# Stevens and the Necessity of Distance: International Influence and the Theater Auditorium

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J. HILLIS MILLER described seeing Wallace Stevens perform at a poetry reading at Harvard University around 1950:

> <ext>As the hour went on, Stevens got more and more carried away by his own poetry. His voice got softer and softer, more and more inward, until only those in the first two or three rows, where I happened to be, could hear him. People in the back started leaving, but he paid no attention. Nor did he pay any attention to the loud ambulances and fire engines going by on Mount Auburn Street behind him, bells clanging and sirens wailing. He went right on reading, more and more quietly, absorbed in the sound of his own words. (23)</ext>

By most measures of what constitutes a "good" public performance, then, Stevens offered a very poor one, apparently seeking to please only the small world of his own self and a few favored intimates rather than to engage the larger world of the auditorium, or to acknowledge the still larger and encroaching outside world. Miller's experience echoes Stevens's own avowed resistance to publicly performing his work: this is, after all, the man who declared, "I am not a troubadour and I think the public reading of poetry is something particularly ghastly" (qtd. in Richardson 225).[1] Yet prior to this late-career aversion, Stevens had engaged

rather more enthusiastically with the public world of performance: he wrote three plays for the theatrical stage between 1916 and 1917, entitled *Three Travelers Watch a Sunrise, Carlos Among the Candles,* and *Bowl, Cat and Broomstick*. None of these plays achieved any critical or commercial success in performance, and Stevens would quickly abandon his attempts to write for the stage. Nevertheless, examining Stevens's early engagement with the theater medium throws new light not only on his later resistance to public performance, but also on Stevens's careful distancing of larger international "worlds" from his work, and the question of the ideal relation between reality and the imagination that recurs across his subsequent writing.

Here, I trace first the vexed question of the lines of international influence that shaped Stevens's plays--with particular attention to Japanese *noh* and French symbolist theater--and, second, how the crowded material world of the theater medium troubled Stevens's vision of his work. In both instances, the concept of distance is a crucial defining element. As we will see, Stevens self-consciously distanced himself (geographically and otherwise) from the international theater movements and models that seemed to influence his own playscripts. In turn, Stevens's unhappy experience of the theater medium--specifically, the inflexible material reality of the stage space itself, and the too-close presence of the audience in the auditorium--would reinforce his sense of the necessity of imaginative distance between the individual and material reality, and of a more literal distance between artist and public. This idea of a *necessary distance* would crucially inform his conception of the relationship between self and surrounding environment in his later poetry and prose.

## Stevens as Playwright: French Symbolism and Japanese *noh*

Stevens showed early promise as a playwright. His first completed playscript, *Three*

*Travelers Watch a Sunrise*, was awarded the $100 first prize for the best one-act verse play by Harriet Monroe's *Poetry* magazine in May 1916. The panel of judges praised its "extraordinary poetic beauty," but expressed concerns as to "its actability," admitting that "most of the judges doubt if it would 'get across' to more than a fraction of the audience" ("Prize Announcement" 160)--prefiguring Miller's later description of Stevens's failure to more literally "get his reading across" to more than a fraction of his Harvard audience. The more pessimistic members of the *Poetry* panel were proved correct. Despite Stevens's subsequent revisions attempting to make "the play a play and not merely a poem" (*L* 194), his playwriting career had already peaked. By the time the Provincetown Players eventually staged *Three Travelers* in 1920, Stevens was so disillusioned with the public response to his plays that he was not even present in the audience. His one-act *Carlos Among the Candles*, written shortly after *Three Travelers* but produced almost immediately by the Wisconsin Players in October 1917, had been an abject failure in performance, hampered by poor production values and a lead actor who "forgot three pages of the text which only contained . . . about ten or twelve pages," as Stevens would complain to Monroe (*L* 291). The New York Neighborhood Playhouse canceled its planned two-week run, and press criticism was unforgiving. The *New York Post* called *Carlos* "buffoonery" ("The Wisconsin Players" 7), and the *New York Times* criticized it as "a baffling monologue . . . intended neither for the stage nor the library" ("'Wisconsin Players' Here" 13). Writing in the *New York Tribune*, Ralph Block reported that the play's aim "appears to be to say something that has no meaning at all with all the bearing of significance" (28). Stevens's third and final play, *Bowl, Cat and Broomstick*, had been scheduled to run directly after *Carlos Among the Candles*, but was cut when *Carlos* was canceled, and did not even reach print publication until 1969, having been excluded from both *Poetry* magazine and the original edition of Stevens's *Opus Posthumous*.

