

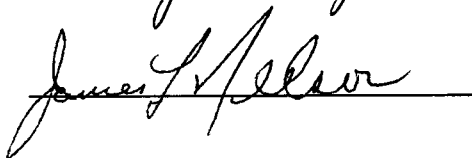
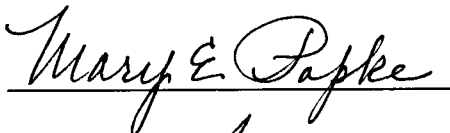
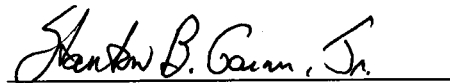
To the Graduate Council:

I am submitting herewith a dissertation written by Sara J. Ford entitled "Gertrude Stein and Wallace Stevens: Negotiating the Act of Modern Consciousness." I have examined the final copy of this dissertation for form and content and recommend that it be accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy, with a major in English.



B. J. Leggett, Major Professor

We have read this dissertation
and recommend its acceptance:



Accepted for the Council:



Associate Vice Chancellor and
Dean of The Graduate School

**Gertrude Stein and Wallace Stevens:
Negotiating the Act of Modern Consciousness**

A dissertation
Presented for the
Doctor of Philosophy
Degree
The University of Tennessee, Knoxville

Sara J. Ford
August 1998

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DEDICATION

This dissertation is dedicated to my mother,
Barbara Ford, whose friendship and laughter help me to
make sense of the world, and my father, Kenneth Ford,
who teaches me always to leave room for paradoxes.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I am especially grateful for the brilliance and patience of my dissertation committee. To Stanton B. Garner Jr., for so many stimulating conversations and for his faith in breakthroughs; to Allen R. Dunn, for his willingness to examine and discuss these ideas again and again, from so many directions; to Mary E. Papke, for her careful reading, for urging me to select the committee that I did, and for her helpful guidance throughout my entire graduate career; to James L. Nelson, for bringing to my attention helpful new perspectives on the project; and, most importantly, to my Director, B. J. Leggett, for his many readings and re-readings, for his always helpful suggestions, for his constant support even when I was swimming in confusion, and above all for his kindness—I offer my genuine appreciation.

I would also like to thank other members of the University of Tennessee English Department for their help over the last seven years. No one from our Department finishes without a great deal of much-appreciated help from the amazing Dinah Brock. Linda Bensel-Meyers, George Hutchinson, and Don Cox have provided important and helpful guidance along the way. I also appreciate more than they realize the friendship, sincerity, and support of my friends and colleagues Kathy White, Sarah

McKee, Bill Larsen, Lance Dean, Caroline Maun, Curt Rode, Kirsten Benson, and Claudia Milstead.

The folks at interlibrary loan and the circulation desk at Hodges Library have offered invaluable assistance throughout the research process for this project. I would also like to thank Suzanne Newbold, Victor Barr, and other members of the Dissertation Group that helped keep this project on track.

Finally, the greatest debt is owed to my family. Corey Ford and Leah Newton have helped me to maintain my sanity, at times against great odds. Without the love and support of Barbara, Ken, Ben, Judy, and Karen, I would have headed back to Miami without putting up such a stink in the first place. Thanks for the courage, the direction, and the joy.

Abstract

Literary modernists inherited a self that was fallible, a self that was seen as an ultimately failed gesture of expression, and throughout much modern literature is a sense of disillusionment with more traditional, expressivist notions of selfhood. As more conventional ways of thinking about consciousness became suspicious, so too did conventional models of artistic expression. One modern strategy for dealing with this disillusionment was to ironize the artistic subject by framing it within various self-conscious gestures. Modern writers grappling with a highly determined notion of consciousness often articulated its status in theatrical terms—as a performance of sorts, in a highly theatrical world. Gertrude Stein and Wallace Stevens provide powerful examples of the modern attempt to stage the modern subject. This dissertation examines particular kinds of "staging," both literal and metaphoric, in the plays and poetry of Stein and Stevens. By positing a staged or performed self, each writer negotiates some degree of agency for the artistic voice which must discover itself through its external relationships at the same time that it creates itself anew by challenging and renewing those determining forces.

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Chapter I. Consciousness Ungrounded: William James and Modernist Expression

If there were no passing states of consciousness, then indeed, we might suppose an abiding principle, absolutely one with itself, to be the ceaseless thinker in each one of us. But if the states of consciousness be accorded as realities, no such 'substantial' identity in the thinker need be supposed.

—William James, Psychology

Gertrude Stein and Wallace Stevens are not often considered together in the discourse surrounding literary modernism. The central concerns of scholars working with the two writers are significantly disparate. Scholars working with Stein's texts focus, for obvious reasons, on her concern with language, her disruption of generic categories, and her innovations in form. Feminist scholars in particular have paid a great deal of attention to Stein, and many contemporary feminist readers are involved in a broader move toward reclaiming Stein's achievement from its ambiguous position in earlier twentieth-century critical analyses. Scholars working with Stevens' texts often focus on his concern with the relationship between imagination and reality, discovering within his poems particular theories of poetry.

Recently critics have focused on Stevens' engagement, or lack of engagement as the case may be, with the social and political climate of his day. These studies, along with several recent works that focus on those figures who most heavily influenced Stevens' poetics, have offered helpful connections between the often seemingly isolated figure at the Hartford Accident and Indemnity Company and the literary, political, and social movements of which he was so importantly a part and product. As diverse as the critical schools surrounding these two authors seem to be, there remain some important issues in relation to which the two have a great deal in common. The canons of both authors reflect a deep concern with a modern discourse concerning what it means to have, be, or express a self. Both authors concern themselves with new manifestations of consciousness in a modern world, and both develop important models of artistic expression that reflect these new ways of thinking about consciousness. The theater, both as a literal physical space and a metaphor for more abstract concepts, maintains an important position in the works of both Stein and Stevens, and it is the presence of that theater that this study will investigate.

The age of literary modernism was, of course, not the first to find its poets involved in the creation of a verse drama. Nevertheless, the period stands out as one in which such a drama seems to have been particularly crucial to the development of a great many of its poets. Stein and Stevens were hardly unique among modernist writers known primarily for poetry or

prose who ventured into the theater. Others are T. S. Eliot, W. B. Yeats, James Joyce, W. H. Auden, Edwin Arlington Robinson, Edgar Lee Masters, E. E. Cummings, William Carlos Williams, and Robert Penn Warren. In general, however, critical discussions of modernism fail to address satisfactorily the importance of theater spaces to modern poets and their works, and very little attention has been paid to modern verse drama in recent years. One of the primary aims of this project is to suggest that we pay much closer attention to the dramatic productions of the modern poets who already hold firmly entrenched positions in our literary canon because they offer tremendously important insights into the theoretical worlds of the poets and their poetry. Specifically, the theater offered Gertrude Stein and Wallace Stevens an important opportunity to examine modern consciousness because there they could emphasize and examine self-consciously some of the particularly theatrical characteristics of modern subjectivity. Both as a literal space and as a metaphor, the theater provided Stein and Stevens the necessary vehicle through which to develop their models of modern consciousness and artistic expression. The two writers explore modern consciousness in their works, emphasizing the extent to which consciousness is determined by its external relationships. As they do so, both Stein and Stevens suggest that consciousness can be seen as a kind of performance—enabled by the “theater” of a given set of relationships and associations. The theatrical roles that enable selfhood are constrictive, in that the self cannot exist apart from them,

and they also allow for the expression of consciousness to take place. The theater itself, both as a physical space and a metaphor, provided the opportunity for Stein and Stevens to emphasize this performative view of consciousness and to develop models of artistic expression that negotiate some degree of agency for the artist, even within the determining relationships of experience.

The few extended critical discussions of modern verse drama that exist are dated and limited. Denis Donoghue's The Third Voice: Modern British and American Verse Drama (1959), Vinod Sena's "Yeats on the Possibility of an English Poetic Drama" (1966), Donna Gerstenberger's The Complex Configuration of Modern Verse Drama (1973), Wanda Rulewicz's "Some Modern Theories of Poetic Drama" (1973), and H. H. Anniah Gowda's Dramatic Poetry (1971) represent the majority of studies that have tackled the phenomenon as a whole. Although these studies offer a great many insights into the modern theater, they all fail to consider the genre of drama in relation to the larger modern discourse concerning consciousness and artistic expression. Before introducing the importance of theater to Stein and Stevens, however, it will be necessary to provide some context for the notions of selfhood and artistic expression that are at stake in their shared concern with theatricality. The theater was an important artistic space for these two modernists because it allowed them a unique artistic perspective involving a high degree of self-consciousness. This emphasis on a self-conscious art is in

large part a response to particular kinds of questions being raised about the modern self.

i

The concept of the self is at the heart of one of the most hotly debated and highly contentious discourses of the modern period. Philosophers, psychologists, anthropologists, and artists alike were consumed with the problem of a self that had been thrown into a seemingly inescapable arena of instability. The romantics had done much to destabilize a traditional, more coherent self, and the modern era brought with it further challenges.

Pressures that threatened a dissolution of the self included a tension between a self determined or defined by various external factors, and notions of self-determination, agency, and free will. Was consciousness a mediated entity, depending on others for its definition, or was the self an unmediated entity, able to know itself exclusive of others? In the discourse of the period, we can also see a tension between the self caught in chaos and change and the self maintaining a significant degree of permanence and stability, qualities central to traditional ways of thinking about identity.

Many already well-documented forces contributed to the modern dethronement of traditional notions of consciousness. Marx's focus on class argued for a self that was defined by its external circumstances rather than its permanent and stable core. Freud's psychoanalysis too, by arguing that the

self is defined largely by early relationships to others, posed a vision of consciousness that was much less coherent, much less permanently centered, than was previously supposed. Also, the horror of World War I contributed to a widespread cultural loss of faith in the religious structures that had previously grounded the self in a more stable system of meaning. Of particular concern to literary modernists were those problems that related most directly to the definition, value, and scope of artistic expression. These concerns are closely related to particular questions about selfhood being raised by the work of William James. As I will discuss later in this chapter, James' work in the fields of psychology and philosophy pointed to the particular difficulties inherent in attempts to claim for the self a significant degree of either coherence or agency, which in turn created a number of specific challenges to traditional notions of artistic expression. James' attention to the external relationships that determine and situate consciousness posed some important difficulties for those who would view the self as coherent and able to act upon the world, rather than be acted upon by its external relationships. And, once the self loses its grounding in either coherence or permanence, models of artistic expression too must be reconciled with a parallel enigma, must be seen in relation to an undeniable degree of determination.

It is helpful, in looking backwards, to look beyond William James to the visions of selfhood and expression offered up in earlier texts. Though Romantic visions of consciousness are varied and contested, they hinge on

a model of artistic expressivity. That is to say, the Romantic poem posits a voice that is seen as a direct expression of a self which is much more stable and coherent than it will become in later Victorian poetry and, certainly, in modernist poetry. An expressive poetic is one that sees poetry neither as an imitation nor a symbolic equivalent of emotion, but as direct expression (Damrosch 638). Wordsworth provides one of the best known examples of this Romantic expressive poetic. In his Preface to the second edition of the Lyrical Ballads, for example, he calls poetry "the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings" (Wordsworth 400). Wordsworth develops this notion further in the Preface, suggesting a poetic that places more emphasis on the poet's own response to the object that motivates his emotion than on the object itself. This has led some readers to suggest that when "Wordsworth depicts an object he is also depicting himself, or, rather, a truth about himself" (Hartman 5). Wordsworth did not imply that the model was without some degree of complication. In the Preface, he also adds a number of qualifications to his model. The poem is not the immediate feeling itself, claims Wordsworth, but is that which has been contemplated for some time. Poetry "takes its origin from emotion recollected in tranquility: the emotion is contemplated till by a species of reaction the tranquility gradually disappears, and an emotion, kindred to that which was before the subject of contemplation, is gradually produced, and does itself actually exist in the mind" (Wordsworth 400-1). There is a marked distance created between the

original experience and the composition of the poem by the period of necessary contemplation, and there are changes inherent in the adaptation from feeling to verse. Another important complication in this model involves the relationship between artistic consciousness and the objects in nature that motivate the feeling to begin with. Indeed, some scholars have suggested that these complications remain ultimately unreconcilable (Damrosch 638). Nevertheless, Wordsworth's emphasis on direct expression marks an important note for the background of this study in that it emphasizes the value that was placed on expressivist artistic models. Such models will become increasingly untenable over the course of the nineteenth century, and during the modern period, artistic expression will be seen at the center of a highly contentious discourse.

