Wallace Stevens's Modernist Melodies

Bart Eeckhout

Words are the only melodeon.

—Wallace Stevens, "Adagia"[1]

In an essay on the joys and frustrations of translating Wallace Stevens, the award-winning Italian translator Massimo Bacigalupo points to a study by Tim Parks entitled *Translating Style*. Following Parks, Bacigalupo claims that "a translation is an excellent signpost towards whatever in a text deviates from standard language, because the translator will probably be forced to normalize the original so as not to be accused of falling into 'translatorese.' And it is precisely the points within a text that deviate from linguistic standards and norms that reveal a writer's peculiarity."[2] Parks offers the striking anecdote that "students, when shown parallel texts in two languages and asked to identify the original and the translation, almost invariably decide that the translation is the original, of which the original (they conclude) is a poor translation."[3]

To put this principle to the test, let us consider for a moment the opening stanza of a famous late poem by Wallace Stevens, first in Italian:

> Cadute le foglie, torniamo
> Al senso ordinario delle cose. É come se
> Avessimo esaurito l'immaginazione,
> Inanimi in un sapere inerte.[4]

And here are the same lines again, now in French:

> Quand les feuilles sont tombées, on revient
> À un sens ordinaire des choses. C'est comme si
> On avait atteint la limite de l'imagination,
> Inanimé dans un savoir inerte.[5]

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Finally, this is the English version:

> After the leaves have fallen, we return
> To a plain sense of things. It is as if
> We had come to an end of the imagination,
> Inanimate in an inert savoir.[6]

Certainly, the English variant looks like a very poor translation: not only does it mistranslate "*the* plain sense of things" in line 2 (the perfectly normal formulation we have in Italian) as "*a* plain sense of things," or "*the* end of the imagination" in line 3 (the straightforwardly idiomatic phrase in French) as "*an* end of the imagination," it also and more importantly fabricates a final line that is totally off. Apparently, the English translator could not quite remember the word for "knowledge" and opted out by inserting the French nominalized verb "savoir." Or maybe this inept translator deluded himself into thinking that "French and English constitute a single language"[7]? What was he thinking when producing such an awkward line: "Inanimate in an inert savoir"? Can one sound less musical than that?

As a sometime Stevens translator myself, I have become wary of the ways in which his poetry in Italian and French occasionally sounds too good to be true. It does not require a strong knowledge of phonetics to realize that Italian and French are intrinsically more euphonious than English: the singing quality we primarily associate with the notion of melody is built into the phonemic systems of these two languages more than is the case with English, which, despite more than a half-century of globalized pop music, is a language quite unfit for singing. As a result, it is particularly hard for a translator into Italian or French to open the reader's ears to the peculiar melody Stevens composed in the first quatrain of "The Plain Sense of Things." What are we to make of this kind of melody?

To ask the question of melody about Stevens's poem is not as artificial as it may seem at first sight. Stevens's favorite Shakespeare sonnet opens with the famous quatrain:

> That time of year thou mayst in me behold
> When yellow leaves, or none, or few, do hang
> Upon those boughs which shake against the cold,
> Bare ruined choirs, where late the sweet birds sang.[8]

In these lines, Shakespeare gives us a traditional poetic topos—the ineluctability of physical transience—voiced in a melancholy melody that must convey something of the compensatory consolations of poetic creation at a time when the summer birds' singing appears to have ended. Stevens, at the outset of "The Plain Sense of Things," takes off from this

melancholy Renaissance melody to stage the condition of an aging modern poet at a time when earlier satisfactions no longer suffice. It would be easy to adopt the language of the poem itself and call Stevens's tone and melody in his belated creation "blank." That is, after all, the word suggested by the opening sentence of the second stanza: "It is difficult even to choose the adjective / For this blank cold, this sadness without cause."[9] There is a well-established critical history describing the tone of Stevens's late poems (those from the early 1950s) as remarkably neutral, colorless, or blank—or, with the adjective launched by the title and first stanza of this particular poem, "plain." While this may be true in terms of the delivery many of the poems invite when read out loud, I want to ask the question here whether this is quite the same thing as analyzing the stanza in terms of its specific modern melody.

To get a first purchase on this topic, we can fall back on an ancient and widely taught (if unpopular) methodology: we can undertake a metrical analysis. One of the things we immediately notice is how every line in Stevens's opening stanza has its own carefully crafted metrical shape that is peculiarly modern in its unpredictable, syncopated distribution of stresses. Even without a highly developed metrical ear, it is not hard, in particular, to get a sense of the stuttering rhythm of the fourth line, which starts out iambically only to be pulled to pieces through an unorthodox series of five unstressed syllables, after which the line becomes unredeemable and is laconically clipped short: "InANimate in an inERT savOIR." Ti-TUM-ti-ti-ti-ti-ti-TUM-ti-TUM.