Stevens was himself a frequent theater-goer. His early journals and letters give much

space to recording his visits and his often lengthy responses to the plays he attended in New York and Hartford. Indeed, it was his rapturous response to Clyde Fitch's *Captain Jinks of the Horse Marines* that spurred Stevens to begin his first attempt at playwriting in 1901, "A Romantic Comedy in Four Acts" entitled *Olivia*, which he would never finish (*L* 51). His journal records his outline of the play, which begins: "Olivia Rainbow, an American, is visiting France with her brother Harry. She goes to Dijon or some other place. . . . There she encounters, besides the Duke, three Frenchmen who fall madly in love with her. She is very vivacious + perhaps inclined to flirt + so she appears to encourage each of the three." It ends: "Olivia accepts the Duke + the Countess accepts Harry" (*L* 51-52). *Olivia* fits neatly within the mainstream traditions of nineteenth-century European theater: the comic romance plot turns on the audience's awareness of the gentle subterfuge and misunderstandings among the upper-class characters, mimicking the workings of the European comedy of manners, and its plotted resolution echoes the tidy structural conventions of Eugène Scribe's "well-made play." Stevens's first attempt at a stage script appears acutely influenced by the time-honored dramatic practice of the previous century.

When he returned to playwriting in 1916, however, Stevens's approach was noticeably altered, keeping pace with the radical new developments in European and American twentieth-century theater practice. In place of *Olivia*'s plot-driven upper-class romance, the verse drama *Three Travelers* sees three unnamed Chinese travelers ponder the relationship between art objects and humanity, culminating in the unexpected revelation of a hanged man in the trees beside them. *Carlos Among the Candles* gives a lyrical, imagist monologue to the sole character Carlos, who slowly lights twelve candles, one by one, pausing to comment on how each changes his concept of the room and of himself, before extinguishing them again. *Bowl, Cat and Broomstick*, set in the seventeenth century, sees the three eponymous characters dressed in *commedia dell'arte*-style costumes arguing over the

age of a "poetess" based on her use of imagery. Discarding *Olivia*'s focus on elaborate inter-character plot stimulus, Stevens oriented his three completed playscripts around the overlapping relationships among environment, art, and self, anticipating the poems of *Harmonium* (1923) onwards. The recurring concerns that characterize poems like "The Snow Man" (1921), "The Man with the Blue Guitar" (1937), "Prelude to Objects" (1938), "Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction" (1942), "An Ordinary Evening in New Haven" (1949), and "Final Soliloquy of the Interior Paramour" (1951)--subjective contemplation and reflection, unexpected intersubjective reverberations, and the conjunction between tangible environment or artwork and individual perception--find early expression in *Three Travelers*, *Carlos*, and *Bowl, Cat and Broomstick*.

This change in Stevens's playwriting practice between *Olivia* and *Three Travelers*, *Carlos*, and *Bowl, Cat and Broomstick* suggests the influence of several international theatrical examples, which shaped Stevens's conception of the potential of the dramatic medium in the early years of the twentieth century. In particular, French symbolism's concern with expressing a subjective *état d'âme* and suggesting an intuited yet ineffable knowledge of the surrounding universe is very distinctly echoed in Stevens's own practice. His Harvard training in French literature and his participation in Walter Arensberg's New York salons frequented by numerous French artists offered the Francophile Stevens an early exposure to French symbolism. Sarah Bay-Cheng and Barbara Cole have argued for the particular importance of the Francophone symbolist Maurice Maeterlinck's "slow, meditative dramas" as a precursor to Stevens's plays, in which characters are permitted "to ruminate on their own subjective response to the world around them" (31).[2] Symbolist theater's popularity across Europe in the late nineteenth century--as represented by plays such as Maeterlinck's *La Princesse Maleine* (1889), *Les Aveugles* (1890), and *Pelléas et Mélisande* (1893), and Auguste de l'Isle-Adam's *Axël* (1894) and *Elen* (1895)--was boosted in Anglophone literature