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Though there are several crucial figures at the forefront of modernism whose works reflect important contributions to later literary manifestations of artistic expression, one figure of particular relevance for this study is William James. James (1842-1910) is an important figure for any discussion of the modernist self because his work in the fields of psychology and philosophy opened up new ways of seeing consciousness and in many ways created—or at least articulated—the complex questions that plagued so many modernist writers. I do not mean to suggest that James was alone in either

field. Freud, for example, had already done much to unsettle traditional visions of the self as having a stable and permanent core. Nor do I wish to suggest that James is by any means solely responsible for the modern enigma of the self. I do think it important, however, to acknowledge his significance in this modern discourse because his work specifically targets that element of the self with which we are the most concerned—its ability to be defined free from external experience and relationships. Such questions concerning the self's external relationships will be manifested in specifically theatrical terms in the work of Stein and Stevens. Through his writings and his work at Harvard, James' radical contribution to cultural visions of the self was connected to his success in changing the focal point of our attention in philosophical or psychological quests for truth and understanding. James insisted that we look for meaning not in either the self or the object but in the experience of the self with the object. In studying only what is knowable through experience, he changed the way we envision the self. From a Jamesian perspective, one viewed the self by apprehending it as it experienced, by viewing consciousness not as a whole that is definable outside of experience but as an entity that is definable only in its various relationships with external experiences. This new perspective necessarily changed the way all discourses focused on and defined the self in that it created new intellectual enigmas, and it opened up new levels of inquiry in philosophy, psychology, and the arts.

William James taught psychology at Harvard for twelve years (1878 to 1890) and worked during this period on Principles of Psychology (1890). With a background in physiology and medical studies, and with a great deal of enthusiasm for evolutionary theory, James could not be satisfied with a psychology that stressed the soul and the mind and ignored the body. His science of the self would be built on a theory of evolution that included consideration of the emotions and the senses. James' psychology marked a shift in the field from a discipline based on ethical and moral considerations to one based on the natural sciences. Related to this focus on the natural sciences are the two most important philosophical theories associated with James' work: pragmatism and radical empiricism. Under the umbrella of pragmatism, James called for philosophers to cease focusing on lines of inquiry that were not firmly rooted in "positive experienceable operations" (Brennan 53). Instead of abstract quests for truths about God or free will, James called for a search for meanings that focused primarily on the experience of human life.

James developed his radical empiricism in direct opposition to both rationalism and British empiricism. His lifelong struggle against rationalism was based on his insistence that philosophy not be based on abstract conceptions. Radical Empiricism insists that reality be found in the study of experience. In opposition to rationalist thought, James argues that abstract

conception is secondary in importance to experience because abstract conceptions are not necessarily grounded in anything tangible:

[T]he famous world of universals would disappear like a soap-bubble if the definite contents of feeling, the *thises* and *thats*, which its terms severally denote, could at once be withdrawn. (James, Some Problems 80)

The rationalist thought James was working against held that there is a mysterious and unified ego or soul, and that all programs for defining that ego/soul rely on the inexplicable. James argued that such an ego/soul, inasmuch as it cannot be located in experience, represents a useless hypothesis. Because they focused less on the metaphysical, James held more affinities with the British empiricists. Empiricism involves a focus on life as it is lived through sensations of all kinds, a focus James embraced, but British empiricists, such as Locke and Mill, had not, in James' view, taken their program to its logical conclusions and had fallen, in fact, into the trap of the rationalists—that of assuming before all else that there is some unified ego or soul. In moving away from both established schools of thought, James was able to envision the self in radically new terms.

In a chapter devoted to "The Self" in Psychology: A Briefer Course, James discusses consciousness in terms of two levels of inquiry and understanding: the self as known, and the self as knower, or the "me" and the "I." The self as known consists of various categories of identifiers: the

material self, the social self, and the spiritual self. All of these categories make up the self as me, or the self that is known. The self as knower, the I, is "that which at any given moment *is* conscious, whereas the Me is only one of the things which it is conscious *of*. In other words, it is the *Thinker*" (175). This dichotomy seems clear enough, but, as James points out, the concept of the self as knower raises a question about the nature of that which is thinking. Is it a deeply imbedded and somehow permanent entity? Or is it, rather, the passing state of consciousness itself? In other words, is the self as knower a different self when apprehended at different moments of experience, or does it remain a single, unchanged entity? These questions highlight James' departure from the two traditional schools of thought mentioned above, for it is here that he breaks new ground. James emphasizes the importance of passing states of consciousness and argues that once we can see the differences in the self as it exists in different experiences, our need to base our knowledge on an abstract, single, unchanged self becomes highly suspect:

If there were no passing states of consciousness, then indeed, we might suppose an abiding principle, absolutely one with itself, to be the ceaseless thinker in each one of us. But if the states of consciousness be accorded as realities, no such 'substantial' identity in the thinker need be supposed. (181)

According to the tenets of James' Radical Empiricism, states of consciousness are functional realities that make up experience: "This functional identity seems really the only sort of identity in the thinker which the facts require us to suppose" (James, Psychology 181). Reality is only accessible contextually. James often discusses mental activity in terms of vision, and he recognizes that "thoughts are no more discrete than visual sensations, but are apprehended contextually, with varying degrees of clarity and focus, within an ever-changing mental field" (Adams 66). James does not necessarily negate the possibility of some sort of soul or ego at the center of the individual self but, rather, calls into question the usefulness of our apprehension of it. What is important here is the dramatic shift in attention, brought about by James, from the self as a unified, if undefinable, entity to the self as it experiences. The self as it experiences becomes the fundamental ontological fact:

The logical conclusion seems then to be that the states of consciousness are all that psychology needs to do her work with. Metaphysics or theology may prove the Soul to exist; but for psychology the hypothesis of such a substantial principle of unity is superfluous. (James, Psychology 181)

In closing this particular discussion of the self, James considers the implications of his argument and is more understated than he could possibly have known as he muses, "I myself believe that room for much future

inquiry lies in this direction. The 'states of mind' which every psychologist believes in are by no means clearly apprehensible, if distinguished from their objects. But to doubt them lies beyond the scope of our natural-science point of view" (James, Psychology 191). Much future inquiry did indeed lie in this direction, and the decentering of the self would mark a crisis for many modernists.

Further, James called attention to elements of experience which had previously not been thought of as significant to visions of the self. In addition to substantive states of consciousness, those of which we are most likely to be aware, James also pays attention to what he calls "transitive states." Transitive states are

those feelings of tendency, significance, intention, intellectual and moral attitude, those inner movements of all sorts which we so persistently name after the goals towards which they aim, that finally we come to notice only the latter and to lose sight of the equally real transitive process which leads up to them. (Flournoy 79)

Experientially, the intention to carry out an act is every bit as real as carrying out the act itself, even if the former is less memorable or less practically important. By incorporating even these seemingly less significant mental states into his vision of experience, James was able to create a realm broad enough and complete enough as to leave no gaps in that which can be studied as experience.

Importantly, one element of experience that is brought to light among the many seemingly less significant “transitive” experiences James discusses concerns the relationship between the self and language. In a 1884 article entitled “On Some Omissions of Introspective Psychology,” James makes a distinction between various parts of speech, claiming that there are again substantive parts (those upon which a particular thought is based) and transitive parts (those that speak of the relationships of the substantive parts). James posits that language reflects the rhythm of our mental life:

Our mental life, like a bird’s life, seems to be made of an alternation of flights and perchings. The rhythm of language expresses this, where every thought is expressed in a sentence, and every sentence closed by a period. (James, “On Some Omissions” 2)

The resting or perching places in language are the substantive parts, the parts we are most aware of, and the places of flight are those that get us from one resting place to the next. We pay more attention, for example, to the noun and verb phrases of our thoughts than we do to the smaller and seemingly less significant prepositions and conjunctions: “We may then say that the main end of our thinking is at all times the attainment of some other ‘substantive’ part than the one from which we have just been dislodged” and that “the main use of transitive parts is to lead us from one substantive conclusion to another” (James, “On Some Omissions” 3).

Just as James emphasizes the equal reality of transitive mental states, so too does he emphasize the equal reality of these transitive parts of language and, therefore, the potential for the self to “experience” these language parts. In other words, though we may pay attention to our experience of the word “house” because we assume that it signifies an actual, physical entity, we also “experience” the words themselves and, indeed, experience even the transitive words that may surround “house” in a sentence:

There is not a conjunction or a preposition, and hardly an adverbial phrase, syntactic form, or inflection of voice, in human speech, that does not express some shading or other of relation which we at some moment actually feel to exist between the larger objects of our thought.

(James, “On Some Omissions” 5)

And further,

We ought to say a feeling of *and*, a feeling of *if*, a feeling of *but*, and a feeling of *by*, quite as readily as we say a feeling of blue or a feeling of cold. (James, “On Some Omissions” 5)

That we may have a relationship with language that is distinct from our relationship with the elements of the world that language signifies, a relationship with the signifier free of the signified is a radically new conception not only of language but of the self as well. It is a concept that will have profound implications for the modern artists for whom language is the

primary medium and one that will have important implications for this study, particularly in my discussion of Gertrude Stein.

To return for the moment to James' Radical Empiricism, it is necessary to consider specifically how such a program of inquiry might affect our perspective on the self. To do this carefully, I will use the example of a recent study involving the relationship between objects and individual subjects. The study was conducted on refrigerators and their users by a team of researchers from the University of California. Because the study follows the mandates of James' Radical Empiricism, particularly in its conclusions, a discussion of it was published as part of a 1985 celebration marking the seventy-fifth anniversary of James' death, and a brief elaboration of its findings can help us to see James' theories in application.

In 1980, a team of researchers attempting to find out more about the relationship between tools (or in this case appliances) and their users studied the use of refrigerators in a variety of households. The researchers took photographs of the insides of the boxes and had the subjects of the study keep diaries documenting their use of their refrigerators. What the researchers found severely challenged a "functional account" or a "rational account" of the refrigerator, those theories which would mandate that appliance use is a means to an end and that "there is assumed to be a discontinuity between person-using-appliance and the appliance itself, such that a person uses appliance but the appliance does not in any significant sense use, identify, or

define the person" (Hackett and Lutzenhiser 319). The reports about refrigerator use from the subjects of the study raised new questions in the minds of the researchers. Some users reported, subtly, that they would open the refrigerator and then analyze their behavior as an indicator that they were hungry. Other users reported uses of the refrigerators that they discussed in terms of the deviant and abnormal (a herpetologist who keeps a separate refrigerator for snakes, a couple who freeze their garbage, and a student who uses a fake 'Coke' can to store 'coke' or other controlled substances). These stories, because they were told as stories about abnormal refrigerator use, indicated that the users had a clear vision of what constituted "normal" use as well. They are stories which "constitute part of the verbal work that is done to keep the refrigerator within its proper 'frame'—work that indicates...the work that must be done by the person to literally constitute or accomplish what we know as a 'refrigerator' (Hackett and Lutzenhiser 320). Finally, users indicated that they used their refrigerators as a way to indicate some level of social standing or character, as in the case of those who admitted to keeping fresh fruits and vegetables in the refrigerator to "indicate our good intentions, but mostly we eat at Wendy's" (Hackett and Lutzenhiser 320). The researchers also showed pictures of the refrigerators to observers, who saw not just boxes stored with food items but particular "types" of persons or families. For instance, a woman told researchers that when she dated a man, she would "early in the relationship make it a point to inspect

his refrigerator to 'see what kind of a man he is'" (Hackett and Lutzenhiser 320).

This foray into the kitchens of refrigerator users is useful here because it helps us to explain what happens when we follow James' dictates and look at the self only through its experiences. James, as discussed above, closed the gap between self and object, making it impossible to delineate one completely from the other. The results of the Hackett and Lutzenhiser study, for example, show that the subject/object dualism breaks down: "insofar as we can speak of a distinction between self and object within experience at all, the relationship is circular, with the self and object 'constituting' each other. Within experience, the dualistic notion of 'person-using-refrigerator' is replaced by 'refrigerator-user'; the tool being used defines the user" (Hackett and Lutzenhiser 320). In the case of the users who admitted opening the refrigerator to learn how hungry they were, the tool is actually defining the need for which it is the solution. In the case of those users who talked of abnormal refrigerator use, and indirectly then of normal refrigerator use, the tool is actually being "performed" as much as it is being used as a means to an end. The refrigerator provides its users with a role that they, in turn, fulfill. The users are acting, in fact are being, according to their conceptions of what constitutes a person using a refrigerator. Once the distinction between self and object breaks down, we find a self that is defined at any given moment according to its relationship to the object. The refrigerator, in a sense, enables

the illusion of independent selfhood to be manifest, since the self is not definable free of the relationship. The subject/object relationship then provides the stage for a moment of selfhood to be performed.

As much as James' work contributed to a widespread challenge to traditional ways of looking at the self, he did not, importantly, suggest that we throw away entirely the conventional models that his various theses challenged. James is very much a modernist, and his sometimes paradoxical attitude toward definitions of consciousness reflects the contestational and seemingly unreconcilable nature of the modern negotiations of selfhood. In "The Will to Believe," the title work in his 1897 essay collection, James offers an argument in defense of conventional belief. He calls the essay a "sermon on [the] justification . . . of faith, a defence of our right to adopt a believing attitude in religious matters, in spite of the fact that our merely logical intellect may not have been coerced" (The Will to Believe 2). James has argued elsewhere that there is little point, from a psychological perspective, in paying attention to any elements of consciousness that are not manifest free from external relationships, for such elements are impossible to define. However, in this essay, James argues that lack of scientific evidence need not negate our ability to believe in the states of consciousness not supported by his program of scientific investigation. He addresses his essay to those "whose capacity for faith has been paralyzed by the notion that they cannot believe anything for which scientific evidence is lacking" (Bates 205-6). James

goes on to offer several examples to support his claim that faith is better than eternal skepticism. So, though he challenged most of the conventional models of selfhood, he nevertheless seems to have wanted to maintain those models in one form or another. James argues that there can still be a permanent element of identity, a core or soul that requires faith as it cannot be determined by way of scientific, empirical evidence. Regardless, however, of James' insistence that a significant degree of faith in conventional ways of seeing the self in the world remained viable, his body of work nevertheless left behind a set of inescapable questions that would seriously challenge those very models.