To such a metrical analysis may be added a look at the phonemic patterning in the stanza's anticlimactic line. That there is such a patterning is undeniable: it is even pushed to an extreme of self-consciousness. "Inanimate in an inert" is so conspicuously construed out of assonance, consonance, pararhyme, and multiple phonemic repetition that it has inspired critical discussion of "a kind of negative materiality" whereby, in Ronald Schleifer's commentary, "'inanimate' is reduced to its material sound, *in-an-imate*, the ghostly repetition . . . of its sound that is there all along, 'in an inert': where meaning (or 'spirit,' or the imagination) was, there shall non-sense (or the blank cold of 'matter' and the 'letter') come to be."[10] Schleifer may be getting a lot of psychoanalytic mileage out of a few words here, but the point is that the line does invite, perhaps even demand, some such critical reflection precisely to the extent that it builds a strikingly modern melody—a melody that becomes even more modern when the very minimalist phonemic patterning of the first four words issues in the wholly unexpected and phonemically dissonant conclusion of "savoir." That word, with its suddenly opening assonance on [a], its relatively un-English midword cluster of [vw], and its even more un-English uvular [X], is conspicuously out of place in an English sound system. At the signifying level, Lee Jenkins is no doubt right to note that, suspended

by itself, the word is used in such a way as to lack the "conjunction with 'faire' or 'vivre' and is left in a kind of limbo on the page."[11] But just as surely there is more to Stevens's word choice than just a semantic selection principle. There is also the conscious construction of a resistant, dissonant modern melody that brings to mind Stevens's confession in a letter to Henry Church: "Personally, I like words to sound wrong."[12]

Words cannot sound wrong unless we factor in some of their semantic effect. To be able to sound wrong, a word must disrupt the horizontal, syntagmatic chain in which it appears, which inevitably involves the reader's semantic understanding of the word and its signifying function within that chain. When we hear poetry read out in a language completely unknown to us, we are not likely to be struck by words sounding wrong—unless they were to be marked as such by the speaker's inflection or articulation. But just as obviously it would be a mistake to reduce Stevens's love of wrong-sounding words to a mere semantic effect. If the horizon of expectation that finds itself interrupted, or disrupted, must be principally semantic (hence cognitive), the words building such a horizon are irreducibly material: they are for instance always embodied, enacted, and performed sonically—even in the case of words that sit still on the page. Stevens did not write that he liked words to *be* wrong, for then any poor lexical decision or any instance of syntactic incoherence would qualify; the words have to *sound* wrong. Such a claim seems to invite an analogy with the art of musical composition, in particular its component of melody-making.

In poetry criticism, the notion of melody is not part of the traditional arsenal of concepts and analogues, although the analysis of sound has long been a staple of critical practice. So it is with Stevens. On the one hand, his sonic qualities have been the object of extended critical analysis.[13] On the other, critical attention to the place of melody in his work seems to be implicit, as in Beverly Maeder's claim that Stevens "successfully integrated limited moments of suggestive consonant and vowel effects into an auditory experience of momentous developments"[14] (which reads like a definition of verbal melody in disguise), or else, occasionally, thematic, as when Alison Rieke interprets Stevens's swan figures as encrypted comments on melody.[15]

There are some very good reasons why melody should have received short shrift in poetry criticism. To begin with, it is not exactly well developed in musical theory itself, where it is frequently treated as the more or less pretty, more or less inspired component that does not demand or afford extensive conceptual or structural analysis. When melodies are composed for the human voice, they are easily regarded as extraneous to the verbal materials with which they are conjoined: they are what is *added to* the signifying process of language, in more or less expressive or mimetic ways. After all, the same melodies may also simply be hummed or whistled, or take the shape of a wordless *vocalise*. As a result, the spoken

word and its transformation into sung melody are frequently regarded as two distinct ways of using the vocal organs. Even if the melody is a direct setting of spoken words into sung lines, we are inclined to treat it as involving a leap of transformation or transposition that is intermedial rather than intramedial: speaking and singing are often regarded as two different media.

From such a commonsensical perspective, the literal application of the term "melody" to describe features of a strictly textual composition intended for consumption on the page (or at best materialized in mere speech) appears to be something of a stretch, and to many critics only a metaphoric and analogical application would seem possible. If we want to argue for a rapprochement between metaphoric and literal uses of the term in the case of poetry, as I will be doing here, then we should start by granting the impossibility of a perfect match and focus the comparison above all on verbal melodies that come in vocal realizations, such as we also find in song and opera. Yet once we begin to align these modes of vocal production with what we have in poetry, we soon realize that the distinctions are not as clear-cut as they seem to be upon a first, cursory consideration. On the musical side, for instance, the hybrid, crossover phenomenon of *Sprechgesang* devised by Schoenberg, among others, immediately serves to remind us of this. On the side of speech, likewise, phonolinguistics is quick to remind us of the fact that every bit of vocally realized speech has its own cadences and a range of pitch and timbre that together make for the specific and individual tonal patterns of the delivery. It is worth reinvestigating, I believe, how melody is not only implicated in the sonic dimension of poetry but how it can serve as an analytical tool for enriching our experience of poetry.

When we attempt to define the place of melody in any poet's work, and the precise quality of Stevens's melodies in particular, we should heed Maeder's warning that "sounds in poetry—*sounds*, not just *sound*—cannot be called 'music' except insofar as we submit that term to minute dissection."[16] A minute dissection of the term "melody," I argue below, requires that we analyze at least four material components, which need to be understood together and heard together in the inner ear for a better sense of poetic melody to emerge. I will look first at the vertical axis of the units out of which verse melodies may be composed. Then there is the combination of such units along a horizontal axis. Third, we need to find a rhythmical organization and a certain pacing. And finally, we should investigate the role of elements treated in musical theory under the label of "quality"—aspects like timbre, texture, loudness, and dynamics, whose applicability to silent words on the page seems so limited, yet whose status as intrinsic to melody is itself contested.[17]

To explore the vertical or paradigmatic axis of the distinctive material units out of which verse melodies may be composed, we should study the

unique combination of the following three features: (1) the character and variety of the stylistic register employed by a poet; (2) the extent to which the production of phonemes is valued as an autotelic aesthetic sensation by the poet; and (3) the relative autonomization of the sonic material.

