‘Bordeaux to Yucatan’: Stevens’s French Connections Tony Sharpe

> Complacencies of the peignoir, and late
> Coffee and oranges in a sunny chair,
> And the green freedom of a cockatoo
> Upon a rug… (*CPP* 53)[1]

I suppose that most Stevens *aficionados* know these lines by heart; and as the beginning of what is probably his most anthologised poem, they are likely also to be familiar to a broader readership. Familiarity may not breed contempt, in this instance, but it might desensitise us to what remains surprising about the opening of ‘Sunday Morning’. Stevens’s catalogue, starting with a pluralised abstract noun, ‘complacencies’, moving to more particularised items in a scene that still has about it a potential for being generalised (we all know, the inference seems to be, what it is to yield to that leisurely coffee, those oranges, that sun-warmed chair), then unexpectedly culminates in a specific that combines abstract with concrete, ‘the green freedom of a cockatoo/ Upon a rug’. This, as Keats said of his Grecian Urn, teases us into thought: is this exotic bird a released parrot or a figure in the carpet, and if the latter, in what sense is it free, and in what sense can its ‘freedom’ be ‘green’? If we think it is an actual cockatoo, then ‘green’ could be a transferred epithet, albeit one which retains some strangeness, by assigning colour to an abstract noun. All these items listed serve, we learn, to counteract ‘The holy hush of ancient sacrifice’: and so the poem goes on to explore the implications of its title.

But I want to stay at its beginning, to catch from this irrational moment its unreasoning. In my questionings above I asked, ‘in what sense…?’, and one possible answer would be: in the sense of *sound*. For there is a kind of sonic logic underlying these lines, by which aural patterns of triplication drive it forward; our ear has been secretly prepared for that unexpected ‘cockatoo’ by the precedent sequence of ‘Complacencies’ and ‘coffee’. Assonantally echoing the second syllable of ‘coffee’, ‘green freedom’ then functions as a spondaic doubling that interrupts the slightly-too-smooth iambic pentameters as well as the alliterative triplication just noted – which forms the poem’s third sonic triad, its first having consisted in the pronounced long ‘a’s of the opening line: ‘Compl**a**cencies of the p**ei**gnoir, and l**a**te’. The studied indolence depicted in these opening images implies its own dissent from any American work ethic; an ethic whose innate Protestantism is further subverted by

[1] In what follows, references to Stevens’s writing are to *Wallace Stevens: Collected Poetry and Prose*, eds Frank Kermode and Joan Richardson, Library of America edition (New York: Penguin , 1997), identified as *CPP*; and to *Letters of Wallace Stevens*, ed. Holly Stevens, (London: Faber and Faber, 1966), identified as *L.*

the poem's ensuing religious scepticism. This indolence, as a conscious abstention from institutional hierarchies of what is judged significant, could be linked to the Whitman who 'lean[s] and loafe[s] at [his] ease' or who 'stop[s] and loiter[s] all the time'[2] and – since Whitman's outcome was ecstatic vision – to the wider project of American Transcendentalism, to which Stevens stands as somewhat sceptical heir: his scepticism flagged here by the poem's very first word.

'Complacencies of the peignoir': for my present purposes, much goes on in this phrase, which eventually implies its own critique of the criticiser. Most of its readers, I imagine, would not incline to believe themselves complacent; so this word distances, encouraging the thought, 'we're not like *that*' (although possibly, in thinking thus, we *are*). And since that distance establishes the position from which we judge adversely someone who *is* defined as complacent, we might further conclude that there's no more appropriate costume to be complacent in, than a 'peignoir' (our impulse to judgement reinforced, maybe, by an unease at not knowing precisely what a 'peignoir' is, and perhaps also by its association with the feminine). But, notwithstanding, this foreign-sounding word contributes to the poem's harmonic progression, as already noted, and furthermore is a word naturalised in the English language: these facts bespeak an actual integration, undermining any prejudicial impulse to define the experience and the person described as 'other'. I have dwelt on the phrase at this length because it encapsulates some of the ways in which Stevens evokes French and its associated values, in his writing: as something potentially effete or unmanly and, in being so, at odds with a routine American self-perception; as something playful or sophisticated, through its very 'otherness', and to that extent, too, more benignly un-American; and as something that, as well (and not necessarily instead of these other implications, but alongside them), conduces to an ultimate seriousness, without any such sense of tension between French and 'Americanness'.