The challenge presented by James' work which is most important to this study is that which suggests the difficulty of maintaining any model of selfhood which requires consciousness to be defined free from its external characteristics. From a Jamesian perspective, if there is a distinguished and distinct soul or center in the self, it is neither knowable nor crucial for our understanding of consciousness, for all information that will further our understanding of the self will be found in the relationships between that self and the world as it is experienced. Further, when we look at experience as a way to define the subject, we see that the subject is defined by the world of experience at least as much as it is able to define that world. The selves that we discover in experience are therefore different selves in different experiences. Such moments of definition represent the passing states of

consciousness that James finds so important and that radically challenge the notion of a stable and permanent self. James did not negate the possibility of a soul, claiming that faith in conventional religious structures remained a distinct possibility. Nevertheless, his mode of inquiry marked some crucial problems in upholding such traditional views. The soul or any other conceptualization of an autonomous core at the center of the self—a core that remains fundamentally unchanged through different experiences—was for the modernists not a concept easy to let go of or to replace. James' suggestion that we shift our attention away from such a soul and his finding when doing so that our selves are different in different moments posed a monumentally difficult challenge to any theory of such a core at the center of self. It was partly in the wake of William James, then, that modern writers took on the problem of a traditional, expressive self, "obsessed with destroying the concept at the same time as they were haunted by it" (Brown 6). Jamesian questions about subjectivity are the focus of many modern literary works, including many works of both Stein and Stevens. In an empirical model, selfhood becomes only the illusion of coherence and stability. Many modern writers turned to the theater as the genre most beneficial to investigations into the modern self because it provided the opportunity to emphasize the degree to which external relationships determine selfhood by presenting characters at all times in relation to a particular framework, by emphasizing over individual voice the relationships that enable the illusion of selfhood.

Modernist questions about the nature and definition of selfhood accompanied broader and equally troubling questions about the nature of artistic expression. The empiricist argument of James posed a serious threat to expressivist ideals. As modern notions of consciousness shift from models that reflect an inherently stable and permanent soul to models inherently bound by temporality above all else, we can also see a shift in the kinds of artistic expression thought to be possible. In fact, what we begin to see emerging in the wake of such arguments is a contrast between expression and determinance. From an empiricist perspective, after all, "the subject is simply the object of laws and regularities that the person cannot control" (Altieri, Painterly Abstraction 99). Once the subject becomes ungrounded to this degree, becomes merely the "object of laws and regularities" of forces external to itself, its ability to express a stable or otherwise permanent self becomes suspect. If art cannot express a stable consciousness, then is it necessarily without autonomy, being acted upon by the world of external relationships rather than able to act upon it? Also, if poetic consciousness is necessarily determined, either completely or even to a significant degree, by its external relationships, then how can the poet ever inhabit a position from which to challenge those relationships? Empiricism raises important questions about the degree to which artistic expression can reflect agency, and it likewise poses

questions about the very purpose of artistic expression. The work of Stein and Stevens reflects a great deal of concern with such questions, and for this reason, some contextual background investigation is necessary here. A brief look at the philosophical responses of Henri Bergson and Friedrich Nietzsche to issues concerning the nature and value of artistic expression will provide a useful set of questions for my larger discussion of the work of both Stein and Stevens. Bergson and Nietzsche were by no means alone, of course, in the particular modern discourse with which I am here concerned. They provide useful models for this study, however, because they fall at opposite ends of a broader spectrum and therefore provide a helpful glimpse into the variety of approaches to this modern enigma.

One of the most important philosophical hypotheses underlying modernism concerned a split between human concepts and external reality. Sanford Schwartz's The Matrix of Modernism begins with a discussion of the late nineteenth-century, early twentieth-century philosophical concern with what came to be known as "anthropomorphic error" of which the central characteristic is the erroneous assumption that conceptualizations about external reality necessarily reflect an essential order of that reality. Most modern philosophers concerned themselves with a distinction between some form of external reality and conceptual abstraction, and though manifestations of that external reality differ, sometimes radically, from one philosopher to the next, we can nevertheless find some common ground

between them. According to Schwartz, "reality," to these philosophers, "lies in the preconceptual flow of appearances, which is irreducible to rational formulation, and our concepts, far from representing a reality beyond the sensory stream, are merely instrumental devices for organizing it" (19). We can find such a distinction in a variety of thinkers:

Bergson's 'real duration,' James's 'stream of consciousness,' Bradley's 'immediate experience,' and Nietzsche's 'chaos of sensations'—all of these expressions designate the original presentation of reality beneath the instrumental conventions we use to order it. Philosophers varied considerably in their description of the sensory flux, but they agreed on the essential points. All of them employed the stream of sensations as a counterpoise to the abstract systems that organize reality, and they regarded it as a kind of repository for aspects of experience that we habitually ignore. (Schwartz 19-20)

Again, this is not to suggest that Nietzsche's "chaos of sensations" and Bergson's "real duration" are by any means the same thing, but it does suggest that at least on one important level, several modern philosophers were making similar distinctions between abstract conceptualization and some form of external reality. Many philosophers, continues Schwartz, "shared the belief that instrumental conventions determine not only conceptual knowledge but every aspect of conscious life" (20). Experience is not determined by a relationship with a stable and essential order of external

reality; rather, it is determined by our instruments of conceptualization, which "isolate those elements from the sensory flux that serve our practical interests and screen us from the rest. As a result, we inhabit a world that is suited to our everyday needs, but we are detached from the original stream of sensations" (Schwartz 20).

This distinction between external reality and abstract conceptualization is closely related to the questions about consciousness being raised simultaneously by figures such as James. James not only suggests that we examine the self as it experiences, but he also argues that our experience is marked by a variety of external forces. He suggests, for example, that we experience language both as a referential vehicle and a medium in its own right. Language is one of the instruments of conceptualization that the modernists envisioned as being distinctly apart from external reality. It provides, rather, a framework of form for the ultimately unorderable flux of reality. It is possible, therefore, to see language as having a great deal to do with determining both perception and consciousness itself. Language might not express our thoughts as much as it does order our thoughts, including those involved in the act of self-perception.

James' position in relation to artistic expression, much like his position in relation to modern visions of consciousness, places him in a kind of middle territory. While in one sense his middle position most clearly reflects that of the artists I wish to discuss, he is not as helpful as are other

philosophers in illustrating the specific values that were at stake in such decisions. For that, I turn to two philosophers, Bergson and Nietzsche, who braved opposite ends of the wide range of responses to the modern dilemma concerning artistic expression. Henri Bergson offers a model of artistic expression in which art's value lies in its ability to return us to the flux of external reality. He distinguishes between surface levels of consciousness and a deeper consciousness that maintains access to immediate experience. We live largely unaware that our consciousness is only superficial, unaware, that is, of large parts of ourselves:

The greater part of the time we live outside ourselves, hardly perceiving anything of ourselves but our own ghost, a colourless shadow which pure duration projects into a homogeneous space.

(Bergson 231)

At this surface level, consciousness is regulated by intellect and language, both of which fall into the category discussed above of those instruments of perception that place artificial ordering principles upon the unorderable flux of external reality. Because consciousness is so regulated, Bergson argues that in our daily life we fail to act as free agents (231). But, continues Bergson, it is possible to gain access to that flux by gaining access to the deeper levels of consciousness of his "real duration." It is the role of philosophers and artists, he continues, to guide us "not from immediate experience to conceptual

abstractions but from conceptual abstractions back to immediate experience" (Schwartz 29).

On the other end of the spectrum, however, we find the work of the much more radical Friedrich Nietzsche. Nietzsche argued against the suggestion that we have within us a deeper consciousness that belongs to, relates to, or can gain access to the sensory flux. For Nietzsche, what lies beneath our conceptions is "the formless unformulable world of the chaos of sensations" (Nietzsche 307). According to Nietzsche, we never have access to this indifferent flux, for "everything of which we become conscious is arranged, simplified, schematized, interpreted through and through" (263). Any preoccupation with the sensory flux therefore becomes "merely a vestige of metaphysical thinking" (Schwartz 37). Nietzsche abandons the search for truth based on that reality which can never be accessed. Instead, he suggests that artistic expression should acknowledge its inability to find such a truth and should therefore find freedom in its ability to impose new orders: "Dismissing the traditional search for a truth guaranteed by a preexisting reality, Nietzsche declares that we are radically free to shape our world, to create the forms that bring order and meaning to existence" (Schwartz 44). In this model we overcome traditional conventions by imposing new ones, acknowledging even then that the new orders, too, are conventions which will in turn need to be replaced.

The artistic models suggested by both Bergson and Nietzsche are far more complex, of course, than such brief discussions can reflect, but their disparate approaches to concerns about the value and purpose of modern art exemplify the range of issues with which modern writers, particularly Stein and Stevens, were familiar. These models raise numerous questions about consciousness too, questions about agency within a field of determining external relationships and about the ways in which artists can avoid complete determination by conventional ordering principles. Bergson finds agency in the act of returning to the sensory flux; Nietzsche finds it in the ability of consciousness to freely impose new orders. I am less concerned, however, with the ways in which these questions get played out specifically in the texts of modern philosophers than I am with the ways in which they are negotiated in the texts of Stein and Stevens. For our purposes, the work of these philosophers offers a broad range of modern concerns regarding both what it means to have, be, or express a self, and what it means to claim for oneself the position of literary artist. It was a set of highly contentious questions regarding both consciousness and artistic expression, then, that Stein and Stevens inherited, along with all of their contemporaries, as literary modern artists. The work of James, Bergson, and Nietzsche is useful here not to provide a rigid philosophical framework into which Stein and Stevens can be placed but to raise some of the more important questions with which this study is concerned.

While (as we have seen) there are few recent studies on modern verse drama, the period stands out as one that saw its literary artists heavily involved in the theater. It is my contention that Stein and Stevens used the theater both as a literal space and as a metaphorical framework through which to conceptualize these very enigmas. Stein and Stevens both investigate the extent to which the self is determined by way of its external relationships, and in order to do so, they employ notions of performance. James' emphasis on the importance of external relationships in shaping and defining consciousness implies that any given moment of selfhood is not a reflection of a permanent or stable self but is rather enabled in the first place by its position in relation to a number of various relationships. Such a vision suggests that selfhood can be seen as something of a performance—an illusory presentation of coherence and stability not separable from the relationships by which it is defined. In the work of both Stein and Stevens, the determined self becomes the performed self, a response to a given "costume" or "role" through which consciousness is manifested. Because contemporary visions of selfhood were so closely related to notions of performance, the theater offered a place in which to investigate its artistic possibilities. In their plays and in some of their most significant non-dramatic work, both Stein and Stevens stage the modern self in order to explore its implications for literary expression. In doing so, each posits a

model of expression that negotiates some middle ground in relation to the disparity between expressivist and performative models.

In Chapter II, "Relationships in a Landscape: Stein's Operas and Plays and the Investigation into Modern Consciousness," I examine some of the reasons Stein wrote so often for the theater and claim that in her operas and plays, she explores a number of implications stemming from the modern discourse surrounding notions of consciousness. Because the theater allowed Stein to portray a number of characters at once, it was in the theater that she developed her concept of the landscape. In the operas and plays, Stein resists narrative, refusing to identify her characters according to a temporal sequence. Instead, she presents characters who are at any given moment apprehensible only through a complex web of relationships, with other characters, with other elements on stage, and with the frame of the scene itself. An important element of Stein's landscapes is her use of language. Language is presented throughout the plays as one of the primary elements of the landscapes that surround the self according to which the self finds its definition. Her landscapes emphasize the inseparability of self and surroundings, and they also offer Stein a broader perspective than that which would be allowed by a narrative. Through this broader perspective on the relationality of selves in the world, Stein is able to resist narrative as well as the hierarchical structure that narrative entails. Both at the level of Stein's characters and at the level of Stein's language in the plays, selves can be seen

in a multitude of relationships at any given time and are not reduced to their position in a temporal sequence or to their position in conventionally rigid language patterns. This perspective places the various elements of the plays, characters included, on relatively equal footing and allows Stein to challenge the rigidity of conventional modes of ordering, modes that place the self in particularly rigid relationships. In her operas and plays, Stein stages the modern self, and in doing so, she posits a model of artistic expression that, while rooted within a determined consciousness, nevertheless maintains an important degree of agency. Artistic expression, in this model, is that which can open up our conventionally rigid perspective and expose a multitude of relationships existing simultaneously. Its agency is not grounded in an ability to escape determination, but in its ability to challenge the rigidity of relationships by which it is determined.

In Chapter III, "Language as a Blind Glass: Artistic Expression as Performance in Stein's Tender Buttons," I examine Stein's important exploration of the determining relationships inherent in our use of language. In Tender Buttons Stein develops theatrical metaphors to describe our relationships to language. Language becomes the costume through which perception itself, or any moment of selfhood, can take place. Stein presents language as a performance, and in her performance here we find a model of artistic expression that includes a significant degree of agency, even with the determining forces of language. Stein's effort here is to "wear" the costume of

language consciously, to expose its rigidity and thereby to open up within it new possibilities for difference. Because the self in this model can challenge from within the very determining relationships that deny her a more conventional kind of stability, artistic expression becomes simultaneously the act of creating and discovering oneself.