Since words are the building blocks with which poets write, much of the verbal melody will depend on the range and variety of the stylistic register on which the poet draws. In Stevens's case, his famously exotic and quixotic lexicon is responsible for much of why we experience his melodies as unique. (We are, of course, used to talking in terms of a poet's unique voice, but the lines this voice spins build melodies of a sort.) A brief sample of his vocabulary, consciously extracted from syntactic and signifying contexts and strung together without dividing commas, serves to make audible again the intrinsically colorful, contrastive units out of which his melodies are constructed:

> Squamous henna gramaphoon skrittering gubbinal peignoir ai-yi-yi exchequering flambeaued bagatelles hoobla-hoobla-hoobla-how spissantly douce masquerie ké-ké empurpled plentifullest cabildo miff-maff-muff plomets lol-lolling Schwärmerei.

Stevens's poetry is full of its own Bakhtinian heteroglossia: not that of pasting together and recycling sundry quotations from a variety of sociolinguistic environments (as his poetic friend Marianne Moore was wont to do) but that of concocting a hybridized language that jumbles diction from incompatible registers and backgrounds, "compound[ing] the imagination's Latin with / The lingua franca et jocundissima,"[18] and propounding, "Natives of poverty, children of malheur, / The gaiety of language is our seigneur."[19]

Stevens defended this lexical inclusiveness and expansiveness in a lecture at Mount Holyoke College as late as April 1951:

> I have never been able to see why what is called Anglo-Saxon should have the right to higgle and haggle all over the page, contesting the right of other words. If a poem seems to require a hierophantic phrase, the phrase should pass. This is a way of saying that one of the consequences of the ordination of style is not to limit it, but to enlarge it, not to impoverish it, but to enrich and liberate it.[20]

This drive to enlarge, enrich, and liberate diction may be measured, among other ways, by his tapping into the full range of unusual words: those qualified as "rare, obsolete, archaic, colloquial, dialectal" in the distinctions drawn by the *OED*.[21] His resistance to a purist attitude toward poetic diction, expressed by his refusal to stick to Anglo-Saxon higgling and haggling, extended on other occasions to a distrust of the Teutonic

and so at once of the Germanic lineage of English and part of Stevens's own ancestry as a Pennsylvania Dutchman. In December 1935, tellingly, he responded to some questions by Ronald Lane Latimer by saying,

> Just how it comes about that my vocabulary is more Latin than Teutonic, I don't know. Perhaps there may be something in the idea that the language of poetry is never Teutonic. It may even be said that the sound of German poetry is not Teutonic. The Teutonic makes a very good foil in the music of Sibelius; the heavy Teutonic characteristics are not what constitutes its poetry: the poetry arises as the strings rise from that volume of sound.[22]

In a lecture at Harvard University one year later, he went on to explain that the freedom of modern composition may seem like a free-for-all that renders compositional decisions ultimately indifferent, but the opposite is in fact true—a claim he illustrated by centering precisely on the sonic dimension:

> You can compose poetry in whatever form you like. . . . It is not that nobody cares. It matters immensely. The slightest sound matters. The most momentary rhythm matters. You can do as you please, yet everything matters. . . . To insist for a moment on the point of sound. We no longer like Poe's tintinnabulations. You are free to tintinnabulate if you like. But others are equally free to put their hands over their ears. . . . You have somehow to know the sound that is the exact sound; and you do in fact know, without knowing how.[23]

By setting off his poetry from Poe's notorious sonorities and rhythms, Stevens was defining his own modernist melodies, arguing against antiquated notions of mellifluousness and fixed tonal as well as metrical systems. Hitting upon the "exact sound" did not prevent words from "sounding wrong"—if such was the desired effect. As someone who had been raised throughout his childhood and early manhood on the sound systems of Romantic and Victorian poetry (above all Keats and Tennyson) and who had himself a seductive talent for virtuoso tintinnabula, Stevens the aesthetically innovative modernist knew to distrust his nineteenth-century past and easy talent. That is why he felt impelled to ridicule "the bawds of euphony"[24] as early as 1917, in his semi-programmatic poem "Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird."[25] And it helps to account for that quality of his verse explained in a 1945 letter to José Rodríguez Feo: "All the interest that you feel in occasional frivolities," he playfully confessed to his young Cuban correspondent, "I seem to experience in sounds, and many lines exist because I enjoy their clickety-clack in contrast with the more decorous pom-pom-pom that people expect."[26]

Some summing up is already possible, then: the material units out of which Stevens composes his verse melodies are characterized, first, by the amplitude of the sound system on which he draws, combining words from a range far beyond the everyday modern lexicon, mixing Anglo-Saxon higgling and haggling with the hierophantic, the nonsensical, and the occasional *Fremdkörper*. This sound system, furthermore, prefers the Latin over the Teutonic, the wrong word over the euphonious, and the clickety-clack over the pom-pom-pom. We do not need to belabor the fact, then, that to Stevens the production of phonemes was valued as an intrinsically gratifying aesthetic sensation, and that he saw the phonetic materiality of writing and the sonic impulses of individual words as a relatively autonomous aspect of poetic composition. One final quotation should clinch this point. It appears in the final pages of his lecture "The Noble Rider and the Sound of Words," where, almost as an afterthought, Stevens turns to what he considers to be really at the heart of poetry writing:

> And what about the sound of the words? . . . I do not know of anything that will appear to have suffered more from the passage of time than the music of poetry and that has suffered less. The deepening need for words to express our thoughts and feelings which, we are sure, are all the truth that we shall ever experience, having no illusions, makes us listen to words when we hear them, loving them and feeling them, makes us search the sound of them, for a finality, a perfection, an unalterable vibration, which it is only within the power of the acutest poet to give them. . . . above everything else, poetry is words; and . . . words, above everything else, are, in poetry, sounds.[27]