by Oscar Wilde's adoption of symbolist theater practice in *Salomé* (1896) and W. B. Yeats's experimentation in *Deirdre* (1907) and *The Hour-Glass* (1914). French and Franco-Irish symbolist drama prioritized ritual action, highly stylized movement, musically patterned and poetically expressive speech, and a trance-like atmosphere of Mallarméan contemplation; Stevens's plays employ similar compositional elements. A. Walton Litz detects the "stylized figures in symbolist drama" (59), for example, in the ornately dressed characters of *Bowl, Cat and Broomstick* reading from "*a book which is bound in yellow paper, like a French book*" (*CPP* 621), and *Carlos Among the Candles* unites the protagonist's carefully choreographed movements on stage with sensorially evocative description:

> <ext>It is like twelve wild birds flying in autumn.
> *(He blows out one of the candles.)*
> It is like an eleven-limbed oak tree, brass-colored in frost. . . . Regret. . .
> *(He blows out another candle.)*
> It is like ten green sparks of a rocket, oscillating in air. . . The extinguishing of light . . . how closely regret follows it.
> *(He blows out another candle.)*
> It is like the diverging angles that follow nine leaves drifting in water, and that compose themselves brilliantly on the polished surface.
> *(He blows out another candle.)*
> It is like eight pears in a nude tree, flaming in twilight. . . The extinguishing of light is like that. (*CPP* 619)</ext>

Intensely subjective Mallarméan reverie is expressed in esoterically metaphorical, synesthetic terms here, in one of the clearest extended examples of the influence of French symbolist

practice on Stevens's writing for the stage.

Japanese *noh* theater also exerted a formative influence on Stevens's playwriting practice. During the period in which Stevens was experimenting with writing for the stage, the highly stylized fourteenth-century Japanese theater form was seeing a new vogue in Western modernist practice.[3] Ezra Pound's translations of and writings about *noh* drama, for example, appeared in *Poetry* magazine in 1914 and 1915--the same magazine that would reward Stevens's *Three Travelers* in 1916, and that would publish many of his poems from 1914 onwards. *Noh* theater draws on codified gestures and slow, ritual dance movement to stage several narrations and re-narrations of a single tale. The conventional structure of most *noh* plays sees the narrator figure relate a story to a traveler or *shite* figure, typically accompanied by several companions or *wakizure*. The *shite* traveler then disappears from the stage and, after an interlude in which the *ai* actor retells the story in the more comedic or colloquial *kyōgen* style, reappears again as either the ghost of the story's protagonist or else newly revealed to have been that protagonist all along, and re-enacts the events one last time (Preston viii). The *noh* drama's momentum is focused around this patterning of re-enactment and anticipated revelation, rather than the more typical Western theatrical model of conflict and resolution. Stage assistants (*kōken*) and the chorus (*jiutai*) kneel onstage, alongside the orchestra (*hayashi*) of flute and drums; dialogue is delivered in a slow, versified chant (Preston 25, 30). The "plots" of *Carlos* and *Bowl, Cat and Broomstick* are similarly constructed around a *noh*-like pattern of repeated return, re-enactment, and revelation. Carlos lights a candle, pauses to comment, lights a candle, pauses to comment, and so on, across the first half of the play, and then reverses the process across the second half, before finally, elatedly, discovering the outside world. The conversation among Bowl, Cat, and Broomstick circles repetitively around their extended contemplation of the frontispiece of one book of poems, before the final revelation of contradictory detail in the book's preface. *Three*

*Travelers* replicates the *noh* convention of the traveler and companions--here, three Chinese men, along with two "negro" attendants (*CPP* 601), who fulfil the role of the *noh koken* stage assistants[4]--and relocates the narrated story that customarily opens the *noh* play, first to the book from which the second Chinese figure reads, and then to the ballad that the first Chinese figure sings to the company. The revelation of the supernatural or ghostly figure of the *noh* play becomes, in Stevens's play, the revelation of the dead figure hanging in the trees and the young girl sitting watch beneath him, who are, in turn, revealed to be the central characters from the traveler's song. All the onstage characters speak in short verse lines, and as Ruth M. Harrison observes, the "ritualized and formal character of movement in Stevens' play" echoes that of traditional *noh* theater (195): the characters handle the props with solemn ceremony, and the careful positioning and re-positioning of objects on the stage--and even the glances that the characters cast on them--are meticulously choregraphed in Stevens's script. Alongside French and Francophone symbolist practice, Japanese *noh* theater offered another key international influence on Stevens's evolving experimentation with playwriting.