In Chapter IV, "Stevens' Verse Plays: The Drama of the Mind," I look at Stevens' little-known plays. In his three early attempts at writing for the theater, Stevens began to develop concerns he would struggle with throughout his career. Specifically, he began to investigate what he came to see as the theatricality of consciousness in the modern world. In the plays we see early manifestations of the idea that consciousness is at any given moment a performance of selfhood, donning a given costume by defining itself according to its surroundings. The plays also expose Stevens' early renderings of the necessary aims of poetic expression in a theatrical world. Here we find that the characters who are able to renew their relationships with reality are those who can accept as an inherent feature of life the quality of change. These characters serve as early models of the ideal poet Stevens will develop later in his more significant poetry. Stevens' plays illustrate both his conception of modern consciousness as a potential performance and a model of artistic expression that can recover for that consciousness an important degree of agency.

In Chapter V, "Willful Illusions: Stevens' Poetry and the Performance of Poetic Consciousness," I examine the development of specifically theatrical metaphors in Stevens' poetry. In several important instances, Stevens adopts the metaphor of the theater in his poems to describe his view of modern life and modern consciousness. The world is offered up as a theater and consciousness is offered up as a performance. More importantly, he also develops through the use of the theatrical metaphor a model of poetic expression as performance that allows for a significant degree of agency. It is partly through the use of a symbolic theater that Stevens is able to posit a poetic mode that resists a complete engulfing of poetic consciousness by history's tendency to consume all in dead metaphor. Poetic consciousness acknowledges the extent to which it is determined by external relationships and becomes engaged in a never ending process of becoming, denying the validity of one way of seeing himself in the world in order to make way for a new, though soon to be discarded, set of determining relationships. The model of poetry drawn out by Stevens suggests a degree of agency in that imagination which can "say no" to old metaphors in order to produce startlingly new, soon to become dead, possible relationships between self and world. Self becomes a process more than an end, continually moving from forcing new orders to the discovery in those new orders forms which must then be scraped away. Like Stein, then, Stevens' model posits the artist as simultaneously creating and discovering himself. It is the imaginative act of

the destruction of old ordering principles that allows the poetic imagination an important degree of agency on the ever-changing stage of the theatrical modern world.

Chapter II. Relationships in a Landscape: Stein's Operas and Plays and the Investigation into Modern Consciousness

*The composition of living had extended
and each thing was as important as any other thing.*

—Gertrude Stein, "Picasso"

*I had been enormously interested all my life in finding out what
made each one that one and so I had written a great many
portraits. I came to think that since each one is that one and that
there are a number of them each one being that one, the only
way to express this thing each one being that one and there being
a number of them knowing each other was in a play.*

—Gertrude Stein, "Plays"

Stein's operas and plays are not often considered in the larger critical discourse of literary modernism. Aside from Four Saints in Three Acts, made famous by the opulent Broadway production done in collaboration with Virgil Thomson, few Stein plays have gained status as important works in the study of modernism. The general reason for this is that her operas and plays, particularly the early ones, are among the most difficult works in the canon of an already difficult writer. As written works, they often seem to defy

even the closest of readings and as “plays” they challenge all of the rules associated with the genre of drama. After all, Stein was relentless in her efforts to locate, expose, dethrone, and flatten convention in every guise. Nevertheless, Stein’s operas and plays remain essential to our understanding of her work in and across all of the literary genres. Knowing more about Stein’s dramatic aesthetic and her expectations for the reception of drama by an audience can help us formulate a more rewarding approach to a text such as Tender Buttons. The operas and plays also, I contend, investigate particular modern concerns about the nature of consciousness and the potential value of artistic expression.

In her dramatic works, we can see Stein’s attempt to stage and thereby recuperate the fallible, modern self by way of a model of artistic expression that both acknowledges and challenges the determining characteristics of external relationships. The operas and plays present a logical field for any study concerned with the Steinian subject, for there is no question that one of the reasons she turned to drama was her fascination with consciousness and its position within intricate fields of relationships. Throughout the operas and plays, Stein’s concern with the self reflects the concerns articulated by others, particularly her teacher William James, about the problems inherent in efforts to locate the self free from its external experiences and relationships. James’ influence on Stein’s literary achievement cannot be overstated, though it is often oversimplified. Her devotion to James led her to take

seven of his courses at Harvard. The essays Stein wrote for her courses at Radcliffe and Harvard offer evidence of the Jamesian influence on the young Stein. In one essay, Stein repeats and answers the question posed by the title of an address made by James at Harvard in 1895: "Is life worth living? Yes, a thousand times yes when the world holds such spirits as Prof. James. He is truly a man among men" (R. Miller 146). Critics have rightly paid attention to the influence of James on Stein's work, particularly the earlier texts. Throughout these works, Stein acknowledges the futility in attempting to discover the singularity of any given self without paying attention to its external experiences and relationships (Bridgman 134).

Because the style of the operas and plays presents such an overwhelming barrier to those who wish simply to read or produce her plays, critics have focused on style when approaching her work. A number of critics have suggested that the operas and plays be broken up into several distinct phases or styles. These distinctions are helpful in pointing out many of the important developments in Stein's career as a playwright. However, as varied in style as Stein's operas and plays are, there remains in nearly all of them a common tension—a tension which is indicative of James' influence and which marks Stein's struggle with modern visions of consciousness. Throughout these works, Stein shows a concern for the multitude of external relationships that necessarily determine the self. In the operas and plays, Stein experiments with the determined self both at the level of her characters

and at the level of her own artistic voice. Her characters exist, at all times, in a complex web of relationships on stage, and are never offered as isolated, completely self-determined individuals. Stein's portrayal of consciousness inseparable from its surroundings is suggestive of models of selfhood that view the self as a particular kind of performance. The "landscape," that which surrounds a character at any given time, becomes the setting necessary for selfhood to take place, becomes something of a stage through which consciousness is manifested. Consciousness is not a core which can be expressed as much as it is the performance of the roles given it, at any given moment, by a variety of external relationships. This performative view of consciousness raises important questions about the nature and value of artistic expression, since it challenges the notion that expression might in any way reflect a core or essential self. In her dramatic works, Stein suggests another version of the self, a version which in some ways is exempt from utterly passive determination by external relationships. This version of the self is that which controls the staging, and it is this model of artistic expression that carves out for itself a position in relation to its determining relationships whereby it can negotiate, to some degree, its own determination. This self is that which can negotiate its position among its various determining relationships. The staged characters of Stein's design illustrate the difficulty of locating agency, but at the same time they point to

the artist's larger agenda which includes carving out for herself a significant degree of control.

One of the most difficult challenges for readers, producers, and viewers of Stein's drama involves her refusal to involve her characters in linear narratives. The lack of narrative structure frustrates our attempts at "reading" these works in conventional ways. One result of Stein's resistance to narrative is a broader perspective on the characters involved. What Stein developed in place of narrative is what she called the "landscape" play. Stein sought an artistic perspective that could acknowledge selves in multiple relationships at any given moment, and the landscape play, that which resists the linearity of narrative, allowed her such a perspective. Through the landscape play Stein could flatten traditional hierarchies of determining forces, opening up the self not to an existence beyond determining relationships but to a variety of simultaneous relationships. Central to these landscapes and the portrayal of consciousness therein is Stein's staging of language. In the operas and plays, Stein resists conventional uses of language, choosing instead to create new linguistic constructs. Stein's confrontation with the powers of language throughout her dramatic works illuminates another dimension of this version of consciousness which can resist passive determination. By exposing our assumptions about the authority of conventional language and by subverting those conventions through her own linguistic forms, Stein is able to maintain some degree of

autonomy in relation to a language that would otherwise deny it. In this chapter, I will examine Stein's sense of "landscape" and her challenge to conventional language structures in the operas and plays. The artistic model that we find in Stein's dramatic works acknowledges the extent to which it is determined and yet challenges the most conventional mandates of those determining relationships. That Stein chose the theater for such an investigation reflects the importance of theater to her sense of consciousness and artistic expression. Stein was certainly not interested in the theater for its conventional possibilities as a site of realistic representation or story telling. The theater was an important site throughout Stein's career because the issues she focused so intently on had everything to do with theatrical concepts. Consciousness, in Stein's operas and plays, is determined by its environment in particularly theatrical ways; it becomes, again, a performance—a staged illusion of coherence and stability. And, though agency is displaced within the performance of self, it is not necessarily, according to Stein's model, abolished.

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Stein's attraction to the theater can be traced to some of her earliest recollections as a child, and it continued through three major collections of plays—Geography and Plays (1922), Operas and Plays (1932), and Last Operas and Plays (posthumous, 1949). In all Stein wrote over seventy-five operas

and plays from 1913, with What Happened, A Five Act Play, to 1946 with The Mother of Us All. Some resemble conventional dramatic works in one way or another, and others are recognizable as "plays" only because Stein labeled them as such and pushed aggressively to have them produced in theaters. Martin Esslin's dismissal of the plays in his book Theatre of the Absurd highlights the problem of generic classification as well as a typical level of frustration with the plays. He sees the plays merely as

short abstract prose poems in which single sentences or short paragraphs are labeled act I, act II, and so on. Even a work like Four Saints in Three Acts, which has been staged successfully as a ballet opera . . . is essentially an abstract prose poem on which elements of 'pure theatre' can be imposed in a more or less arbitrary fashion. (347)

Rarely in Stein's operas and plays is there a plot, in the conventional sense, and rarely a clearly identifiable or stable cast of characters. There are few stage directions, and when she does use them, she includes them in the dramatic text, making no distinction between stage directions and the other spoken language of the play. She also often makes a point to immediately contradict such directions, as in the opening act of Four Saints, which reads "Begin three saints. Begin four saints," and later, "Saint Therese Seated. . . Saint Therese not seated" (Last Operas 442-5). Stein labels sections of her plays with conventional phrases such as "act," "scene," and "dialogue," but rarely do the sections so labeled fulfill the expectations aroused.

As many challenges as she presented to potential producers, directors, and actors, Stein nevertheless clearly wrote her plays to be produced. She fiercely resisted the early publication of her plays, in fact, because she felt so strongly that the public should first encounter her work in the theater and not on a printed page. In response to Mabel Dodge's suggestion that Stein publish her first several plays, Stein wrote "No decidedly not. I do not want the plays published. They are to be played" (Bowers, Gertrude Stein 107). It was only after some time went by and she realized that productions would not come as swiftly as she had hoped that Stein eventually allowed her operas and plays to be published. This temporary refusal to let the plays be published is particularly remarkable in light of the fact that Stein and Alice B. Toklas worked relentlessly throughout their lives to get more of Stein's works published and were continually frustrated at the difficulties and rejections they encountered from many a publisher. Stein has not been entirely without success, however, in her desire for production. During her lifetime, five works saw complete theatrical production: Four Saints, Identity a Poem, A Wedding Bouquet, Yes is for a Very Young Man, and Lesson 16 of The Gertrude Stein First Reader and Three Plays. Four Saints, by far the most well-known and oft-produced during her lifetime, ran for six performances in its first production in Hartford, Connecticut, and continued to run for over fifty more performances in New York and Chicago (Ryan 167). Yes is for a Very Young Man, the first and only play without music to be produced

during her lifetime, was put on by the Pasadena Playhouse in March of 1946, just a few months before Stein's death on July 27. Since then, Stein's operas and plays have been produced with slow but consistent regularity, both by large, well-known theaters and by smaller, experimental theater groups. This production history reveals a renewed interest in her work in the 1960s and 1970s when feminists scholars began to reevaluate the importance and achievement of Stein's canon. About half of her dramatic works have now been produced at least once, and some of her non-dramatic works have made it to the stage as well (Ryan).

One element of Stein's dramatic works which has received a good deal of critical attention is her jarring use of a continual present tense in place of a more conventional narrative. Stein explained in "Composition as Explanation" and her lecture "Plays" that "the business of Art. . . is to live in the actual present, that is the complete actual present, and to completely express that complete actual present" (Stein, Lectures 104-5). Indeed, as others have noted, this aesthetic motivated Stein's entire career: "the evolution of strategies for composition of a literature to correspond directly with the 'now'—the exact moment of her perception—was Gertrude Stein's singular purpose during the first half of the twentieth century" (Ryan 15). During her childhood, Stein went to the theater a great many times. As she explains in "Plays," she was often frustrated by her experiences. She felt that her emotions were always either ahead of the action on stage, waiting for

inevitable resolutions, or behind, wanting to "start over" or go back to a particular moment that had already passed. This disjunction, according to Stein, made her feel "nervous." It was only when the still young Stein saw Sarah Bernhardt in a play done in French that she felt the powers of the theater were being fully realized. Not fluent enough in the conventions of French theater or the French language, Stein experienced the theater in this instance in a wholly new way. She explains that since the play was done in French (both in language and convention), "I could rest in it untroubled. And I did" (Lectures 115). Later she would develop a fondness for bullfights, operas (particularly those produced in foreign languages), and Shakespeare plays. She found these experiences more rewarding than other forms of "theater" because in each instance the audience member must pay attention to something other than the story that is being told. In the case of bullfights and Shakespeare plays, the script is so familiar that observers come to the performance already knowing the outcome of the action. In the case of operas in foreign languages and the Sarah Bernhardt play, the observers are denied access to the referential meaning of the language, even though they are likely aware of the general outline of the script, and therefore must pay attention in a different manner to what is happening on stage. All of this reflects Stein's interest in the present tense and her belief that it is art's responsibility to render that present tense completely. Stein wanted audiences to pay attention to something other than the linearity of the story being told, to spectacle in

place of narrative. This way, Stein could call attention to the elements of her art themselves—she could call attention to dramatic conventions and to language by writing them into the spectacle of her drama.