The affirmation, influenced by the Romantic and Sybolist traditions in which Stevens was steeped, of "the music of poetry" is obvious here, as is the fact that the language he employs to describe the "need for words to express our thoughts and feelings," a need that "makes us listen" and "search the sound of them, for a finality, a perfection, an unalterable vibration," is in fact the language in which we usually talk about *melodies* and the effects achieved by them on the listener.[28]

As the foregoing section has made clear, it is not really possible to talk about the vertical or paradigmatic axis of the units out of which melodies are composed without to some extent already including the horizontal or syntagmatic axis in the discussion. This becomes even more clear when we notice how Stevens returns to the "unalterable vibration" poetry readers are supposed to be listening for in "The Noble Rider and the Sound of Words." Casting for ways to leave his key concept of nobility open to creative transformation, he decides that "nobility resolves itself into an enormous number of vibrations, movements, changes. To fix it is to put an end to it."[29] This is the mobility of nobility, so to speak: the whole concept is

to be understood as a process, forever on the make, like the ever-changing melodies—those moving vibrations—Stevens spins to make us hear and feel his sense of nobility.

"Just as composers traditionally devise new arrangements of notes from pre-existent melodic scales," Maeder reminds us, "poets create new sequences of sound from human languages."[30] If we want to talk of something resembling melodies in this verbal flow and not of a random sequence of sounds, there seem to be a few specific requirements again: the poet must use (1) more or less identically recurring sonic units (playing the role of individually recognizable pitches in musical composition); (2) sonic patterns that change and interact; and (3) connections between units in relatively short sequence, preferably building some kind of distinct entity with an appreciable aesthetic shape. This is where the discussion becomes most complex and, therefore, interesting.

It would be unwise to limit the recurring units in this case to words, although these got us launched on our discussion of the vertical selection principle. If words tend to come as a whole, so that choosing them forces one to submit to a small, predetermined set of phonemes (a limitation Joyce famously sought to overcome in *Finnegans Wake*), building verbal melodies is not therefore a matter of stringing together individual words. The sonic units with which the poet works to build melodies—the pitches he organizes in ways of relation—are not just full words, but also word stems, more isolated phonemes, or phonemic clusters and patterns drawing our attention to their sonic qualities per se. That the melodic patterns thus devised must change and interact to build melodies is so obvious it proves analytically unhelpful: apart from rigorously minimalist or conceptual experiments in avant-garde writing, the building of verbal sentences automatically entails constant change and interaction between its constituent sonic units. What deserves closer scrutiny, however, is the need for melodies to build some kind of distinct entity with an appreciable aesthetic shape spread over a short time span, allowing the reader-listener to contain the melodies in his short-term memory.

Here Leonard Bernstein's didactically exemplary explanation of the difference between melodies, tunes, themes, motives, and phrases proves useful in moving us beyond the level of intuitive response. This is how he contrasts the first three terms:

> [P]eople usually think of melody as a *tune*, something you can go out whistling, that's easy to remember, that "sticks in your mind." What's more, a tune almost never goes out of the range of the normal human singing voice—that is, too high or too low. Nor should a tune have phrases that last longer than a normal breath can sing them. After all, melody is the *singing* side of music, just as rhythm is the dancing side. But the most important thing about a tune is that it is usually

> complete in itself—that is, it seems to have a beginning, middle and end and leaves you feeling satisfied. . . . But in symphonic music . . . tunes aren't exactly in order, because being complete in themselves, tunes don't cry out for further development. And development is the main thing in symphonic music . . . —the growing and changing of a melodic seed into a big symphonic tree. So that seed *mustn't* be a complete tune, but rather a melody that leaves something still to be said, to be developed—and that kind of melody is called a *theme*.[31]

Sometimes, Bernstein continues, the material "is so short it's not really even a theme, but what is called a motive," which "can be as little as two notes, or three or four—a bare melodic seed—the raw material out of which longer melodic lines are made."[32] When this material is in turn lengthened, it becomes

> what is called a *phrase*, just as a series of words in language is called a phrase [and note how musical parlance about melodies in this instance borrows from spoken language rather than the other way around]. And Wagner, by using this method of joining motives together and making phrases out of them, and then sentences out of the phrases, and paragraphs out of the sentences, finally turns out a whole story.[33]

The distinctions expounded by Bernstein invite a particular understanding of the kinds of melodies we find in a poet like Stevens: at the level of melody-making, it seems appropriate to align Stevens above all with composers in the Western tradition of symphonic art music and post-Wagnerian opera, where motives and phrases are endlessly developed in the most original ways, while a figure like Robert Frost is more clearly a gifted tune-maker, a poet whose more regular reliance on meter, end-stopped lines, end rhyme, and identical repetition, will produce catchy tunes like the following, probably his most famous:

> The woods are lovely, dark, and deep,
> But I have promises to keep,
> And miles to go before I sleep,
> And miles to go before I sleep.[34]

To be sure, Stevens knows how to produce such effects as well, and he falls back on his talent for tunes throughout his writings. Often he will then resort to reiterating shorter phrases or building anaphoras. Early examples of this tune-building facility can be found in "Metaphors of a Magnifico," "The Apostrophe to Vincentine," and "The Snow Man," which are not coincidentally also among the poems containing his most memorable lines—those we literally feel like memorizing, just as we do with catchy tunes. Emerging tunes like these and hints of a possible refrain

will remain characteristic of his writing but, as Wittgenstein has said, in language almost identical with Bernstein's above, "[a] tune is a kind of tautology, it is complete in itself; it satisfies itself,"[35] and Stevens's principal desire as a poet is famously *not* for the finish of completion. His is a poetry investing most in the *act* of composition and its ongoing rewards—a poetry, as he styled it, "in the act of finding / What will suffice."[36] Thus, in Stevens's middle to late work, tunes become more ephemeral and subservient to a more extended and complex development of melodies. By then they appear more frequently as the glimpse of a possibility of a satisfying tune than as the immediate and easy, self-sufficient achievement of melodic satisfaction.[37]