However, these lines of international literary influence endure only in crucially attenuated form in Stevens's work for the stage. Stevens holds his foreign sources at a careful distance from his own creative practice, first and most simply in physical terms: despite Stevens's lifelong engagement with European and Asian art forms, geographically he remained distanced from these intercontinental sources of influence, never visiting either France or Japan. Bart Eeckhout and Edward Ragg have pointed out "the extent to which Stevens made a point of *not* travelling" (2), very rarely journeying outside North America even when he gained the financial means to do so comfortably. As "the poet who *stayed home*" (Perloff and Ragg 11; emphasis in orig.), Stevens's primary point of contact with Europe and Asia remained the mediated link of books, museums, and correspondence with his globe-trotting friends, including Thomas McGreevy and Barbara Church in Europe and

Witter Bynner and Arthur Davison Ficke in the Far East. He intends to "keep in touch with Paris," Stevens tells his soon-to-be wife, Elsie Moll, in 1908, by "run[ning] over to the [New York Public] Library some night [to] take a look at the *Journal des Débats*"--not by visiting the city itself (*Contemplated Spouse* 106).

In more subjective rather than strictly geographic terms, Stevens also repeatedly voiced his frustration with and even near-dismissal of the French and Francophone symbolists most consistently cited as his influences. In January 1909, he wrote to Elsie, "I have such difficulty with Maeterlinck. He distracts by his rhetoric" (*L* 122). Later, he would admit to Ronald Lane Latimer, "I have read very little of Valéry, although I have a number of his books and, for that matter, several books about him. . . . Of course, a man like Valéry emerges from his books without a close reading" (*L* 290). Stevens's claim to have refrained from any "close" reading of Valéry seems less a confession of a lack of knowledge of the Frenchman's works--which is demonstrably untrue--than part of Stevens's self-willed construction of a distance between himself and his sources of French influence. This conscious distancing recurs throughout Stevens's own presentation of his engagement with pan-Asian art forms. Telling Elsie of his "superficial study" of Kakuzō Okakura's book *Ideals of the East*, which he read in translation in March 1909 (*L* 137), Stevens describes his interest in broadly conceived "Eastern" art forms in deliberately casual terms, telling her, "I am going to poke around more or less in the dust of Asia for a week or two. . . . Curious thing, how little we know about Asia, and all that" (*L* 138). Stevens frames himself as an amateur enthusiast rather than an informed connoisseur of Chinese and Japanese art and culture. He downplays his engagement with Japanese literature, responding to Latimer's interest in *Two Travelers* and *Carlos*: "Yes: I think that I have been influenced by Chinese and Japanese lyrics. But . . . [t]he two plays about which you ask were not influenced as you suggest, unless I am mistaken" (*L* 291). Here, Stevens offers a clearer admission of international

influence on his work more generally, but maintains a careful distance between Japanese sources and his playwriting specifically.

We can trace a similarly careful distancing from international models in Stevens's plays as well as in his letters. In *Bowl, Cat and Broomstick*, for example, Stevens uses a mocking humor to generate an ironic, circumspect distance from its source material.[5] Broomstick's exaggeratedly Gallic costume of blue blouse, red sash, and white trousers--"*like a French peasant*," as the stage directions have it (*CPP* 621)--borders on parodic ludicrousness, and Bowl's pretentious showcasing of his engagement with French poetry is subjected to similar comic undermining:

> <ext>BOWL (*With finical importance*)
> She says--m--m--she says--m. (*Patronizing Cat*) I shall continue to translate this for you. Fleurs--des fleurs--full of flowers--full of tawny flowers--
> CAT (*A little bored*)
> Tawny? What is the word for tawny?
> BOWL
> Rouges.
> CAT
> But, Bowl, rouges means red.
> BOWL (*Coolly*)
> No doubt, when it refers to something red. But when, as here, it refers to something tawny, then it means tawny. (*CPP* 621)</ext>

Here, both the overly precious reverence for French poetry and the symbolist subjectivity of "interpretation" is held up for mockery.