Marc Robinson argues that according to Stein's vision, of all the arts, theater should be closest to the here and now; but the drill-sergeant logic of narrative, with its teleological imperative, and the arduous task of 'getting acquainted' with characters and situations, prevents theater from directly communicating with anything. So many plays, it seems, can only be understood in recollection. (21)

According to the aesthetic theories of Stein, present tense is something that cannot be accessed if lost in a narrative. If an audience member or reader is paying attention to the meaning of something that happened ten minutes ago based on what is happening in the current moment, or is paying attention to how the current moment will unfold in the following ten minutes, he or she is not experiencing the present tense of what is on the stage at a particular moment in time. It is partly this disjunction that Stein set out to repair in her operas and plays. Two elements illuminate this effort most clearly. In most of these works, Stein uses the present tense almost exclusively. Even the works whose titles indicate a past experience or event, such as What Happened and He Said It, indicate almost no recollection of a past at all and for the most part maintain only present tense language throughout. The dramatic works also, as mentioned above, resist narrative so that there never

appear on stage characters whose actions and language are indicative of either a past or a future. The style of these works “represents a rejection of the Western literary tradition based on Aristotelian concepts of progressive time, causality, and a single point perspective” (Ryan 15).

Evidence of Stein’s attempt to resist narrative in order to isolate characters from narrative sequences can also be found in her use of syntax throughout the plays. Jane Bowers points out, for example, that in many of the operas and plays, Stein uses the period to disrupt further the possibility of narrative. In the play Paiseu, Stein places a period after the subject of one of her sentences: “Rudolph Geronimo. Is never mistaken” (Last Operas 158). In other plays, particularly those of the early thirties, this practice is used with increasing frequency. Stein also uses the period to fragment further spoken lines that already resist narrative. The play They Must. Be Wedded. To Their Wife. best illustrates this technique both in its title and throughout the text itself. A syntactically typical passage from this play illustrates Stein’s relentless effort to resist linearity:

Josephine. It is very inappropriate. To have it. Made. With them.

By them.

Therese. Or as they feel well.

Therese. Which it is. No. No. Which. With. An applied. In their. Credit.

Bowers suggests that by using the period in such a radically new way, "Stein disrupts grammatical continuity and, if we imagine the appropriate breath stops at each period, slows the onrush of speech, allowing each word its full value" (Gertrude Stein 149). We must pause with each brief and unconnected utterance, accepting the speaker in that moment, relying for definition on no further temporal occurrences. Though Stein's language here calls attention to itself by resisting the grammatical sequence and continuity that narrative traditionally requires, it is never entirely separated from referential associations. What this disruption of linearity does accomplish is an opening up of multiple references at any given point. In a final section of this chapter, I will discuss much more thoroughly the kind of linguistic "play" that is evidenced here. Clearly, one of Stein's most profound achievements in the operas and plays involves her attempt to literally put language on stage, to frame it self-consciously and to suggest in doing so an entirely new perspective that opens up new layers of potential for language and our relationship to it. Before investigating Stein's work with language, however, it is important to look carefully at her more general sense of landscape and the ways in which it functions in her dramatic works.

Many of Stein's critical writings indicate her firm belief that the theatrical medium offered her the greatest opportunity to achieve an artistic rendering of the present tense because theatrical language, at least at the level

of vocalization, exists only in the present tense. Stripped of many of the conventions traditionally associated with theater, Stein's theater presented her audience with a concrete, present-tense reality. Spectacle was of particular importance to her aesthetic. Stein would resist narratives in many of her works across the genres, but in the theater she could also confront the audience members with the physical reality that is unique to theater: "When the actors are there they are there and they are there right away" (Stein, Lectures 109). In a press release concerning the debut of Four Saints, Stein wrote: "The charm of the opera lies not in its obvious literary dramatic values, but in the emotional content brought up in the individual by the fusion of sound, the dance, rhythmic movement, and the scenery and costumes" (Ryan 40). Denying her audience the narrative plot structure they were expecting was easy enough to achieve in any literary genre, but the theater offered—or at least seemed to offer—the physical relationship between work and audience that she needed for an art concerned above all with capturing the present moment. Theater offered at least the potential for spectacle in place of narrative. Stein's interest in the theater's ability to confront the audience with a physical reality did not lead her, however, to pay particular attention to those elements of drama that allow for the physical performance itself to take place. Stein's lack of clear stage directions, her refusal to present even a stable cast of characters or to acknowledge in some places exactly who is supposed to be speaking, seem to limit the potential for

physical performance to an immediate confrontation between the audience and the embodied voice, the spoken language of Stein herself. Indeed, her landscapes emphasize above all the spectacle of language. As problematic as this is in terms of production, it does help to clarify Stein's aesthetic. If we keep in mind that Stein's attempt was to present an unmediated present tense on the stage, then it is not surprising to find her neglecting those elements of form that would necessarily impose mediation.

Stein's attraction to the theater was also motivated, I argue, by her interest in the multiple relationships which determine and situate the self at any given moment. The theater, in a way no other genre could, allowed Stein to present a number of characters simultaneously and to stress their connectedness, to each other and to language, by denying them the singular voices that would naturally be emphasized in another literary genre. The theater parallels the particular version of consciousness that Stein offers here, as that version of consciousness is bound by a high degree of performance. Consciousness is not essential here—not an entity independent of external defining relationships—but requires for manifestation a stage of references through which it can be apprehended and defined. Stein's fascination with spectacle, therefore, can be read in terms of her interest in discovering the ways in which consciousness is determined. The theatrical model of consciousness presented in the plays does not suggest the idea of role playing, which involves an important degree of self-conscious distance, but of a more

mechanical role, apart from which consciousness cannot exist. The “spectacle” made possible in theatrical production provided Stein the most fitting artistic field in which to present those relationships which she saw as being already theatrical. That is to say, the theater enabled Stein to emphasize the theatricality of a consciousness which needs for its own manifestation a stage—a particular set of references against and according to which it can be defined. Consciousness is theatrical in the sense that it is constituted by an artificial set of relationships that in themselves create a particular kind of illusion—the illusion of stability and coherence traditionally applied to notions of the self. Ironically, it is partly this interest in the potential of theatrical spaces that accounts for many of the difficulties encountered by potential producers, directors, and actors, for her interest in and emphasis of the interconnectedness of selves and environment often seems to contradict some of the basic requirements of theatrical production.

In her lecture “Plays,” Stein explains the events surrounding the writing of her first play. She had just attended a “pleasant dinner party,” and found herself thinking that too much attention was paid to things that were always “happening,” and that people are always telling stories:

Something is always happening, anybody knows a quantity of stories of people's lives that are always happening, there are always plenty for the newspapers and there are always plenty in private life. Everybody knows so many stories and what is the use of telling another story.

What is the use of telling a story since there are so many and everybody knows so many and tells so many. In the country it is perfectly extraordinary how many complicated dramas go on all the time. And everybody knows them, so why tell another one . . . So naturally what I wanted to do in my play was what everybody did not always know nor always tell. By everybody I do of course include myself . . . and so I wrote, *What Happened, A Play*. ("Plays" 118-9)

Stein's motivation for writing her first play involved the desire to get beyond "story" or narrative, and to see what could then be told. She explains further what she hopes to find once she is able to tell what "everybody did not always know or always tell":

I had before I began writing plays written many portraits. I had been enormously interested all my life in finding out what made each one that one and so I had written a great many portraits. I came to think that since each one is that one and that there are a number of them each one being that one, the only way to express this thing each one being that one and there being a number of them knowing each other was in a play. ("Plays" 119)

Stein is interested in both the relationships between "each one" and what makes each one "that one" and believes that the theater provided the greatest opportunity to engage in such inquiry. That "the only way to express" individual consciousness ("each one being that one") is in the theater

emphasizes the theatricality of this particular vision of consciousness.

Consciousness is something that is "played out" in its various relationships with its surroundings. It is a process of play, not an essential being. The theater offered an opportunity to stage this theatrical self and thereby to investigate several important implications of the modern determined subject. Such a theater, however, would have to avoid "telling another story."

Instead of the perspective offered by traditional narrative, Stein's dramatic works offer a much broader point of view. Stein's interest in the artist's perspective stems from a fascination with what she saw as a new, twentieth-century awareness of space. The possibility of airplane travel and the spatial perspective on the world that the airplane ride offered inspired Stein and informed her work: "One must not forget that the earth seen from an airplane is more splendid than the earth seen from an automobile. The automobile is the end of progress on earth" ("Picasso" 76). The airplane ride offered a perspective that avoided the rigid narrative traps inherent in the linear car ride. As Betsy Ryan explains,

[T]he differences between the two modes of travel, as Stein saw them, are primarily differences in time and space. For the automobile traveller, the trip is not complete until the car has progressed from point a to point b. In addition, one point in the trip is likely to appear more or less important or interesting than another as items in the landscape approach and recede. For the airplane traveller, the trip is

complete, in a sense, at every moment, since the landscape exists as a piece at every moment: the changes perceived from one moment to the next are so small relative to changes perceived from the car as to be non-existent, and may have as much to do with changes of consciousness as with changes in the landscape. (9)

The view from an airplane presents multiple relationships simultaneously whereas the relatively sequential progress of a car offers a much more limited set of relationships. Stein's fascination with experiencing "space" in place of "time" informs much of her work and has invited appropriate critical attention to the connections between Stein and the modern painters with whom she aligned herself. This perspective also informs the general aesthetic of her operas and plays. Throughout these works, narratives are resisted, and in their place we find a much broader perspective, one that parallels the shift from the view from a car to the view from a plane.

In place of narrative, then, Stein chooses to present what she referred to as a "landscape." This new perspective does not privilege one particular line of relationships, as any conventional narrative would necessarily do, but rather suggests a multitude of possible relationships at once. Instead of focusing on a cast of characters involved in dramatic action against a background of some sort, Stein often emphasizes that background above all. We are constantly made aware that the characters exist in relation at all times to the background, the "landscape," or "geography," to use Stein's terms, that

includes them. The aesthetic reflected in this use of landscape illuminates Stein's focus on "space" and perspective as well. In her lecture "Plays," Stein explains in part her fascination with landscape and her attempts to render landscape visible in her plays:

The landscape has its formation and as after all a play has to have formation and be in relation one thing to the other thing and as the story is not the thing as any one is always telling something then the landscape not moving but being always in relation, the trees to the hills the hills to the fields the trees to each other any piece of it to any sky and then any detail to any other detail, the story is only of importance if you like to tell or like to hear a story but the relation is there anyway. And of that relation I wanted to make a play and I did, a great number of plays. (Lectures 125)

It seems clear from the above passage that for Stein, "formation" stems from relation. Stein's desire to "play" the relationships between selves and objects—to show a dynamic totality rather than a singular, moving "story"—underlies the great majority of her dramatic works and explains in part her lifelong commitment to the theater.

Stein's fascination with landscape in her plays stems from her concerns as a young theater-goer. She explains in the same lecture:

I felt that if a play was exactly like a landscape then there would be no difficulty about the emotion of the person looking on at the play being

behind or ahead of the play because the landscape does not have to make acquaintance. You may have to make acquaintance with it, but it does not with you, it is there and so the play being written the relation between you at any time is so exactly that that it is of no importance unless you look at it. Well I did look at it and the result is in all the plays that I have printed as Operas and Plays. (Lectures 122)

In other words, Stein's landscapes do not have to "make acquaintance" with the audience member. The landscape does not have to make itself known, provide a story for itself, or explain its motivations. The landscape play, in Stein's words, can simply be "just there." The audience member does not trouble herself with predicting inevitable conclusions or making sense of past occurrences in the play but rather can "rest in it untroubled."

Stein's presentation of a landscape in her dramatic works poses some important questions. For this study, the most important result of Stein's fascination with the proximity of selves involves the characters in the operas and plays and what the portrayal of those characters suggests about Stein's sense of consciousness. Since Stein is so often concerned with how characters exist in landscapes together (either with one another or with other elements of their landscapes), her characters rarely resemble the coherent, singular personas of conventional drama. Stein's first play, What Happened, provides a strong example of Stein's presentation of non-narrative, present-tense characters. The play is short—merely four pages of text—and it consists of

neither dialogue nor action. Like many others, What Happened is made up of rich prose pieces which vary in length. There is not always a clear connection between the pieces, at least not at the level of communication necessary for a dialogue:

(Two.)

A silence a whole waste of a desert spoon, a whole waste of any little shaving, a whole waste altogether open.