'Peignoir', indicating the loose robe in which a woman sits before her glass to comb her hair ('*se peigner les cheveux*'), might suggest an atmosphere of relatively trivial self-absorption or self-gratification, and there is something of this in the woman of 'Sunday Morning'; but later, in 'Of Modern Poetry', Stevens dissented from any such judgement:

> It must
> Be the finding of a satisfaction, and may
> Be of a man skating, a woman dancing, a woman

[2] *Walt Whitman: Complete Poetry and Collected Prose*, ed. Justin Kaplan, Library of America edition (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982), pp. 27, 171. Hereafter identified as 'Whitman'.

Combing. The poem of the act of the mind. (*CPP* 219)

That the act of such a mind in such an action could connect, not with self-absorption but with a fundamental spiritual tenacity, Stevens movingly evoked, later still, in the figure of Penelope in 'The World as Meditation':

> She would talk a little to herself as she combed her hair,
> Repeating his name with its patient syllables,
> Never forgetting him that kept coming constantly so near. (*CPP* 442)

Thus, any hedonism implicit in the woman addressed by 'Sunday Morning' has, by the end of this revisionary sequence, become a resourceful self-communing linked to what the poem has described as Penelope's 'barbarous strength' – connected to the magic formula of her husband's name, intoned like a mantra. Her linguistic affirmation, involving sound as well as sense in reiterating his 'patient syllables', simultaneously denotes both actual absence and potential presence ('It was Ulysses and it was not'). This journey from early to late Stevens started from the sound and the etymology of 'peignoir'; would it be too fanciful to wonder whether the adjective 'barbarous' which, in 'The World as Meditation', immediately precedes her act of hair-dressing, might conceal a pun on what pertains to a 'barber'? Thence we could meander back to Stevens's Crispin, in 'The Comedian as the Letter C', who had 'a barber's eye' (*CPP* 22), or to the kinds of knowledge possessed by 'Utamaro's beauties' seeking 'The end of love in their all-speaking braids', and whose refined sexual artifice is contrasted, in their poem, with the challenging erotic immediacy of the woman principally addressed, who has 'come dripping in your hair from sleep' (*CPP* 11). The title of this final poem reached on my free-associative extravaganza is 'Le Monocle de Mon Oncle': punningly, playfully, darkly seriously, French – and seeming to allude to the formulaic phrase once encountered by Anglophone schoolchildren in entry-level French language text-books: *La plume de ma tante*.

The consistent importance of French to Stevens's self-conception is signalled in the title of the commonplace book, *Sur Plusieurs Beaux Sujects*, compiled in two notebooks identified as '*cahiers*' between 1932 and 1953; and is further enforced by the fact that its first and final entries were in French. What might have been suspected as a schoolboy error ('*sujects*' for '*sujets*') turns out to have been an accurate transcription although, characteristically, it came not from the primary but a secondary source.[3] Elsewhere, I have

[3] See Milton J. Bates (ed.), *Sur Plusieurs Beaux Sujects: Wallace Stevens' Commonplace Book* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1989), p. 18n. Hereafter identified as *SPBS.*

considered Stevens's recourse to France and things French in its historical moment;[4] here, although some motifs will recur, I shall examine more specifically his deployment of the French language and French associations. His affinity with French writing was an early but enduring perception: the first critical book in which his poetry was discussed was written by a Frenchman transplanted to the American academy, René Taupin, whose study of *L'Influence du symbolisme Français sur la poésie Américaine* placed the Stevens of *Harmonium* in a French tradition, linking him specifically to Baudelaire and Laforgue. Taupin had singled out Stevens's '*désir d'élégance, son dandysme*' alongside '*son ironie nonchalante*' as features that supported such a judgement.[5] Later, in an essay collected in his influential book *Language and Silence*, George Steiner took a much less indulgent view of what he derided as linguistic tourism: 'the inventions or habits of style most characteristic of his work come from a narrow and brittle source. (…) Most are Latinizations or naked borrowings from the French. They are conceits superimposed on language, not, as in Shakespeare or Joyce, growths from within the natural soil. (…) And behind Wallace Stevens's linguistic acquisitiveness, there is a queer streak of provincialism. He borrows words with obtrusive excitement, rather like a traveller acquiring French bonnets or perfumes'.[6] While some aspects of Stevens give grounds for Steiner's view, I shall suggest that there is a good deal more substance, as well.