Especially in the longer, meditative poems, Stevens's efforts are best understood in the post-Wagnerian compositional terms of endlessly evolving melodies built around a ceaselessly transformative dynamics of tension and release and a late-Romantic/early-Modernist chromatic resistance to an all-too-easy harmony. For much of the time, he is a poet actively foregoing the satisfaction of simple harmonic tunes, preferring instead to intersperse what sounds right with what sounds wrong. One way of conceptualizing this is by viewing his modern melodies as full of unpredictable, alternately strange, grating, or exhilarating intervals that break through the listener's expectations of symmetry and established or perceived harmonic systems. This is what makes for much of his melodic modernity. Stevens's verbal melodies are nothing if not full of surprises, which has made them at once inimitable and irresistible to a legion of descendants—both poets (like John Ashbery) and composers (like Ned Rorem).

These surprising leaps or intervals in the weaving of melodic patterns are implied whenever a stylistically expert critic observes that

> [i]t is not just Stevens's use of single words that is so striking. Even more, it is his way of combining words. Blackmur notes this, and it is one thing that James Merrill remembers learning from Stevens: ["]his great ease in combining abstract words with gaudy visual or sound effects. 'That alien, point-blank, green and actual Guatemala,' or those 'angular anonymids' in their blue and yellow stream.["][38]

To such unheard-of sonic chains applies what Bernstein notes about many of the great Western composers' melodies:

> [W]hat happens when we hear melodies that don't repeat at all, that just weave on and on, always new? It's true that we usually like them less, *at first*. But that doesn't mean they're any less melodic; in fact, the farther away you get from that kind of "Mac the Knife" repetition, the harder the melodies may get to latch on to, but also the nobler and more beautiful they can become. Some of the really greatest melodies

> ever written are of this kind, nonrepeating long lines; only they're not necessarily the ones people go around whistling in the streets.[39]

"After that alien, point-blank, green and actual Guatemala" (the concluding line from "Arrival at the Waldorf"[40]) builds such a melody, arguably: not a smooth and simple tune, but a resistant modern melody so captivating in the long run that a fellow poet like Merrill would come to memorize it and offer it up as a source of aesthetic admiration. In "The Creations of Sound," Stevens famously argued that "speech is not dirty silence / Clarified. It is silence made still dirtier," complaining that an anonymous opponent's poems "do not make the visible a little hard / / To see"[41]: it is in the nature of his melodies, too, that they are silence made still dirtier and make the audible a little hard to hear.

Melodies that "just weave on and on, always new," and build "nonrepeating long lines" are typical of Stevens, and their principal cohesion comes from modulation, variation, and freely roaming improvisation—those long-noted staples of his aesthetic. George S. Lensing has called this pattern one of "appositional elaboration," "unfold[ing] like the waves of the sea, each like its predecessor but subtly different,"[42] a compositional practice that in the music after Wagner has come to mark the modernity of a melody.

If we want to characterize a poet's specifically *modern* melodies, we nevertheless require still more than a peculiar sonic system of distinct units strung along surprising chains: we also need a rhythmical organization that breaks with conventions in unpredictable ways. Two elements are to be included in this part of the analysis: prosody and pacing—what in music we would call rhythm and tempo.

"My line is a pentameter line," Stevens wrote in 1942, "but it runs over and under now and then."[43] This typical running over and under has afforded Maeder an opportunity to marshal Adorno and Zemlinsky in her analysis of "The Man with the Blue Guitar" (where the backbone is formed, more unusually, by a tetrameter line):

> Theodor Adorno has described the general strategy of Zemlinsky's Third String Quartet (1924) in terms that could apply to Stevens' poem when he writes of Zemlinsky's "readiness to interrupt the movement, never pursuing a rhythmic impulse beyond the point where it naturally comes to rest: the antithesis of anything mechanical. This waxing and waning of impulse is characteristic."[44]

The endlessly evolving melodies Stevens composes in a post-Wagnerian tradition, in other words, come with a particular rhythmic organization as well, which may again be characterized as late Romantic/early Modernist: the metrical backbone of traditional verse melodies is still in place, but the

drive is toward maximum liberty and naturalness of declamation within a traditional framework.

In due time, as Natalie Gerber has convincingly demonstrated, this rhythmic liberty of waxing and waning to accord with the needs of the moment acquired an intrinsic value and force for Stevens—just as rhythmic innovations sometimes did in the work of contemporary composers like Stravinsky and Bartók. Especially in the later work, Stevens deployed prosody not just in the service of verbal meaning, but as an autotelic affirmation of vital energies unaffected by historically bound words. In Gerber's argument,

> Stevens' refining sense of rhythm comes to take the force of philosophy for him, and to offer a sustainable mode for meaning, one that could compensate for the failure of the semantic, which as Stevens witnessed, occurred as history subjected statements to evisceration as rhetoric. By exploring how Stevens treats words not only in their referential sense, not only in their figurative, but also in their compositional aspect—as plastic entities—we can approach the late poems and their remarkable rhythms in a way that begins to apprehend the power of their cadential speech.... Time and again, Stevens harnesses the force of the meter to focus our attention on the sounding and resounding of the sounds of words.[45]