(Two.)

Paralysis why is paralysis a syllable why is it not more lively.

There are, however, a number of recurrent themes throughout the piece, and often the characters, or voices, on stage do seem to be considering some of the same things in their speech. The short prose pieces are broken up into five sections labeled "acts." The play includes no stage directions or other markers of conventional drama.

There is evidence, however, that characters are to appear on stage and give voice to the lines of the text. The "characters" are not names, however, but numbers, "musical values in a textual harmonics" (Pondrom xl). A line of speech is not labeled with the name of a single character who is to speak it but by a number indicating, presumably, how many characters should speak it together. These directions ("the same three," "four and four more," "five"), imply "that the voices should be treated as a chorus of the number of characters designated" (Pondrom xl). Lacking names, the characters are void

of any other descriptive elements that might determine identity. Stein so emphasizes the relational that individuality becomes lost almost entirely. The play is made up less of conventional dramatic action than of a kind of rhythm of relationships and connections. An early line in What Happened suggests that the characters at a dinner are to be a shifting combination of individuals not necessarily distinct from one another: "A single sum four and five together and one, not any sun a clear signal and an exchange" (Geography and Plays 205). Robinson adds that "there is no obvious feeling of engagement among the speakers; one talks of a sound or a sensation, another follows with a list of objects, the next asks an unanswered, unanswerable question. . . nothing resolves; the play seems to go nowhere" (13). Stein's focus on relationships here reflects the inseparability of singular, intricately related units.

What Happened is by no means an exception in Stein's dramatic output in terms of an intense focus on the determining powers of relationships. In Listen to Me, Stein sometimes names characters specifically ("Sweet William" and "Lillian") and sometimes calls only for a particular number of characters, showing no indication that it matters which of the characters is involved, as in the stage direction "[t]wo together say, that they will finish with everything" (Last Operas 393). Stein's concern here has more to do with the verbal landscape of characters and voices on stage than with any singular voice. In emphasizing the relationships between selves and

objects, she illustrates also that there is always a significant degree of exchange which makes it difficult to distinguish between related selves and objects. In A Play Called Not Now, characters are indicated only by their resemblances. The "cast of characters" includes "A man who looks like Dashiell Hammett," "A man who looks like Picasso," "a woman who looks like Lady Diana Grey" and others. Again, Stein's emphasis on relationships heightens our awareness of the exchange between selves to the point that it is difficult to apprehend any singular self.

Four Saints provides another strong example of Stein's foregrounding of the relationships that determine and situate the self. In part because of its famous Broadway production, the "opera" is one of the most oft-discussed among Stein's dramatic texts. There are more than four saints in the work, though only two central ones, Saint Therese of Avila and Saint Ignatius Loyola. The text consists of a series of meditations, primarily, at first glance, about sainthood, with little indication as to which characters are to be voicing them. Though at least one critic has suggested that Stein's text renders the "essential natures" of the individual saints (Hoffman 82), it is difficult to ascertain just where these essential natures are to be found. Stein's focus on the inseparability of selves is again made clear. The play is replete with meditations that consider the relationships between saints themselves, and it remains difficult to discern one from another or to separate one from the objects with which Stein aligns it. Throughout Four Saints, saints and objects

are constantly articulated as being in proximity to one another. In the following passage, Stein considers combinations—the “some” and “sums”—of saints and objects:

They might in at most not leave out an egg. An egg and add
some. Some and sum. Add sum. Add some.

Let it in around.

With seas.

With knees.

With keys.

With pleases.

Go and know.

In clouded.

Included.

Saint Therese and attachment. With any one please.

No one to be behind and enclosure. Suddenly two see.

Two and ten.

Saint Two and Saint Ten. (Last Operas 450)

The opera is inundated with references to combinations, sums, inclusions, connections, attachments, and relations. As Marc Robinson points out, there is in the opera an emphatic use of the word “with,” as in the passage above, which underscores Stein’s focus on the proximity of things. Throughout the opera, Stein interrogates this concept of proximity and, again, the

inseparability of both selves and objects with questions such as "Who separated saints at one time," "Can two saints be one," and "What is the difference between a picture of a volcano and that." Stein's landscapes show that at any given moment, selves are temporarily defined according to a complex web of external relationships. What this suggests is that the characters cannot reveal an "essential" selfhood, since they cannot be manifested at all without their various relationships. What we have is not Saint Therese, a unified, definable character, but "Saint Therese and attachment," a character who can only exist through her various connections to others. To the extent that Stein's dramatic characters represent individual examples of modern consciousness, it seems clear that this vision of consciousness is a highly performative one. Selfhood does not exist on its own but requires instead a particular set of references, a stage, within which it can come into being and without which it simply does not exist.

Since the plays resist conventional dramatic action, most are made up entirely of speaking voices unconnected to action or story. Some critics have designated a number of Stein's plays as "dialogue" plays, but the term "dialogue" may imply more communication and response than actually appear in the plays. While different voices may at times seem to be speaking on the same subject, it is not always clear that they are listening to or responding to one another. At other times, however, speakers do not appear to be speaking on the same subject or to be speaking coherently at all, but they

behave as if they understand each other perfectly. The reader or audience member alone seems to notice that the language is incoherent and the world being presented on stage seems a closed one. In either case, we often find a lack of idiosyncrasies which might differentiate the characters from one another. Most playwrights attempt to create characters that are distinct from one another in a number of ways, characters that actors can then impersonate. But in Stein's operas and plays, even when characters have names, they are not "characterized, either by habits of speech or through coherent portrayal" (Bowers, Gertrude Stein 120). Characters are often little more than voices, all other characteristics being pushed to the background or not included at all. What is emphasized in place of more conventional characterization is the costume through which consciousness can be found—the costume of its surroundings, its landscape. Characters on Stein's present-tense stage exist only to the extent that they relate to their particular landscape, a web of relationships much broader than themselves. The particular stage upon which the characters exist enables the presentation of selfhood.

Qualities of the theater itself compound the problems facing Stein's attempt to perform these conflated selves on stage. As mentioned above, Stein's stage directions can only further confuse the already difficult process of producing her plays. Without a stable cast of characters and without making clear distinctions between characters once they have been introduced into a play, Stein makes production at times either entirely arbitrary or impossible,

thereby limiting some of the plays to the field of literary drama and negating any of the potential benefits the actual theater might offer to her investigation into the determined and situated self. The characters are not developed, psychologically or otherwise, so when Stein strips away the determining force of narrative, what glimpses of character that we find remain incomprehensible and fragmented—too fragmented, in many cases, for production itself to take place. This illustrates an important paradox for Stein's examination of consciousness. Without narrative, without emphasis on particular relationships over others, consciousness becomes fragmented to the degree that it is unrecognizable as such. In as far as selves present cohesion and unity, then, Stein implies that a high degree of performance is at work—an illusory "playing" out of a particular narrative which enables such unity. However, despite Stein's belief that the theater offered her an opportunity to come closer than any other genre to embodying this present tense of multiplicity and fragmentation, its very nature would necessarily deny her such a high level of fragmentation. Bodies still appear on stage and would necessarily defy Stein's most radical attempts at blurring the lines between selves. Also, linguistic fragmentation is limited to the printed text. After all, textual punctuation is not visible in the speech of an actor on stage. Stein's focus on landscapes that emphasize the inseparability of selves from their surroundings, in other words, may ultimately contradict some basic requirements of theatrical production, and the theater, therefore, may not be

able to stage the linguistic interrelation that is found in many of Stein's operas and plays.

In Listen to Me, Stein shows her concern with the spatial relationships between characters in lines like "The three characters and sometimes two come together and without sitting down they frown" (Last Operas 393). In this case, Stein's focus on the proximity of selves goes as far as to blend the distinction between the characters to the point that production becomes, again, either arbitrary or impossible. Stein's interest in relationships manifests itself as much with objects as with characters or selves. In Objects Lie on a Table, Stein again shows her concern with describing, at least linguistically, the spatial relationships between the objects she invokes:

The objects on a table have been equal to the occasion. We can decorate walls with pots and pans and flowers. I question the flowers. And bananas. Card board colored as bananas are colored. And cabbages. Cabbages are green and if one should not happen to be there what would happen, the green would unhappily unhappily result in hardness. (Operas and Plays 104)

In this play, the pots, pans, flowers, bananas, cabbages and other objects create the particularly domestic landscape of the play. The selves and objects within Stein's landscape plays are arranged spatially; the play is neither vertically progressive nor linear, and our ability to read it depends on our ability to come to terms with the spatial relationships therein. In Objects Lie on a Table

Stein writes: "When I appeal I appeal to their relation. . . combining everything with everything. . . I find that milk salt flour and apples and the pleasant respective places of each one in the picture make a picture" (Operas and Plays 106). This verbal picture will remain the focus of many of Stein's operas and plays.

As mentioned above, one significant result of Stein's sense of the artist's perspective reflected by this use of landscape involves the flattening of conventionally hierarchical entities, and this is accomplished in the operas and plays on a number of levels. Here Stein closely parallels the work of Picasso in his cubist period. Though she is discussing Picasso when she writes that "the composition of living had extended and each thing was as important as any other thing," she could just as well have been describing much of her own work ("Picasso" 19). By refusing to tell a story, Stein suggests two things about consciousness. She argues first that selves require social and geographical positioning for definition in the first place, and secondly, she argues that any narrative necessarily imposes an artificial ordering principle onto the otherwise inseparable and highly complex web of relationships that are at work at any given moment. Narrative does not capture the complexity of the self in its multiple relationships. No element of the play—for instance, no particular spoken phrase and no individual character—is to be valued according to its place and significance in a narrative

but must be seen only in the present tense, as potentially equal in importance to all other elements.

As she flattens dramatic elements by resisting hierarchical narrative, Stein locates, exposes, and dethrones dramatic conventions. Stein's entire career is marked by her relentless efforts to create spectacles that expose the artificiality of conventions on many levels, and her achievement in exposing the generic conventions of literary production marks one of her most significant contributions to modern literature. Michael Hoffman argues that Stein "uses genres in order to question their validity" (72-3). And indeed, throughout the operas and plays, Stein uses the language of conventional drama and in doing so subverts its authority. Counting Her Dresses: A Play is broken up into forty-one "Parts," each of which is made up of between one and seven "Acts." In all, there are one hundred and forty-five acts, some as short as a single word. By invoking the language of conventional drama and refusing to meet the expectations that language arouses, Stein illustrates the notion that a classification such as "Act" is perhaps more tenuous than had previously been supposed. What had seemed to be the necessary backdrop of principles by which a play must be ordered is foregrounded in Stein's plays and shown to be an ordering principle with no more inherent authority than countless other ordering principles.

On one important level, the "subject" of Stein's work across the genres involves the act of composition itself, and this understanding opens up a

crucial level of "performance" within the plays—that being Stein's own performance as it is manifested in her dramatic texts. When we read Four Saints, for example, we must understand that its subject is not the saints indicated by the title, but is rather the act of writing about saints. Throughout the text, as is often the case in Stein's dramatic works, is a strong sense of Stein's composition process. The subject of the work is Stein's moment by moment consciousness. As Hoffman explains, there is no "authorially indicated stage action beyond the most minimally oblique suggestions, no story, no resolution, no reversal, and no climax, either situational or thematic. . . Stein's major device for conveying her sense of structural essence is the meandering voice of her own consciousness" (81). As much as Stein is exploring the implications of the determined self at the level of her characters, she is also exploring her own limits as she exposes and emphasizes her relationships with the various elements of her art—her relationship with dramatic conventions, for example, and her relationship with language. There are even reminders to the author about the compositional task she faces in the text itself: "A narrative of prepare for saints in narrative prepare for saints" (Last Operas 440). One of Virgil Thomson's most significant and immediate challenges in writing the score for Stein's text involved deciding who would speak or sing which lines. He decided, apparently to Stein's approval, to substitute a chorus for the voices otherwise unaccounted for in the text, the voice seemingly belonging to Stein herself. The saints indicated

by the title act as a kind of landscape. They form the background within and about which all of Stein's compositional decisions take place. Once we accept this, the disjunction of certain elements of the operas and plays, such as the stage directions ("Saint Therese seated. . . Saint Therese not seated"), begins to make sense. What is being performed is Stein's act of composition and the decision about whether one of her characters should sit or stand illuminates the choices such composition entails. In illuminating these choices, Stein also illuminates the artificiality of any particular narrative choice. Stein thus implies that such choices do not reflect an essential self but rather that they reflect only momentary situations. As much as she writes about any particular subject, Stein is always writing about the act of writing itself, and in doing so, she is staging not only her characters but is staging as well her own artistic voice, and is thereby exploring the implications of artistic expression. Since Stein wishes in her drama to "express [the] complete actual present," it is no surprise to find the act of composition at the heart of her works, for any other subject matter would necessarily defer her from the present tense. Stein's art is, at the moment of its conception, the subject of the present tense. Her goal in the theater was not one that would be easily reached. The nature of drama requires that the act of composition take place before the act of performance, making Stein's ideal theater—the immediate present tense act of composition embodied in a live performance in front of a live audience—much more an implied ideal than a realizable goal. However, though Stein

necessarily wrote the plays before they were acted out in performance, she clearly felt that her plays remained unfinished, unfulfilled, until they reached the stage, for only then could she come close to “playing” out the act of composition in some semblance of the present tense. Stein’s desire to have her plays produced underscores the importance of the kind of “play” that is at stake here. Stein’s theater allowed her the opportunity to emphasize the performative nature of consciousness, and theater was also that space in which she could play out the act of artistic expression, an act fully involved in the performative relationships best emphasized in a theatrical arena.

ii

It is important to make a distinction between the self as it is represented on Stein’s stage and the self that is suggested as the controller of that staging. On one level, Stein’s dramatic characters reflect her experimentation with the self involved in a complex web of relationships. Stein’s focus on language throughout the operas and plays, however, presents us with a wholly different element of her larger focus on the self. Language is of primal concern to Stein in so many of her works—dramatic and otherwise—largely because it is the most immediate relationship that necessarily determines the self. Stein’s fascination with language is imbued with suspicion toward both its limitations and its powers. Conventional syntax, for example, even as it enables utterance, structures and limits

expression. Language, in fact, may indeed do more in the way of defining the self according to its rigid adherence to categorization than does some essential, pre-linguistic self use language for expression. One way to read Stein's "play" with language, then, is to suggest that in forging new linguistic forms free of conventional syntax, she was attempting to test the limitations language imposed on the self, as well as the self's potential for expression within such a restrictive system. In other words, Stein's achievement with language may be read as an attempt to resist being wholly determined by language by insisting that self expression, artistic self expression, can act on and determine language as well. On this level, theater becomes the space in which the artistic voice can negotiate its own performative relationships.