Stevens himself seems to have been somewhat defensive about anything threatening to represent him as a dandy, even resorting to such emphatic tactics of disproof as were implicit in his ill-fated decision to get into a fist-fight with Hemingway, at Key West. Later, he disputed Hi Simons's assertion of Mallarmé's importance to his work, and seems to have been even more appalled by finding himself portrayed as a 'Verlaine in Hartford' (see *L* 635, 413). Such an appellation threatened to typecast him in the role, to which he had already confessed in 'Sailing after Lunch', of being 'A most inappropriate man/ In a most unpropitious place' (*CPP* 99), with perhaps the added implication that he was a less than fully-committed American. Therefore it is not entirely surprising to find Stevens reaching for French associations when he wished to define something as outmoded or inflexible, locked into 'old descriptions of the world' (*CPP* 187): such as when he dismissed in a letter 'the orderly relations of society' (proposed as poetic subject) as sounding more like 'something

[4] See Tony Sharpe, 'Cultural Immaterialism: Wallace Stevens in Virtual Paris', *Key Words,* 12 (Autumn 2014), 108-24.
[5] René Taupin, *L'Influence du symbolisme Français sur la poésie Américaine* (Paris, Honoré Champion, 1929), p. 232.
[6] George Steiner, *Language and Silence* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1969), p. 53.

for a choral society, or for Racine' (*L* 305), or insisted in 'Prelude to Objects' that 'he has not/ To go to the Louvre to behold himself' (*CPP* 179). Going to the Louvre is unnecessary because reality is not 'like statuary, posed/ For a vista in the Louvre' (*CPP* 195); rather, following Whitman's closing adjuration in 'Song of Myself' ('If you want me again look for me under your bootsoles'),[7] reality is affirmed to consist in demotic Americana: 'things chalked/ On the sidewalk so that the pensive man may see' (*CPP* 195).

So, one of the uses Stevens makes of French-ness is for antithesis. The Louvre with its 'statuary', derided in the poem 'Connoisseur of Chaos', keys in to his recurrent hostility towards statues, often associated with a now-irrelevant Eurocentric view, focused in dead rather than living art – so much so that 'It was impossible to breathe at Durand-Ruel's' (*CPP* 276). In *Notes toward a Supreme Fiction,* 'The great statue of the General Du Puy' offers futile antiquarian resistance to a world about which the poem's rubrical assertion is, that 'It Must Change'; but notwithstanding such resistance, the General becomes 'rubbish in the end' (*CPP* 338). This is an attitude which, amusingly, Stevens shares with his antagonist Hemingway; for in *The Sun Also Rises,* Jake Barnes walks through late-night Parisian streets:

> I passed Ney's statue standing among the new-leaved chestnut-trees in the arc-light. There was a faded purple wreath leaning against the base. I stopped and read the inscription: from the Bonapartist Groups, some date; I forget. He looked very fine, Marshal Ney in his top-boots, gesturing with his sword among the green horse-chestnut leaves.[8]

For Jake as for Stevens, such things belong 'Among our more vestigial states of mind' (*CPP* 338), obsolete clutter surviving from 'some date; I forget', without capacity to refer to the vital present with its 'new-leaved chestnut-trees'. The manifest French-ness of Stevens's General du Puy, whose statue 'Rested immobile' (in Anglicisation of a French idiom), is something previously encountered in the poem 'Dance of the Macabre Mice' (1935), whose rodents colonise an equestrian statue evidently representing a Frenchman: 'Monsieur is on horseback'; 'It is a hungry dance./ We dance it out to the tip of Monsieur's sword' (*CPP* 101). Like du Puy's, this statue embodies an absurdly contrarian attitude towards things as they actually are, which the poem associates with French-ness. In both cases, Stevens probably had in mind an actual monument: the bronze replica of Bartlett's equestrian statue of Lafayette, recently erected in his home city of Hartford – the mice express 'surprise' at its presence in 'the land of turkeys in turkey weather' (presumably denoting America at its