When in a late poem like "The Plain Sense of Things," then, Stevens constructs a line like "Inanimate in an inert savoir," we need to hear the awkward rhythm of his melody working on more levels than one: not just as a way of rhythmically miming the sense of failure expressed semantically, but as an alternative energy informing the poem independently of its specific expressive effect, subtly foreshadowing, in this case, the small aesthetic victory won at the end of the poem through the speaker's affirmation of the imagination.[46]

Stevens's rhythmical organization is largely a matter of varying patterns of stressed, half-stressed, and unstressed syllables, as it inevitably is in a stress-timed language such as English. To a finely tuned ear, its novelties are probably more striking than those at the level of pacing or tempo. Yet the latter level, too, needs to be included in a full characterization of melodies. Stevens's pacing is typically slow, especially in the poems after *Harmonium*. After that volume's experiments with very short, clipped lines, free verse, and explosive sonic effects, words are tasted more tentatively and lines drawn out longer to build more ample musical phrases. Both the meditative quality of the writing and the semantic denseness of the language as well as its many syntagmatic ruptures, moreover, contribute to the slowing-down effect. Since Stevens was famous for being a walking poet, preferring to compose during his daily ambles between

home and office or through the local park, it is easy enough to connect the dominant pace of his verse to the "stately, measured" manner of the "slow stride" for which he was noted by his neighbors in West Hartford.[47] He himself, in fact, made the connection on one occasion, less than a year before his death, when he explained his writing practice by saying that "[w]alking helps me to concentrate and I suppose that, somehow or other, my own movement gets into the movement of the poems."[48]

Besides such implicit general pacing of melodies, we do well to pay attention also to the way Stevens tended to read out his own poetry on those relatively rare occasions when he allowed himself to be pulled onto a public stage or in front of a recording microphone. One of the most striking aspects of these public performances is the caesuras he introduced to divide his lines into triple waves, thereby slowing down the tempo even more. This is what came as a particular revelation to the British poet, critic, and publisher Michael Schmidt. As Schmidt testifies:

> It is hard for the specifically English ear not to mishear Stevens, not to read in him a relatively regular iambulator. But his own recorded readings transform the English reader's sense of the poet and may indeed affect other readers. . . . The first time I listened to Stevens' 1954 recording of "The Idea of Order at Key West" the scales fell from my ears. Each line seemed to be endowed (in a quite unmechanical way) not with one but with two caesurae. This broke the apparent tyranny of the driving iamb, creating a suspension or a stillness, changing the nature of the emphasis and climax of the line. A driving iamb might be imposed upon Stevens' verse, but it is not necessarily inherent. What is inherent is something deliberately tentative in the kinds of emphasis it gives, something specifically musical. Had Stevens been more calculating he might have considered laying out his lines in those descending, indenting triplets favored by William Carlos Williams. But his relatively orthodox lineation paradoxically enables the poem's mystery and captures its sound without self-consciousness.[49]

Once we start hearing Stevens's characteristic grouping of words and phrases in our inner ear, we begin to understand there is an almost inaudible but peculiarly modern rhythmic organization to his work also at the level of pacing.

In musical theory, the aspect of *quality*, finally, stands for elements like timbre, texture, loudness, and dynamics—features sometimes regarded as already extrinsic to melody itself, since the same melody should ideally be recognizable when produced in a variety of timbres, textures, or dynamic realizations. Asking about quality creates something of a contradiction in the analysis of Stevens's verbal melodies. On the one hand, qualitative features, which are so obviously missing from any poem printed on the page

consisting of mere letters, may be simply (and self-servingly) dismissed as inessential to the sounding of melodies. On the other, we cannot well overlook the historic fact that this specific aspect of musical composition assumed a major role in the music composed precisely by Stevens's contemporaries. In their own search for novel ways of dealing with melody, many early twentieth-century composers gave precedence to qualitative dimensions over traditionally dominant aspects like pitch and rhythm, for instance in the *Klangfarbenmelodie* explored by Schoenberg and Webern, among others, or the multiple experiments with autonomized timbres, textures, and dynamic contrasts pursued by the musical avant-garde. Here we are faced, then, with one of the more conspicuous limits for applying the concept of melody to poetry. It is not really possible to align Stevens's (or any other poet's) verbal melodies with any of these qualitative experiments outside the context of a specific musical performance.

What *is* still possible to address under this heading, however, is the self-conscious construction of a poetic *voice* and of *conditions of performability* as an intrinsic purpose of the creative process. In recent years, Lisa Goldfarb has been doing the most interesting work in this respect by reading Stevens in the context of Paul Valéry's analogous but more extensively theorized ideas on the relation between music and the construction of a poetic voice. Much of Valéry's thinking about voice in poetry, Goldfarb summarizes,

> grows out of his belief in poetry's intrinsic musicality and an understanding of the poem as "act." . . . When he discusses the musical side of his pendulum, he refers to the physical or formal properties of poetic language as "la *Voix* en action" ("the *Voice* in action").[50]

Tyler Hoffman has recently demonstrated how, in bringing this active voice to life during his public readings, Stevens as a modernist writer resisted the established Romantic mode of intoning poetry as a kind of specially pitched, amplifying chant—the way Valéry still seemed to advocate when he recommended to reciters "that one must begin with *song* as one's starting point, to put oneself in the state of the singer, place one's voice in the fullness of musical sound, and from there redescend to a slightly less vibrating state appropriate to verse."[51] Against such habits of intonation, Stevens protested that he was "not a troubadour" and considered "the public reading of poetry [a]s something particularly ghastly."[52]