Since the subject of the plays so often seems to be the act of composition itself, Stein's own voice is emphasized moreso than it might be in a more conventional dramatic rendering. By "staging" this voice, by putting into the theater and thereby making self-conscious the artistic voice, Stein presents another challenge to notions of a fully determined consciousness. As I have suggested, Stein's attraction to the theater had a great deal to do with the notion of spectacle. Stein often wrote about the power of the stage to force upon the audience a new kind of awareness. She argues that spectacle requires audiences to come to terms not just with the elements on the stage as references to something outside of the theater but as materials in themselves: "when a work is put on the stage of course every

one has to look at it and in a sense if it is put on the stage every one is forced to look and since they are forced to look at it, of course, they must accept it" ("Picasso" 44). She wanted to confront her audiences with the physical signs of her art, rather than lose their materiality in a genre that would emphasize the world of referents beyond them. Spectacle was important to Stein, in other words, because her argument throughout so many of her operas and plays is that the various relationships that determine the self, including above all language itself, create or amount to a spectacle in themselves. Stein uses the theater to emphasize the theatricality of consciousness and the relationships that determine it, most importantly its relationship to language. At the level of Stein's language, the operas and plays add a singular contribution to her larger agenda with language, and it may be the "playing" with language, finally, that is one of Stein's greatest and most important achievements in the plays, particularly in relation to the discourse surrounding the expressivist self. As mentioned, the Jamesian notion of an at least partly determined self posed some crucial questions for Stein. As an artist concerned primarily with the "medium" of language, Stein saw language through a particularly Jamesian lens, seeing it as an external force, an entity to which selves must relate and through which selves might therefore be determined. Conventional notions of language as merely an expressive medium, a device by which selves could express themselves, were therefore suspicious. New questions about the degree to which consciousness

actually performs language became relevant, and such questions certainly underlie Stein's theatrical investigations. Throughout her career Stein experimented with language, uncovering its tendency to mask convention, hierarchy, and power and forging out new linguistic forms. In doing so, she experimented with her own ability to escape the constricts of conventional language. It is in the theater, however, that Stein can most literally "stage" her negotiations with language. In "playing" language, therefore, Stein is using a necessarily mediating vehicle to impose new forms upon the world of experience. The self-conscious staging of her own voice in relation to language suggests a moment of resistance to the determining factors inherent in artistic forms.

Language is so prominent a focal point in the operas and plays that Jane Bowers has adapted the name "Lang-scapes" to describe some of them. Bowers offers a helpful explanation of how language is literally staged within Stein's landscape plays:

Stein's plays are not in themselves landscapes. . . they are like landscapes. The similitude lies in Stein's use of language. . . Stein treats her words as though they are material objects related to each other spatially, that is, visually on the page and sonorously in the air. Her language assumes a materiality equal in presence to the materiality of the other elements of the performance event. (Gertrude Stein 122)

Language is so much the focus, in fact, that in many of the dramatic works it becomes a material presence “whose existence and contours are the subject of debate and discussion within the play” (Bowers, Gertrude Stein 123). Stein’s fascination with language stems from her belief that language was an entity with power: “I like anything that a word can do” (Stein, Everybody’s Autobiography 277). Stein “plays” with language in two senses. She puts language on a literal stage, distancing it from its traditional immediacy by placing it in a self-conscious framework that allows for examination. Also, as she stages language, she tests the extent to which she is bound by its conventions. She plays with language’s conventional forms. By exposing the power of language to shape the world it evokes, and by disrupting conventional uses of language, Stein carves for herself a radically new position in relation to language. Theater, then, because of its ability to emphasize a particular kind of relational determination, becomes the site of Stein’s own negotiation between passive performance and artistic will—that performance of self which can expose multiple potential narratives and can claim some degree of control over its own performance.

Stein’s play A List provides a good example of Stein’s achievement with language throughout the operas and plays. The play seems to be concerned primarily with the act of making a list of characters, one of the initial tasks faced by any playwright. The lines in the play provide a dialogue about what such a list should look like and what it might mean. The play is

also, as are many others, written largely in list format. Instead of having her characters speak in sentences written horizontally across the page from left to right, the lines are often written a word or a phrase at a time, all of them listed vertically down the page. In other places we find lists presented horizontally, still resisting any of the dictates of sentence structure. A List is helpful here because Stein's focus on lists marks her increasing departure from grammatical syntax. Throughout the operas and plays is a decreasing dependence on syntax as Stein searches for new ways to present individual words free from the ordering principles of conventional language structures. Dubnick focuses on the form of the list in much of Stein's work. She sees the list form as an effort by the author "to come to terms with the world as chaotic, immediate, and unordered experience, which is how she felt life is perceived" (46). Stein's use of and attention to vertical columns in place of sentences and paragraphs allow her to present words relatively free from their otherwise ordered and limited positions within conventional syntactical forms. The list also parallels Stein's thinking about the artist's perspective and allows her to "challenge the conventional way of seeing the world serially rather than simultaneously" (Dubnick 47). Stein is challenging much more than basic grammatical structure. As Dubnick explains, Stein's new forms also challenged

. . . thought processes and discursive logic conventionally expressed as horizontal written record of the discourse. She not only questions

chronological order and substitutes simultaneity for seriality, but challenges the basic structure of prose. . . For Stein attention to the present moment led to abandonment of chronological order. . . the conventions of reading a book from beginning to end, left to right, and top to bottom lose their validity once chronological order is rejected.

(47)

By refusing to follow the dictates of conventional syntax, by resisting sentence and paragraph structure altogether, Stein "attacks the conventional way of seeing and conceptualizing the world" (Dubnick 48). Language imposes order onto the world of reality, valuing some elements of the world and devaluing others, placing all in rigid categories of perception. By subverting the authority of conventional language, Stein subverts ordinary language's particular ordering system and imposes a system of her own making.

Stein's lists are not, however, random piles of words. In most cases the words are related one way or another, often in a great variety of ways, and Dubnick is especially helpful in pointing out the many connecting devices Stein uses. One example comes, again, from A List. The list is not vertical but follows few conventions of the sentence: "Martha: Carrots and artichokes, marguerites and roses" (Operas and Plays 255). Dubnick explains:

Although one might argue that contiguity links all four items at least potentially, since all items might be spatially linked in a garden, similarity dominates. Carrots and artichokes are vegetables;

marguerites and roses both refer to flowers as well as to women's names. Roses and artichokes have a similar configuration, each having many petals. (61)

The list then tells us something about the words and their referents, showing particular relationships and particular differences between the objects, without including them in a narrative. Once we leave behind our expectations for narrative, the potential for connections between Stein's words and phrases becomes clearer. Stein is thereby able to avoid presenting items only in terms of their relation in a story and can instead speak of similarities and differences in countless new ways. The problem with this element of Stein's agenda in the theater is one that Jane Bowers discusses in a chapter devoted to Stein's drama. Bowers rightly points out that as much as Stein wanted to break from chronological time, such efforts as the presentation of words in list form necessarily limit certain elements of the plays to the field of literary drama. The actual performance of the plays necessitates the reading of the words or phrases, however presented on the page, in some kind of chronological order. And, even if we consider the effect of lists within a strictly literary field, it is important to note that reading too happens sequentially, regardless of a vertical, horizontal, or even, for that matter, diagonal spacing on the page. As Bowers explains, time could not be "vanquished" in the theater—or elsewhere for that matter—as easily as Stein might have hoped (Gertrude Stein 152). Nevertheless, plays such as this

remain important examples of Stein's struggle with the conventions of language.

Stein's focus on language reflects the need not to get from point a to point b but to open up our otherwise strictly limited perspective on language and see it from a broader perspective in which all of its parts are given equal footing. Stein recognizes and exposes syntax's conventionality by carving out a space for herself as a writer that is outside many of the rules and regulations of syntax. In a line such as "Length what is length when silence is so windowful," Stein is refusing "to abide by traditional meaning-producing organizations" (Pladott 114). Leaving behind traditional syntax allows Stein the freedom to literally "play" with language in the theater, to experiment with placing different values on words and phrases. Stein's use of the theater in this sense is a radical one, for she is not using theater in order to create the illusion of a re-presentation of reality but rather to expose the artificiality of any such ordering principles. The broad perspective on language that Stein presents in place of narratives, the refusal to place a hierarchical ordering system on her language by relating it to the action of a story, has prompted feminist critics to celebrate Stein's achievement in undermining and destabilizing a male-centered language system. Stein is often read as an exile, because as a woman, a Jew, a lesbian, and an expatriated American, she lived many times removed from societal systems of power and political agency. Her decision to move to Paris suggests the importance of her status as exile in

her own mind. With language too, Stein positions herself outside of convention, choosing instead to test the limits of language's boundaries by getting as far away from convention as she could. From her outsider position, she is able to question the validity of language's centering in the very conventions she attempts to escape. Her unconventional language has been celebrated as a woman-centered language that resists patriarchal ordering systems. Dinnah Pladott's "Gertrude Stein: Exile, Feminism, Avant-Garde in the American Theater" offers such a reading and argues that Stein's language was more subversive in the theater than in any other genre. Pladott's argument about the particular subversiveness of the plays is based on the notion that in these works,

Stein takes on the tendency of the theatrical medium to mask more effectively than any other art the fact that it is a structured and codified process of signification. The convergence of the spectator with the physical presence of iconic signs. . . the actors and the performance's sights and sounds, fosters the illusion that the staged play is an unmediated reality rather than a rule-governed semiotic exchange.

Stein repeatedly foregrounds and unmaskes this illusion. (112)

Also, because conventional theater takes the focus off of the written text in order to foreground the actual performance, Stein's theatrical foregrounding of the language of composition is particularly radical. As she shows with her characters that selves are always in relation to one another, she shows also

that we are always in relation to language, a language that is much more than merely a mediating vehicle for communication. It is an entity that has the power to shape, determine, and alter the world in which we live. As long as we remain unaware of the conventions that guide our uses of language, we remain unaware of the multitude of possibilities that remain hidden by those conventions. As Stein disrupts syntactical convention, she reduces conventional uses of language to a level on which all ordering systems maintain equal footing. Stein echoes her formalist contemporaries in suggesting that all such ordering systems remain merely human constructs and cannot, then, offer unmediated access to the flux of immediate experience. She achieves at least some degree of success in positioning herself at the margins of language and playing, a term I intend in every sense of the word, with the idea that language's conventions maintain any inherent degree of authority.

In the operas and plays, Stein emphasizes the notion that consciousness is necessarily a performance in the theatrical world of external relationships. Again and again she suggests at the level of her characters that any given moment of selfhood is entirely bound by and inseparable from a complex and dynamic web of relationships much broader than the individual self in question, relationships which enable the performance of self to take place. As she experiments with her landscapes, these broad fields of relationships, she also experiments with the implications they have for

artistic expression. Her drama argues powerfully that by resisting narrative and flattening out the hierarchical patterns inherent to them, the artist can expose and challenge the artificiality of conventional ordering principles. The theater allows Stein to call into question the validity of any singular determining perspective, and in doing so, she opens up a multitude of potential relationships for the performed self at any given moment. By exiling herself from the dictates of conventional ordering principles, whether at the level of story telling, dramatic representation, or language itself, Stein shows ultimately that if she must be determined by her own complex web of relationships, then so too must those relationships be determined by her own artistic performance.