[7] Whitman, p. 88.
[8] Ernest Hemingway, *Fiesta* [as titled in UK publication] (St Albans: Triad/Panther, 1976), pp. 27-8.

foundational feast of Thanksgiving). The 'sword' brandished in 'arm of bronze outstretched' (*CPP* 101) and the 'right, uplifted foreleg of the horse' (*CPP* 338) both accurately describe the pose of Lafayette and his mount.[9] In the same sort of debunking spirit, when imagining an address 'to the Academy of Fine Ideas', Stevens anticipates that its membership would consist of Frenchmen effetely inclined to delight in such a proposition as, 'Messieurs,/ It is an artificial world' (*CPP* 228), and collectively reducible to their stylised facial hair: 'My beards, attend' (*CPP* 229).

The antithesis, however, by no means always operates to French disadvantage. In 'The Plot against the Giant', the erotic sophistication encoded in the third temptress's use of French ('Oh la…le pauvre!'), and in the *double entendre* – in English – of her recourse to 'heavenly labials' (*CPP* 6, both), is surely admirable; for it implies that what could ensue from this culminating intervention would be an act of copulation linguistic as well as sexual. Such acts of union move towards the more productive aspects of Stevens's recourse to French, taking us beyond antithetical positioning into fruitful collaboration. One of the later 'Adagia' exactly illustrates this:

> Reality is a cliché
> From which we escape by metaphor
> It is only au pays de la métaphore
> Qu'on est poète. (*CPP* 920)

At first sight, this seems to set up an opposition between 'reality', as something burdensome, and 'metaphor', as the realm in which 'we escape' it; an opposition that is linguistically encoded, so that the shift from English to French enacts the escape. This, of course, establishes French and its associations, not as something foppish or outmoded, but as the proper environment where figures of capable imagination can realise their potential. But at the same time as it suggests a linguistic opposition, Stevens's saying undercuts this because – like 'peignoir' – 'cliché' is a French word naturalised in English; the same is also true of the word 'connoisseur', so that although 'Connoisseur of Chaos' seems to sneer at the Louvre, its own title indicates crossover rather than contention. The adjective 'macabre', along with the word 'tableau' also occurring in 'Dance of the Macabre Mice', are, equally, importations from French which retain their original pronunciation.

[9] This extends previous discussion in my essay (see note 4). Publicly dedicated on Veterans' Day 1933, Bartlett's statue first stood in front of the Horace Bushnell Memorial Hall (which Stevens certainly knew: see *SPBS* p. 81, 81n), but, like its original in Paris, was subsequently relocated. The following link shows it in its original Hartford location: http://ctmonuments.net/wp-content/uploads/2013/10/Lafayette1013.jpg

The different languages do not, then, offer elements of antagonism so much as they offer areas for *entente*. This is implicit in some of the poems already quoted, which show how often Stevens's thinking was shadowed by a sense of French. Of 'Sailing after Lunch', for example, he explained to his pseudonymous publisher Ronald Lane Latimer that the word 'pejorative' in its first line reflected French usage: 'When people speak of the romantic, they do so in what the French commonly call a *pejorative* sense' (*L* 277). This partly explains the appearance of that language in the poem itself, immediately following his rueful self-definition as 'inappropriate man': 'Mon Dieu, hear the poet's prayer' (*CPP* 99) – which cannot simply be dismissed as the foppish exclamation of a failed romantic. So, too, 'The Latest Freed Man' may desire enfranchisement from old descriptions of the world, but the end of this poem makes clear that new descriptions, and an enhanced response to the world that is the case, could as easily comprise things French as things American:

> It was everything bulging and blazing and big in itself,
> The blue of the rug, the portrait of Vidal,
> *Qui fait fi des joliesses banales*, the chairs. (*CPP* 187)

In such playful incorporation, the French fits in with, rather than contests, the English, showing how – as Louis MacNeice put it – 'World is crazier and more of it than we think'.[10]