Still, despite the muted-down performances of his own work, it is important to understand that Stevens was not therefore investing any less in the musical properties of the modern voice he sought to construct. We can see this clearly in the lecture he gave at Yale University, "Effects of Analogy." There he first dismisses "the music of poetry" as a "mode of analogy" for being "a bit old hat and romantic," only to qualify this

instantly by saying that "after all, the music of poetry has not come to an end."[53] Illustrating what he means with a passage from T. S. Eliot's "Rhapsody on a Windy Night," he goes on to explain that it is not so much the musicality of poetry that has disappeared as that there has been a shift in musical tastes in the modern era away from the grand Romantic gesture. To describe this, he takes down the analogy with music from its exalted Romantic or Symbolist ambitions to the level of the speaking voice:

> It is simply that there has been a change in the nature of what we mean by music. It is like the change from Haydn to a voice intoning. It is like the voice of an actor reciting or declaiming or of some other figure concealed, so that we cannot identify him, who speaks with a measured voice which is often disturbed by his feeling for what he says. There is no accompaniment. If occasionally the poet touches the triangle or one of the cymbals, he does it only because he feels like doing it. Instead of a musician we have an orator whose speech sometimes resembles music.[54]

The modern poetic voice, in other words, is that of an intermittent *Sprechgesang*: its quality is hybrid, allowing for fleeting echoes of an older musical tradition even as it enables and prompts new sonic sensations.

Stevens elaborates upon his point by evoking at some length what the impact is of the music of "great narrative musicians," clearly thinking of opera first and foremost, and expressing his enthusiasm for an operatic music that "excites us and we identify it with the story and it becomes the story and the speed with which we are following it." Such an experience of "complete sympathy" in music through "a communication of emotion" culminates in his analysis, surprisingly yet all the more tellingly, in a categorical conflation with the musical qualities of poetry:

> It would not have been different if it had been the music of poetry or the voice of the protagonist telling the tale or speaking out his sense of the world. How many things we should have found like in either case![55]

Even the far less exalted speaking voice of a "concealed" modern-day poet, then, fundamentally shares the compelling "communication of emotion" traditionally magnified in operatic music. It is merely a matter of learning to hear that modern poet's characteristic voice, even if the poet is himself a figure—and builds melodic figures—"we cannot identify."

As Beverly Maeder has shrewdly noted, Stevens's most famous long poem, "Notes toward a Supreme Fiction," "takes on a new sense if we take 'notes' in the musical sense and see the titles of the poem's three parts as describing together, with an extreme exactitude, the nature of musical sequence: 'It Must Be Abstract,' 'It Must Change,' and 'It Must

Give Pleasure.'"[56] These are not just exact descriptions of "the nature of musical sequence": they are the demands set to the composition of *melodies*—demands Stevens met with a high degree of self-consciousness and startlingly original, modern results.

University of Antwerp
Antwerp, Belgium

NOTES

1. Wallace Stevens, *Collected Poetry and Prose*, ed. Frank Kermode and Joan Richardson (New York: Library of America, 1997), 909. Further references to this edition will be abbreviated as *CPP*.

2. Massimo Bacigalupo, "Reading Stevens in Italian," in *Wallace Stevens across the Atlantic*, ed. Bart Eeckhout and Edward Ragg (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), 220.

3. Bacigalupo, "Reading Stevens" 221–22.

4. Wallace Stevens, *Il mondo come meditazione*, trans. Massimo Bacigalupo (Parma: Ugo Guanda, 1998), 37.

5. Wallace Stevens, *À l'instant de quitter la pièce: Le Rocher et derniers poèmes; Adagia*, trans. Claire Malroux (Paris: José Corti, 2006), 19.

6. *CPP*, 428.

7. *CPP*, 914.

8. William Shakespeare, *Complete Works*, ed. Jonathan Bate and Eric Rasmussen (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 2007), 2448.

9. *CPP*, 428.

10. Ronald Schleifer, *Rhetoric and Death: The Language of Modernism and Postmodern Discourse Theory* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1990), 224.

11. Lee Margaret Jenkins, *Wallace Stevens: Rage for Order* (Brighton: Sussex Academic Press, 2000), 113.

12. *Letters of Wallace Stevens*, ed. Holly Stevens (1966, rpt. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996), 340. Further references to this edition will be abbreviated as *Letters*.

13. Coincidentally or not, Stevens's sonic experts are almost all female scholars: see esp. Helen Vendler, *On Extended Wings: Wallace Stevens' Longer Poems* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1969), and *Wallace Stevens: Words Chosen out of Desire* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1984); Marie Borroff, *Language and the Poet: Verbal Artistry in Frost, Stevens, and Moore* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979); Eleanor Cook, *Poetry, Word-Play, and Word-War in Wallace Stevens* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1988); Barbara Holmes, *The Decomposer's Art: Ideas of Music in the Poetry of Wallace Stevens* (New York: Peter Lang, 1990); Alison Rieke, *The Senses of Nonsense* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1992); Anca Rosu, *The Metaphysics of Sound in Wallace Stevens* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1995); Beverly Maeder, *Wallace Stevens' Experimental Language: The Lion in the Lute* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1999); Natalie Gerber, "Stevens' Prosody: Meaningful Rhythms," *The Wallace Stevens Journal* 29 (Spring 2005): 178–87; and Lisa Goldfarb, "Music and the Vocal Poetics of Stevens and Valéry," in *Wallace Stevens across the Atlantic*, 151–62. So far two special issues of

The Wallace Stevens Journal have been devoted to Stevens and sound, both edited by women as well: "Stevens and the Structures of Sound," edited by Jacqueline Vaught Brogan (Fall 1991), and "The Less Legible Meanings of Sounds," edited by Natalie Gerber (Spring 2009).