Stevens likewise distanced *Three Travelers* from any overly close conformity with the Japanese *noh* model, albeit with less comic brio. To take the most immediately obvious example: instead of reproducing a Japanese setting and character list, the play is set in Pennsylvania in the United States, and is populated by three Chinese characters, two "negroes," one Italian man, and one presumably American woman. The traditional *hayashi* orchestra of flute and drums is replaced by a single unspecified "*instrument*" (*CPP* 606), which is eventually kicked to the side of the stage when the travelers abandon the scene, and the appearance of the *mugen* ghost or the *genzai* prodigal return is grimly transfigured into the revelation of the hanging corpse in the trees. In sum, *Three Travelers* discards or radically transmutes as many *noh* conventions as it borrows. Consequently, in her extended comparison of *Three Travelers* and *noh* dramatist Zeami Motokiyo's play *Nishikigi*, Harrison has to labor hard to demonstrate the extreme closeness of correlation that she claims. She is reduced to citing, for example, the "topics of poetry, death, love, and tradition" as linking Stevens's play to the *noh* convention (193)--ignoring the frequent occurrence of these elements in many other forms of theater--along with more specific but still dubious comparisons, such as the fact that *Three Travelers* and *Nishikigi* "have approximately the same number of characters" (194), the alleged resemblance of Claire Dupray's "black hair . . . arranged simply" in *Bowl, Cat and Broomstick* to "a formal Japanese wig" (*CPP* 623; Harrison 202), or the alignment of the purple and gold of *Carlos*'s setting as well as the gold, violet, green, black, and red of *Bowl, Cat and Broomstick* with the "colors of Asian art that so charmed Stevens" (202).[6] Stevens does not appear to be prioritizing precise or "close" cultural replication as his aim or artistic standard, and instead privileges a careful distancing between sources of international influence and his own theatrical practice. This is not to claim that Stevens was not influenced by his mediated encounters with French and Japanese theatrical models, nor is it to accept at face value Stevens's own exaggerated claims of

ignorance about foreign sources of influence. Rather, it is to underline how purposely Stevens distanced himself, in both geographic and artistic terms, from other "worlds" beyond his own, auguring the concern with the "correct" distance between reality and the imagination that would recur in his later poetry, as we will explore in more detail in the next section. Ragg shrewdly links Stevens's "at once genuinely curious *and* dilettante" approach to international artistic models, his method of "both embracing and resisting new influences" on his own work (57; emphasis in orig.), to his "strong determination for creative independence . . . prefiguring the kind of poetic 'detachment' Stevens would later master" (59). The melding of literal and imaginative distance that typified Stevens's relationship with international sources of influence is reprised in the writer's clash with a "too close" form of material reality in the theater medium, and his own subsequent self-distancing from the world of the theater auditorium.

## Stevens in the Theater: Material Reality and the Audience

We might have expected the theater to provide a particularly fitting medium for Stevens's interrogation of "the relation between the imagination and reality," and the respective "degrees of reality" and "degrees of the imagination" that best inform that relationship, as he puts it in "The Noble Rider and the Sound of Words" (*CPP* 646). Theater is, after all, a mode of representation based on structures of imaginative invention and displacement, fueled by the spectator's "*active* use of the imagination: the creative ability of *seeing* something as 'something else,' . . . of *blending* fiction and reality" (Kallenbach 8; emphasis in orig.). Bodies, objects, and setting are both "real" and imagined in the theater medium: the scripted character and environment coexist within and alongside the material performer's body and stage setting that mediate their imagined presence. In this ontologically indeterminate space,

the spectator must oscillate between the referential and the real to make sense of the process unfolding before them. The dramatic medium is thus constructed around the relation between the two "worlds" of the imaginary and the materially real in a manner that resonates auspiciously with Stevens's own attention to the varying "degrees of reality" that interact with the beholder's imagination. Indeed, around the time that Stevens was writing *Three Travelers*, Monroe's *Poetry* magazine was calling for a return to a poetic drama that could achieve, editor Alice Corbin Henderson believed, "the complete fusion of realism and poetic imagination, and that is what we need in America" (33). The theater seemed a promising medium for Stevens in this regard.