John Malcolm Brinnin nicely summarises his own shift in perception with regard to Stevens: 'I used to see Stevens as a delightful exotic; now I see him with oats in his teeth'.[11] I am proposing, however, that it might be truer still to see that Stevens was both, all along: so it is not a matter of choosing the 'marguerite and coquelicot' of St Ursula's official oblation, rather than the homelier and more suggestive 'radishes and flowers' offered to 'the good Lord' 'in the grass' (*CPP* 17), nor yet of making the choice the other way round. We are not in an either/or situation, and this is what Stevens intended when declaring, in another of the 'Adagia', that 'French and English constitute a single language' (*CPP* 914). This secured him another ticking-off from George Steiner: 'He once declared that English and French are closely related languages. Not only is the proposition shallow, but it betokens a view of his own idiom which a poet should guard against'.[12] Here I think Steiner misrepresents Stevens, as suggesting that French and English were fundamentally similar. But what Stevens asserts is, rather, that their differences are complementary, and that we need a sense of both to make

[10] Louis MacNeice, *Collected Poems* (London: Faber and Faber, 1979), p. 30.
[11] Cited in Peter Brazeau, *Parts of a World: Wallace Stevens Remembered* (New York: Random House, 1983), p. 194.
[12] Steiner (see note 6), pp. 53-4.

a whole, without need for conflict or sacrifice. The result would be a harmony of apparent contraries, a 'civil nakedness', with 'nothing fobbed off, nor changed/ In a beau language without a drop of blood' (*CPP* 274) – which last phrase indicates, not the enfeebled bloodlessness of such a linguistic amalgamation, but the life-affirming absence of bloodshed through which it has been achieved.

The spelling dictates the mixed pronunciation 'beau language' rather than the wholly French '*beau langage*', and perhaps it is in this intermixing that Stevens is most characteristic. Sometimes, his deployment of French seems to connect to a desire simultaneously to indicate and to evade a poem's sexual content; this would, in my view, apply to 'Plot Against the Giant', 'Le Monocle de Mon Oncle', 'Cy Est Pourtraicte..', and also to the varied French refrains of 'Sea Surface Full of Clouds', which spring each stanza to its close and seem suggestive of a 'spousal verse' (in Wordsworth's phrase) that intermingles guilt with jubilation. 'Anglais Mort à Florence', by using French to describe the death of an Englishman in Italy, deepens the sense of unrooted alienation. Clearly, Stevens's use of French indicated his Francophilia, and a degree of familiarity that made natural an inclination to extend his linguistic range. But, for all that, I do not feel inclined to endorse Taupin's assertion that '*le mouvement de ses phrases est français*';[13] unlike Eliot, whose proficiency in the language was greater, Stevens did not temporarily inhabit French as a means of tricking himself into poetry, and I doubt he could have managed as competent a whole poem as Eliot's 'Dans le Restaurant' or 'Lune de Miel'. There can be a playful exuberance in Stevens's reaching for French (and other European languages) that might remind us, again, of aspects of Whitman. But what I think releases Stevens's more characteristic effects, is to evoke the presence of French behind or within English, constituting the 'beau language' of their intermingling: moments when Stevens's French connections are to be heard as French inflections. I have already noted the resonance of the phrase 'rested immobile', and the very appellation of that statue as being of 'the General Du Puy' suggests a French rather than an English idiom. A similar effect occurs in the poem, 'The Blue Buildings in the Summer Air', where the mouse that is finally instructed to 'go nibble at Lenin in his tomb' is addressed as 'le plus pur, you ancient one', and defined as 'one of the not-numberable mice' (*CPP* 196, 197). Here, the English adjective 'innumerable' or 'not numerable' has been displaced by a nonce-word deriving from the French '*nombrable*' ('le plus pur' is a phrase from one of

[13] Taupin (see note 5), p. 232.