14. Beverly Maeder, "Sound and Sensuous Awakening in *Harmonium*," *The Wallace Stevens Journal* 33 (Spring 2009): 40.

15. Alison Rieke, "The Sound of the Queen's Seemings in 'Description without Place,'" *The Wallace Stevens Journal* 33 (Spring 2009): 53–54.

16. Maeder, "Sound and Sensuous Awakening," 25.

17. Given the current space restrictions, it will not be possible to address what a full investigation of this topic would nevertheless require: an anchoring of claims in a wealth of illustrations and some extensive close readings of individual case studies; a detailed and consistent attention to the evolution of melodies over the course of Stevens's poetic career; and an inquiry into the purpose of Stevens's melodies within particular aesthetic, semantic, and/or sociopolitical contexts.

18. "Notes toward a Supreme Fiction," *CPP,* 343.

19. "Esthétique du Mal," *CPP,* 284.

20. *CPP,* 841.

21. Eleanor Cook, *A Reader's Guide to Wallace Stevens* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007), 321.

22. *Letters,* 302.

23. *CPP,* 789–90.

24. *CPP,* 76.

25. As Eleanor Cook reminds us, according to the 1893 edition of the *OED* the word "euphonious" was "often used ironically" (*Reader's Guide,* 336). That Stevens reacted to a largely Romantic tradition, whose "aspiration toward a transcendence" in the production of vocal sound and whose "ponderous or aestheticizing poetic forms" he sought to "overturn," is made clear by Maeder ("Sound and Sensuous Awakening," 27, 31).

26. *Letters,* 485.

27. *CPP,* 662–63.

28. That this focus on the sonic is there from Stevens's very first collection, *Harmonium* (1923), and is even carried to experimental extremes there, is well known. In an essay on the peculiarly innovative and challenging quality of Stevens's first collection, Charles Altieri has framed such experiments usefully by pointing to the way in which the volume "brilliantly flaunts traditional expectations about lyric agency." To Altieri, "Stevens' resistance to idealization required his poetry to focus more intently than was customary on the very processes of taking in the sensuous information usually ignored by our conceptual habits. . . . Stevens might [still] matter as a poet because he could exemplify what happens when poetry accepts the imperative that whatever art might claim for spirit has to be based on a radical commitment to the primacy of the senses. . . . This is where poetry's lushness comes in" ("Intentionality as Sensuality in *Harmonium*," *The Wallace Stevens Journal* 27 [Fall 2003]: 163, 165–66).

29. *CPP,* 664.

30. Maeder, "Sound and Sensuous Awakening," 26.

31. Leonard Bernstein, "What Is a Melody?" in *Leonard Bernstein's Young People's Concerts,* ed. Jack Gottlieb (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 201–2.

32. Bernstein, "What Is a Melody?" 209.

33. Bernstein, "What Is a Melody?" 210.

34. Robert Frost, *The Poetry of Robert Frost*, ed. Edward Connery Lathem (New York: Henry Holt, 1979), 224–25.

35. Quoted in John Hollander, "The Sound of the Music of Music and Sound," in *Wallace Stevens: A Celebration*, ed. Frank Doggett and Robert Buttel (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980), 250.

36. *CPP*, 218.

37. If we follow John Hollander's distinction between Frost and Stevens, then the former's interest in straightforward tunes may well betray a deeper lack of interest in the musical-compositional dimension of his work, while Stevens's ongoing modulation of melodies does the opposite. "It is always the speech, and never the music, that the Frostean protagonist is striving to hear and to decipher," writes Hollander, while "Stevens will be overwhelmed with the music of our own listening" ("The Sound of Music," 247).

38. Cook, *Reader's Guide*, 323.

39. Bernstein, "What Is a Melody?" 217.

40. *CPP*, 219.

41. *CPP*, 275.

42. George S. Lensing, "Stevens's Prosody," in *Teaching Wallace Stevens: Practical Essays*, ed. John N. Serio and B. J. Leggett (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1994), 109.

43. *Letters*, 407.

44. Maeder, *Wallace Stevens' Experimental Language*, 172.

45. Gerber, "Stevens' Prosody," 178. See also Gerber's brilliant recent contribution to the metrical understanding of Stevens's poetry in "Stevens' Mixed-Breed Versifying and His Adaptations of Blank-Verse Practice," *The Wallace Stevens Journal* 35 (Fall 2011): 188–223.

46. *CPP*, 428.

47. Peter Brazeau, *Parts of a World: Wallace Stevens Remembered: An Oral Biography* (1983, rpt. San Francisco: North Point Press, 1985), 119, 239. For a compelling reading of Stevens's work as intrinsically a walking poetry, see Roger Gilbert, *Walks in the World: Representation and Experience in Modern American Poetry* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991).

48. *Letters*, 844.

49. Michael Schmidt, "Wallace Stevens: Arranging, Deepening, Enchanting Britain," *The Wallace Stevens Journal* 30 (Spring 2006): 54–55.

50. Goldfarb, "Music and the Vocal Poetics," 153. Goldfarb develops these ideas further in her recent book, *The Figure Concealed: Wallace Stevens, Music, and Valéryan Echoes* (Brighton: Sussex Academic Press, 2011).

51. Quoted in Goldfarb, "Music and the Vocal Poetics," 154. See also Tyler Hoffman, "Wallace Stevens and the Spoken Word," *The Wallace Stevens Journal* 33 (Spring 2009): 97–110.

52. Quoted in Hoffman, "Wallace Stevens and the Spoken Word," 98.

53. *CPP*, 719.

54. *CPP*, 720.

55. *CPP*, 720.

56. Maeder, *Wallace Stevens' Experimental Language*, 175.