This interplay between material reality and imaginative perception is itself a central focus of *Three Travelers, Carlos Among the Candles*, and *Bowl, Cat and Broomstick*. In *Carlos Among the Candles*, for example, Carlos soliloquizes his sense of how he and his environment interact interdependently: "How the solitude of this candle penetrates me! . . . It fills the darkness with solitude, which becomes my own. I become a part of the solitude of the candle" (*CPP* 615). Stevens scripts Carlos and his environment's interaction as what he would describe in "The Noble Rider" as "an interdependence of the imagination and reality as equals" (*CPP* 659): Carlos feels his identity being altered by his environment, but simultaneously holds a reciprocal influence over the room, lighting and extinguishing candles at will. In *Bowl, Cat and Broomstick*, the three characters are engaged in a deeply imaginative reading of both the poems and frontispiece image of Claire Dupray, claiming to be able to guess her age and sensibilities on the basis of her choice of poetic vocabulary and "her hair, her eyes and her mouth. These make it possible to discover something of what she is from the image of her" (*CPP* 623). The dialogue of *Three Travelers* also revolves around the knotty relationship between object and the human perceiver, as the central characters debate the relative merits and drawbacks to the "invasion" of art and nature by the gaze of "humanity":

"There is a seclusion of porcelain / That humanity never invades," the third Chinese man muses, admitting, "I dislike the invasion" (*CPP* 603, 606); the second Chinese man counters, "It is the invasion of humanity / That counts. (*The limb of the tree creaks. . . .*)" (*CPP* 605). The creaking tree branch that repeatedly punctuates the characters' musings on this "invasion of humanity" foreshadows the revelation of the hanged man in the tree beside them which ends the play, disrupting their lofty ruminations by "bringing the three dreamers face to face with the grim realities of agony and death," as Monroe glosses it (37). It also provides an uncanny forerunner of Stevens's own unhappy experience once brought face to face with the "invasion of humanity," the unsympathetic and critical audience, in the theater auditorium. In varying ways, then, the relationship between material reality and imaginative perception is the pivotal concern of each of Stevens's playscripts, in a neat melding of subject and medium.

In dramatic production, however, Stevens found that his own delicate imaginative construct was overwhelmed by the material reality of the theatrical world. He describes, for example, how the artist Bancel LaFarge produced a set of sketches for *Carlos*'s scenery that were "extremely delicate and extremely suggestive" (*L* 291), following Stevens's own instructions that the play's scenery should "impress the imagination" rather than enforce any fixed material finality of setting (*L* 200), but that "[w]hen the stage setting was actually made the result was just the opposite from delicate and suggestive. The actual painting was done by a school boy" (*L* 291). Stevens's fragile imaginative constructions of forms and locales did not survive the transfer from poetic imagination to brute physical substance on the stage. "[T]he theatre is a definite thing," Stevens fretted to Monroe following the failure of *Carlos* (*L* 203), and this very material "definiteness" precipitated an early instance of the "failure in the relation between the imagination and reality," which he would later describe as resulting from "the pressure of reality" (*CPP* 649-50). The poet must be able "to abstract reality, which he does by placing it in his imagination," the older Stevens would declare (*CPP* 657); this

degree of imaginative individual abstraction proved difficult to maintain in the theater medium, for all Stevens's efforts to mimic the more suggestive expressionist or symbolist traditions.

The intrusive presence of theater audience members posed a comparable challenge to Stevens's ideal of the individual's delicately balanced imaginative engagement with a surrounding reality. The intimate proximity of other spectators in the auditorium parallels Stevens's complaint in "The Noble Rider" as to how the too-close presence of other human beings, "the generally heightened awareness of the goings-on of other people's minds," can overwhelm the fragile balance between the individual imagination and the contemplated object (*CPP* 653-54). Bonnie Costello has observed that "Stevens tended to view art as self-delighting; poetry is essentially a private affair between the poet and his own soul or muse" (188); there is by comparison little space in the public theater auditorium to allow the survival of this conception of poetry, even verse drama, as essentially "private" or "self-delighting." Stevens demonstrated his irritation with such imaginative ruptures as an audience member as well as a playwright. On attending Gertrude Stein and Virgil Thomson's *Four Saints in Three Acts*, for example, he complained that the "delicate and joyous work" was ruined by "numerous asses of the first [order] in the audience . . . people who walked round with cigarette holders a foot long, and so on" (*L* 267). Similarly, on attending a performance in the small Cooper Union in New York in March 1904, he criticized the distracting presence of the audience, including many "Jews, some with suspiciously long hair," "one fellow with a bristling, black pompadour wearing carnations," and the "sentimental-looking German" and the "fat Greek" seated near him (H. Stevens 131). His irritation with the presence of his fellow spectators peaked when, during an encore under the influence of which "[m]y very flesh was melting," he grumbles, "a bed-bug made its escape from some neighboring Jew and passed by way of my left hand up my sleeve" (H. Stevens 130-31). If in the previous section