Stevens's jottings in *Sur Plusieurs Beaux Sujects*,[14] and his mouse may owe itself to the suggestive proximity, in French, of '*souris*' to '*sourire*'). In the same way, although there are many poem titles wholly in French, those which conjoin the two languages are for my purposes especially suggestive: e.g., 'Gallant Château', where both word-order and spelling enforce English pronunciation of the adjective, or 'Paisant Chronicle' (although the adjective's Frenchness is disputable). Another interesting example of a crossover word occurs in 'Comedian…', where Crispin is described as seeking 'The liaison, the blissful liaison,/ Between himself and his environment' (*CPP* 28). 'Liaison' is another French word that has installed itself in English; but, intriguingly, Stevens's usage seems to require a kind of intermediate pronunciation. We cannot speak the line appropriately if we adopt English pronunciation (as in 'liaison officer'), because this disrupts the metre by stressing the second syllable; although French pronunciation better fits the metrical requirements, we cannot pronounce the word wholly in French, either, because the English rather than the French terminal 'n' is needed.

Stevens closed a fancifully poetic letter to Harriet Monroe, in April 1920: 'Je vous assure, madame, q'une promenade à travers the soot-deposit qu'est Indianapolis est une chose véritablement étrange. Je viens de finir une belle promenade. Le jour après demain je serai à Pittsburg [*sic*] d'ou [*sic*] je partirai pour Hartford' (*L* 218; also *CPP* 937). Perhaps here his rather functional French condescends to the American cities named, but perhaps, also, it transfigures, ironically imparting to them something 'véritablement étrange'. His poem 'Of Hartford in a Purple Light' exactly illustrates such transfiguration, but having already treated it elsewhere[15] I want instead to examine two poems, early and late, which in title and essence suggest fruitful conjunctions between French and American English. The earlier of my two examples, 'Nomad Exquisite', is perhaps the more surprising, for it might seem to be a wholly unabashed enunciation of a particularly blissful liaison between Stevens and his American environment. Originally sent (with a different final line) on a postcard from Florida in January 1919, again to Harriet Monroe, it may seem perverse to cite this poem in the present context – written as it was during one of Stevens's early extended business trips round the southern states, and amid a run of poems that in quirky ways memorialised those American locations. In Holly Stevens's chronological selection, the poem following this is

[14] *SPBS* p.37, n. 6.
[15] See note 4, and also Tony Sharpe, 'Unbearable Lightness: Some Modern instances in Auden, Stevens, and Eliot', forthcoming in a special issue (about light) of the journal *Romanticism* (2016).

'Life Is Motion', which evokes Oklahoma; then 'Banal Sojourn' with its unspecified but surely Southern location is followed by 'Anecdote of the Jar', set in Tennessee; itself followed by 'Fabliau of Florida' and then by 'Ploughing on Sunday', vigorously evoking 'North America' (*CPP* 16). Although it helps my case that 'Fabliau of Florida' connects a French word with American state, in 'Nomad Exquisite' itself the most evidently foreign word is that state's Spanish name, commemorating Juan Ponce de Leon's sixteenth-century naming, '*La Florida*'. Its flowers were originally found in the poem's final line: 'Fruits, forms, flowers, flakes and fountains';[16] Stevens revised them out of existence in the published version, although retaining the alliterative tribute amid which their ghost persists.

I alluded to the French word '*nombrable*', above; by happy accident, in my French dictionary the word immediately preceding it is '*nomade*'. Stevens's title has about it a strangeness, partly deriving from its oxymoronic collocation of two words seemingly at odds; but beyond the semantics there's an additional strangeness, in its hint of French-ness. Both 'nomad' and 'exquisite' have words closely resembling them in French, but neither is French; yet although both are English words, the order in which they are placed is decisively French, with the adjective following rather than preceding the noun. This gives an aural cue that something unusual is about to ensue: if America is a poem in Stevens's eyes, its ample geography dazzling the imagination in conformity to Emerson's prescription, for all that, 'There is a conflict, there is a resistance involved' (*CPP* 460). This is implicit in the quasi-syllogistic structure of 'Nomad Exquisite' (which, like 'The Snow Man', is all one sentence), whose logical accumulation shapes and controls what might otherwise be an overwhelming American immediacy. The 'big-finned palm', 'green vine' and 'young alligator' embody purely biological appetitive responses, which 'the beholder' – who at the close has become the poem's speaker – exceeds, by verbally creative formulation. The religious suggestiveness of 'hymn and hymn' and 'blessed mornings' enable us to hear – and this is where we swerve back toward French – the trans-linguistic pun lurking within 'immense dew', of 'the immense *dieu*'. My Webster's dictionary shows '*doo*' as well as '*dyoo*' as possible American pronunciations, but the extant recording of Stevens has him pronouncing 'dew' as '*dyoo*'. So what I suggest about this early poem is that the French allusiveness of its title and this potential pun serve to complicate any stance of simple identification between seeing eye and the pure products of America it beholds and then enunciates. This is a complication not only

