental step toward addressing this disconnect is the recognition that we must be a part of what we know in order to know in part.

We cannot rely on the systems we have made any more than we might believe in any system we might in the future make. The language of both internal and shared thought are temporally unstable, and any future solutions lie in the dissolution of answers into orientations. Poetry, more than any other art, lies at the heart of this iterative work of linguistic attention and attrition, and, as practice, presents the possibility of belief.