we traced Stevens's resistance to any too-close association with international sources of literary influence, here we find his aversion to any too-close association with a surrounding audience, who are identified in markedly international (and indeed anti-Semitic) terms. Stevens deplores the lack of literal distance between individuals in the theater auditorium as an obstacle to transformative imaginative engagement. The incursion of the surrounding world--here, the proximate audience members--disrupts his ideal of the delicate balance between contemplated entity and imagination. The figuratively rendered imaginative response of "flesh . . . melting" is shattered by the brute material facticity of a bedbug crawling on the skin, in a particularly distressing invasion of "the pressure of reality" on the imaginative faculty, "the pressure of an external event or events on the consciousness to the exclusion of any power of contemplation" of which Stevens would later warn in "The Noble Rider" (*CPP* 654).

Stevens's deep-seated resistance to the crowded public reception of art thus rather inevitably caused problems when he took to the theater auditorium as a dramatist rather than a spectator. In performance, the theatrical work is created within the collective world of the auditorium; the audience provides a certain degree of shared influence over the unfolding of the live event, in contrast to the more distanced interactions between the worlds of the poet and the reader, separated by time and geography. In this setting, "the autonomy of art is qualified, and an element of antagonism rather than sympathetic identity is built into the relationship" (Costello 193). Faced with live spectators, Stevens could no longer imaginatively script a fictional audience's response, as numerous critics have noted his tendency to do within his poetry--particularly in his many poems that borrow the trope of the theater medium. Margaret Dickie has influentially described what she calls Stevens's use of "inverted dramatic monologue" in his poetry, whereby "he gives voice first and most prominently to the monologue's listener" (23, 24)--and thus, I would add, controls an

imagined audience's response.[7] By contrast, the actual theatrical medium is peopled with actual spectators, whose own unscripted and unscriptable opinions lay beyond Stevens's imaginative control. The audience at *Carlos Among the Candles* were, as he lamented to Monroe, free to and "justified . . . in saying almost anything" (*L* 203). Of course, the printed literary text also faces an unscriptable audience response once published--but that readership is positioned at a more innocuous distance from the process of creation; it is not housed in the same intimate world as the unfolding artwork in its very process of "becoming." The publishing poet, moreover, does not often sit in the room alongside readers encountering and responding to their work for the first time as the dramatist may do in première performance. Having lived through the experience of an antagonistic audience for *Carlos Among the Candles,* Stevens would absent himself from the auditorium completely for *Three Travelers*, and would not attempt the experience again. If part of the poet's measure, as he later put it, is not only to "abstract reality" but also "to abstract himself" (*CPP* 657), to engage in what he terms the fundamentally "escapist process" of poetic creation (*CPP* 662), the theater medium did not permit Stevens the leeway--the necessary *distance*--for this self-abstracting escapism.

In conclusion, then, the dramatic medium initially seemed to offer great scope for Stevens's interrogation of how imagination shapes reality, of how the environment acts on the individual and vice versa. In practice, however, the pressing intimacy of the theater auditorium did not offer the imaginative distance that Stevens would come to think of as necessary to his art. In consequence, he was to turn, decisively and perhaps a little self-defensively, to poetry as "a form of retreat, [where] the judgment of people is neither here nor there," as he would explain to Monroe in 1922 (*L* 230). Instead of making any further attempts at playwriting, Stevens would go on to write poetry that "consistently reveals his interest in theater," as Maureen T. Kravec puts it, "abound[ing] in dramatis personae, in monologue, dialogue, and theatrical metaphor" (309). Littered with masks and masques, "an