[16] Wallace Stevens, *The Palm at the End of the Mind: Selected Poems and a Play*, ed. Holly Stevens (New York: Vintage, 1972), p. 401.

of situation – are we, after all, in Florida or, as the poem actually says, 'in me'? – but of the nature of perception: those 'Forms, flames, and the flakes of flames' (*CPP* 77, all) whose spontaneous generation parallels the primal energy of Floridian nature, also offer proleptic connection to another French aspect. Henri Focillon's *The Life of Forms in Art*, which Stevens would cite admiringly in 'The Figure of the Youth as Virile Poet', asserts: 'To assume consciousness is at once to assume form. Even at levels far below the zone of definition and clarity, forms, measures and relationships exist. The chief characteristic of the mind is to be constantly describing *itself*' (cited *CPP* 671). Perhaps most relevant to 'Nomad Exquisite' is Focillon's accompanying observation, not cited by Stevens: 'Between nature and man form intervenes'.[17]

In 'Of Hartford in a Purple Light', the basic conceit is that the setting sun, empurpling the city where Stevens lived and worked, bestows on it an air of playful French-ness that transfigures its Americanness. The poem addresses that sun as 'Master Soleil' and adopts the French word 'amour' into its register, but also uses naturalised French words like 'souvenirs' and 'bouquet' (*CPP* 208, all), which is its final word, requiring French pronunciation to make the rhyme and keep the line-end stress. This theme of America productively modified by France leads to my next example, 'Celle Qui Fût Héaulmiette'. Its title apparently alludes to a part of Villon's '*Le Testament*', '*Les Regrets de la Belle Héaulmière*' (translated by Swinburne as 'The Complaint of the Fair Armouress'), in which with considerable frankness an old woman who formerly lived by her body intimately itemises its current dilapidations. It also alludes to Rodin's small sculpture of an elderly nude woman, to which the name '*Celle Qui Fût la Belle Héaulmière*' was retrospectively applied. What intrigues me here is that this manifestly French title has been given by Stevens to a pronouncedly American poem which does not, at first sight, connect with it. Indeed, from the outset there is an apparent discord between poem and allusive sources, because Stevens seems to be thinking about a young girl (signalled by the title's French diminutive, *-ette*), rather than an old woman. His girl finds herself in an apparently American landscape (with hemlock trees) whose lack of amenity proves, nonetheless, to be a 'fecund minimum' (*CPP* 29) in which 'the first warmth of spring', tenuously emergent from winter's deprivation, gestures towards summer's plenitude ('not in the arc/ Of winter, in the unbroken circle/ Of summer'). This is one of several poems Stevens set at a point of seasonal transition; what is unusual here is the tone that emerges

[17] Henri Focillon, *The Life of Forms in Art*, tr. Hogan and Kubler (New York: Wittenborn, Schultz, 1948), p. 47.

toward the end, when the melting effects of spring are subject to unexpectedly nationalist critique:

> And yet with water running in the sun,
> Entinselled and gilderlinged and gone,
> Another American vulgarity.

It is as if the poem momentarily inhabits the condescending viewpoint of some European onlooker, dismissive of the short-lived flashiness defined as characteristically American. 'Gilderlinged' appears to be Stevens's own coinage, but evidently describes a minor momentary effect of goldenness (with the '-ling' component, like the title's '-ette', acting as diminutive modifier). The poem finishes:

> Into that native shield she fled,
> Mistress of an idea, child
> Of a mother with vague severed arms
> And of a father bearded in his fire. (*CPP* 376, all)