insatiable actor" and the "Final Soliloquy" (*CPP* 219, 444), Peter Quince and Jean Racine (*CPP* 72, 19), Stevens's poetry compulsively invokes the theater medium, but remains carefully distanced from the tangible reality of the stage and the proximity of the live theatrical audience. Even the older Stevens whom Hillis Miller recalls reading aloud at Harvard around 1950--ready once again to face the audience, with his poetic credentials now firmly established and his vulnerability to negative public response thus somewhat mitigated--would privilege the intimately self-delighting rather than the more expansive performance. Across Stevens's various encounters with the public stage, we find the same necessity of distance, the same refusal to acknowledge the influence of the larger outside world--be that the furthest edges of the auditorium, the response of the gathered spectators, the international circles of wider world literature, or the fire engines and ambulances of Auburn Street. Still more urgently, for the self-conscious newcomer Stevens in 1917, the retreat from the public theater auditorium back to the more private world of printed poetry provided the same necessary relief in distance evident in his delighted record of a morning away from the "foolish crowd" of New York City: "In the morning I read poetry + inwardly told the rest of the world to go to the devil (where I wish a good *many of them* really might go + stay)" (*L* 38, 44-45).

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## Notes

[1]Tyler Hoffman has explored in detail Stevens's resistance to public and recorded poetry readings, in contrast to several of his modernist poet peers. See also Seale.

[2]See also Lisa Goldfarb's work on the influence of Paul Valéry on Stevens's writing more broadly, particularly "Music and the Vocal Poetics of Stevens and Valéry," *The Figure Concealed,* and "'An Unalterable Vibration' or 'An Altering Speech for Altering Things'"; and Robert Rehder's careful tracing of Stevens's lifelong obsession with France and French culture.

[3]Edward Ragg outlines in illuminating detail how orientalist interest in the "Far East" "was notably in vogue at Harvard during Stevens's studies there in the late 1890s, as stimulated by the new Oriental Wing of Boston's Museum of Fine Arts (MFA), established by Ernest Fenollosa" (55), and Stevens's continued collection of Chinese and Japanese artworks over the course of his life. For broader recent studies of the Western modernist engagement with Eastern art and culture, see Hakutani; Reed; and Weir.

[4]An exploration of Stevens's often troubling treatment of racial difference is beyond the scope of the present work. For further exploration, see Glaser and Campbell.

[5]A. Walton Litz has convincingly traced how Stevens's humor in *Carlos Among the Candles* and particularly *Bowl, Cat and Broomstick* also turns self-parodically on the "preciosity" of Stevens's own early poetic practice (58).

[6]Harrison makes a range of other claims connecting Stevens's play to Zeami's *noh* theater that are based on inaccurate readings of textual detail. She claims, for example, that *Three Travelers* and *Nishikigi* both share "the traditional Noh backdrop of the pine forest" (194), but Stevens's stage directions in fact specify only "*a forest of heavy trees*," not necessarily pine (*CPP* 601). She argues that *Three Travelers* replicates the musical prelude that traditionally opens a *noh* play; this is credible only if we accept the unlikely possibility that the stage direction "*The limb of a tree creaks*" is meant to denote a musical passage (*CPP* 601). (The "drum / Of pursuing feet" that Harrison cites in support of her claim occurs only several pages later in the text [*CPP* 608], and is narrated in the characters' dialogue

rather than necessarily "heard" on stage.) Rather more distastefully, Harrison attempts to account for the absence of any traditional *noh* mask in *Three Travelers* by invoking the imagined facial features of the Chinese and "negro" characters: "Since Noh actors often wore masks to symbolize their characters, perhaps Stevens anticipated that the Asian and African features would suggest symbolic, mask-like values to his audience" (195).

[7]For example, several stanzas of "The Man with the Blue Guitar" are given over to the listener's seeming response to the poet-guitarist: "Ourselves in poetry must take their place, / Even in the chattering of your guitar" (*CPP* 137). Elsewhere, in "Prelude to Objects," the apparently speaking listener of the poem begs, "Poet, . . . Take the place / Of parents, lewdest of ancestors. / We are conceived in your conceits" (*CPP* 180).

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