The 'native shield', picking up the armorial motif of '*héaulmiette*' ('little helmet-maker'), perhaps also hints at a kind of heraldry, by which certain devices might be represented on this child's escutcheon, once she has become a woman. That would be a mark of dignity appropriate to one who was a 'mistress', in the sense of being in control of an 'idea' rather than in the sense of being for its use (therefore not like a courtesan, as in Villon). This 'idea', I'd suggest, is something that would take us back towards the proposition that French and English constitute a single language, not because they're the same, but because their distinctnesses are complementary: like the devices to be blazoned on her 'shield', not antagonistic but mutually offering the 'shelter' she has sought. For there is an aspect in which this child *does* have to 'go to the Louvre/ To behold [her]self': the 'mother with vague severed arms', unless we are to summon up some mutilation scene out of *Titus Andronicus*, surely denotes the famously armless statue of the Venus de Milo, displayed in the Louvre. The 'father bearded in his fire' I take to be that 'savage of fire' (*CPP* 69), the sun as primordial America, the immense pagan god of Florida; so her joint and potentially beneficial inheritance is the European artistic heritage and what 'Sunday Morning' calls the 'savage source', America itself.

Despite the evident playfulness of Stevens's recourse to French, 'The strength at the center is serious' (*CPP* 407); but I've tried to suggest that the playfulness and even the critique are part of that seriousness. The most obvious example of this is 'Esthétique du Mal',

whose title at first implies a critique: surely it is an evasion moral as well as linguistic to aestheticise evil. Yet the poem contains, and in semi-serious French of exactly the kind that Steiner would deplore, a statement of some of the most deeply-held articles of Stevens's poetic faith:

> Natives of poverty, children of malheur,
> The gaiety of language is our seigneur. (*CPP* 284)

You cannot separate the muted comicality of this enunciation from the seriousness with which Stevens believed in what it says; as in the poem just examined, the idea of being 'native' is here accompanied by a flight into linguistic otherness, and *all* the substantive terms of his proposition are interdependent, for its force. As a final example of how these aspects function, in the sonic texture of Stevens's verse, I draw attention to the apparent enervation expressed in a late poem, 'The Plain Sense of Things':

> 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. (*CPP* 428)

We might say that this stands at the opposite pole, in terms both of date and attitude, from the reproach offered to the woman in 'Le Monocle de Mon Oncle':

> Yet you persist with anecdotal bliss
> To make believe a starry *connaissance*. (*CPP* 11)

I don't think it quite suffices, as the Library of America volume does, to gloss this as 'knowledge'; I think Stevens was being more exact in his use of French, to bring out the implication in '*connaissance*' of *social* knowing, so that 'starry *connaissance*' implies belief in the reunion of souls in heaven. That idea is repudiated by the early poem and not even articulated in the later one, where, furthermore, we meet what is usually recognised by English-speakers as a French verb, 'savoir', used as a noun. Although it is correct usage, I think that a momentary surprise in the French word's encounter is then deepened by this grammatical extension of its possibility. On one level, the turning of verb into noun might enact the entropic depletion and decaying exactitude that are the poem's ostensible subject; but on another, just as we hear the skipping alliterative rhythms of this line conduct a playful dance with itself, so, 'savoir' being more familiarly verb than noun (and possibly hinting toward adopted phrases like 'savoir-faire' or 'savoir-vivre'), its use denotes activity rather

than inertia. The trans-linguistic leap, together with the sonic animation of the line itself, remind us just how much potential is concealed in little phrases like 'as if': for the poem indicates, *au contraire,* dogged persistence of the very 'fantastic effort' whose failure it itemises.

My argument, then, is that 'Bordeaux' is not replaced by 'Yucatan', nor 'Yucatan' by the points north to which Crispin travels, in Stevens's comedic Odyssey. Rather, his use of French and his recourse to France were a function of his being American, and make most sense within that context; the inter-relation is dynamic and his French connections, as French inflections, are aspects of an achievable 'blissful liaison', rather than any unachievable star-spangled *connaissance* in a linguistic melting-pot that abolishes difference. Robert Frost said that his poetry involved 'the sound of sense';[18] in Stevens, the sound of French sense, too, is a significant component of his poems.

[18] Robert Frost, *Selected Letters,* ed. Lawrance Thompson (London: Cape, 1965), p. 79.