Chapter III. Language as a Blind Glass: Artistic Expression as Performance in Stein's Tender Buttons

*Language as a real thing is not imitation either of sounds
or colors or emotions it is an intellectual recreation and there is
no possible doubt about it and it is going to go on being that as
long as humanity is anything.*

—Gertrude Stein, Lectures in America

*The best thing to do is to take it away and wear it and then be
reckless reckless and resolved on returning gratitude.*

—Gertrude Stein, Tender Buttons

Gertrude Stein's interest in the external relationships that determine the self, as we have seen, led her to a fascination with language. In Tender Buttons, written in 1912 and published two years later, Stein confronts the power of language to determine our experience in the world. The text reflects her belief that consciousness is determined by its relationships, particularly its relationship with language. The text also reflects Stein's sense of the importance of artistic will as a force that can bear witness to unnecessarily restrictive constructs of linguistic order and that can create new linguistic forms that might allow for a greater degree of difference and multiplicity.

The language of Tender Buttons is the performance of a consciousness that is at once determined and determining. The self performs language even as language is made to perform in response to the artistic will. In order to see this element of the work, we must let go of the expectations we traditionally bring to a written text, expectations for narrative based on a referential use of words and phrases. Instead, we must bring to the text the expectations we might bring to the production of one of Stein's plays in which we pay attention to the confrontation between the writer and the script, the act of composition itself. In Tender Buttons, what we are reading is not a description of the objects, food, and rooms of the subtitle but a confrontation between Stein and a language that can be determined by consciousness, artistic will, even as consciousness remains necessarily a performance of the language whose absolute authority it attempts to defy.

Tender Buttons consists of three distinct sections: "Objects," "Food," and "Rooms." The first two, "Objects" and "Food," contain lists comprised primarily of items belonging to the category of the section titles. For each of these items in the list, Stein prints the item's name in capital letters and then follows the name with anywhere from a single line to several pages of writing. The third section, "Rooms," is a single, continuous piece, often referred to as a prose poem. The writing, as in most of the operas and plays, maintains a constant present tense, acknowledging neither memory of the past nor anticipation of a future. Stein resists linear narrative here as she

does elsewhere, refusing to tell a "story" as she writes. One of the other most glaring ambiguities or difficulties of the text stems from the disjunction between the subtitles, "Objects," "Food," and "Rooms," and the writing itself, which seldom offers any insights into the nature of items called to mind by those subtitles. The structure of the work leads its readers to expect definitions, meditations, or some other kind of information about the items invoked by the nouns that make up the short headings along the way. Such expectations, however, lead only to frustration with this text that calls to be read in a wholly different way.

Critical readings of Tender Buttons remain widely divergent. Several critics have approached the text as if it were a complex system of metaphors, attempting to uncover and expose singular and definite meanings within the text. These readings often focus on biographical "details" within the text and often conclude by arguing that the text is a celebration of Stein's domestic and/or sexual life with Alice Toklas. Some of the readings that fall into this category explain the stylistic difficulty of Tender Buttons by suggesting that since the life Stein wanted to celebrate in the text was unacceptable in the eyes of the culture for which she wrote, she therefore developed a writing style that would hide the most radical of its contents. As I will suggest later in this chapter, I find such readings to be somewhat problematic. While the biographical "subtext" of Tender Buttons is important for our overall understanding of the work, it simply cannot explain other issues that are

clearly at stake in the text as well. In short, while I find that approaches to the text which focus on its biographical encoding offer important insights, such an approach cannot sufficiently deal with the text as a whole unless it is coupled with a thorough examination of Stein's confrontation with language.

Other critics have sought to explain Stein's early career by focusing on her stylistic affinities to the cubism of her friend and colleague Pablo Picasso, aligning various stages in her written work with the different stages of his painting. These readings offer an important and helpful perspective on Tender Buttons, as her vision during the writing of the text did indeed share much with that of the cubists, and Picasso's influence on her work in particular should not go unnoticed. Some of these readings, however, omit elements of the text, and there are many, that are unique to the medium and subject of language itself. Nevertheless, a recognition of Stein's affinities with the visual art of cubism can help to illuminate her larger argument about language and artistic expression. Given the singularity and scope of the problem of language in Tender Buttons, readings which focus on its stylistic closeness to the work of Picasso can provide a crucial starting point for a thorough discussion of this complicated text.

I find Tender Buttons to be one of Stein's most intriguing works because in it she deals most directly with the problem of a self in relation to determining external forces, and I argue that language, according to Stein's vision, is the most immediate and problematic external experience that there

is. Language controls perception according to its own conventions—conventions which value certain elements of that reality over others, which acknowledge certain elements of reality while ignoring and effectively erasing others. We are determined and situated as soon as we begin to access the world and to place ourselves in it through language. Selves in the world, according to this model, are linguistically determined. Tender Buttons portrays the relationship of consciousness to language as if language were a costume of sorts, a covering over of both self and world that determines the performance of consciousness. The text exposes this constructive power of language. And, while acknowledging that consciousness is always, to some degree, a performance of its linguistic determination, the text also suggests that the same artistic will that is thus determined can simultaneously act as a determining force upon language itself. Tender Buttons is a staged performance of both language and artistic will. The text negotiates the play between complete determination and agency that is enabled by artistic will. In the text, artistic expression is imagined not as absolute will and control but as a kind of interplay between forces. Before discussing the implications of Stein's confrontation with language in Tender Buttons, I will briefly discuss the primary camps of critical commentary on the text. Such an overview will help to situate my own argument and will highlight some of the most important insights already offered by Stein scholars. I will then, in a second

section of this chapter, turn to the text itself in order to look closely at the language issues that are at stake in Stein's Tender Buttons.

i

One of the most glaring difficulties of Tender Buttons stems from the ambiguous relationship between the text's language and the referential world with which it seems at times to be concerned. Many scholars have approached the text of Tender Buttons with the aim of decoding its complex metaphors in order to unlock the mystery behind them. Edmund Wilson, William Gass, Pamela Hadas, Doris Wright, and Neil Schmitz, among others, have all discovered in the text evidence of lesbian encoding. There is no question that such a subtext exists within the pages of Tender Buttons, and many of these studies, particularly the more recent ones, offer helpful close readings of the poems in this regard. There are significant limitations, however, with attempts to provide a clearly defined answer-key to any section of this complex text, as there is clearly much more at stake than merely an intricate layering of metaphors. As I suggested above, the text demands to be read on its own terms, and approaches to the text which attempt only to find and expose the referents of the signs in the text will ultimately remain unsatisfactory and interminably inconclusive.

Some early readings of Tender Buttons provide good examples of the limitations inherent in such approaches to the text. William Gass' "Gertrude

Stein and the Geography of the Sentence" and Edmund Wilson's The Shores of Light, in particular, highlight the difficulties in attempts merely to decode the text of Tender Buttons. Gass' reading of the text does not entirely disregard Stein's agenda with language. He belongs to a category of scholars who note the importance of tracing the etymological roots of the words Stein chooses, and these word roots offer a great deal of help in our attempt to understand the text, as I will show in part ii of this chapter. But, Gass traces these roots in an attempt not to illuminate the play of determinacy at stake in Stein's portrayal of language but to try to get as close as possible to an "airtight" meaning for the text, the most secure reading of what he supposes to be the subtext of Tender Buttons:

[T]his is certainly not an airtight text. It leaks. But where? and why should we care? It will not tell us what day the bridge is to be bombed, the safe rifled, or buck passed. We must set to work without reward or hope of any, and submit ourselves to the boredom of an etymological narrative. (90)

Gass' assumptions about the cultural importance of the text expose his belief that there is little at stake in the text other than a difficult-to-find narrative about, as he later claims, Stein's relationship with Toklas. He proceeds, then, to attempt to uncover such a narrative by making sometimes insightful, sometimes dubious claims about the "meaning" of Stein's metaphors. At the same time, Gass argues that Stein's text "leaks," suggesting that the text's

unwillingness to be pinned down by these glosses is a weakness that must simply be endured if we are to get anything from it at all.

Donald Sutherland long ago pointed to the problem with such approaches to Tender Buttons:

Such a procedure puts the original in the position of being a riddle, a rhetorical complication of something rather unremarkable in itself. It would be rather like an exhibition of the original table tops, guitars, pipes, and people which were the subject matter of cubist paintings. The original subject matter is or was of importance to the painter as a source of sensations, relations, ideas even, but it is not after all the beholder's business. The beholder's business is the picture in front of him, which is a new reality and something else, which does not add up to the normal subject matter. (77)

When we read Tender Buttons, we must acknowledge much more than the "subject matter" we suspect is lurking behind the words. Efforts to uncover such matter or meanings are ultimately doomed to incompleteness anyway, as the text simply does not allow itself to be pinned to single interpretations much of the time. That is not to say that discussions of the themes that seem to exist as subtext—among them concerns about biographical and feminist issues and the ever-present issue of language—are not worth discussion. Indeed, they remain important to my own reading of the text. Rather, I mean to suggest that aiming to pin down Stein's language to a single referential

interpretation will necessarily neglect the polymorphous nature of Stein's language and, therefore, miss the larger issues at stake in the text. Even as we discover strains of thematic coherence, we must remember that at all times there are a number of potential readings, themes, and associations at work. It is also important to pay close attention to what Stein is accomplishing at the level of the words themselves. Studies which fault the text for its refusal to be coherently glossed miss the most significant attribute of Stein's achievement. Scholars have argued, for example, that the "buttons" of the title "mean" a variety of different things, including words, actual buttons, various parts of the female anatomy, and, amusingly, asparagus tips. As soon as we begin to see how the text resists any singular, definitive reading, we can also see that such an approach is somewhat far from the point here.

One argument that is often couched within readings that would seek to decode Stein's text is that Stein's style is "difficult," that it makes use of so many complex and seemingly inaccessible metaphors, because what the text is really about, her lesbian life, was not something she could write about openly. Many have noted that the text seems to get more "difficult" when there is an erotic subtext involved, adding evidence to those arguments which hold that Stein is difficult because of what she was hiding. Again, Gass offers a helpful example:

One does not need to speak in code of Adam and Eve, though if you are going to take Eve's side against the serpent, God, and Adam—all—you

had better begin to dip your tongue in honey; but what about the pleasures of cunnilingus or the dildo, of what she was later, as she grew more frank, to call 'lifting belly'? . . . And Gertrude had Alice to contend with, a reader who was not as eager as she was to see their intimacies in print, and who could coldly withhold her favors if she chose. . . . She might have to disguise it, but she was damn well going to write about it. (101)

Edmund Wilson offers a similar view:

[T]he vagueness that began to blur [Stein's] writing from about 1910 on and the masking by unexplained metaphors that later made it seem opaque . . . were partly due to a need imposed by the problem of writing about relationships between women of a kind that the standards of the era would not have allowed her to describe more explicitly. (104)

There is no question that Stein knew that her relationship with Alice needed to be carefully managed in public. Only some of their own trusted friends knew of their relationship, friends who knew not to speak of it openly (Stimpson 128). It was by and large not until after Stein's death that the rest of the world began in print to refer to the lesbian relationship between Stein and Toklas, largely because the two women took care to maintain an intense degree of privacy. That this privacy is reflected in Stein's work, even in Tender Buttons, I do not question. Nor do I question the argument that there is a lesbian celebration in the text, a celebration Stein did not wish to call

attention to overtly. But, the argument that Stein wrote the text specifically to celebrate something that she could not openly write about (because of cultural “standards” and/or because of a threat by Toklas), I find highly problematic. Such claims tend, for instance, to make assumptions about Stein’s sexuality and her relationship with Toklas that are unsubstantiated by what we know about the author. Specifically, the notion that Stein reined in her desires to write more explicit material in response to a threat by Toklas to “withhold” anything rings more of uninformed assumptions about lesbian relationships than it does knowledge of this particular relationship. More importantly, however, such overzealous attention to the meaning behind the text ignores the profound importance of what is happening at the level of the language itself. As I will argue near the end of this chapter, once we take into account Stein’s confrontation with language in the text, we can offer a different, more plausible explanation for the relationship between the language and its subtext.

The argument that Tender Buttons was written as a complex set of intentionally inaccessible metaphors designed ultimately both to celebrate and hide Stein’s sexuality, as mentioned above, reflects the more general category of those readers who would attempt simply to gloss or decode the text. Such an approach, if it goes no further, directly contradicts Stein’s purposeful opening up of language into a multitude of new layers of potential association and significance. Once we examine Stein’s argument

about language in Tender Buttons, we can argue not that the text celebrates and hides any given element of Stein's consciousness but, rather, that it both creates and discovers it. As Stein finds herself determined by language, discovers her own performance of language's categories, she also challenges those rigid classifications, opening up new possibilities for the positioning of her own consciousness within linguistic determination.

A much more fruitful and ultimately important approach to Tender Buttons can be found in critical studies which have highlighted the similarities between the style of Stein's text and the cubism developed in painting by Picasso and others (most notably Braque). John Malcolm Brinnin's early biography of Stein calls attention to her affinities with cubism, as do several more recent works. Most notable among these are Randa Dubnick's The Structure of Obscurity: Gertrude Stein, Language, and Cubism, Marjorie Perloff's "Poetry as Word System," and Jayne L. Walker's The Making of a Modernist: Gertrude Stein from *Three Lives* to *Tender Buttons*. Such studies provide an important contribution to our overall understanding of the text, and a brief examination of their primary concerns will prove useful here.

Stein is linked to Picasso and other modern painters for a number of reasons. She was one of the first significant collectors of modern painting and described many of the painters as friends and influences. She and Picasso were close friends and considered each other intellectual colleagues. Stein

also spoke and wrote of the closeness of her work with that of Picasso. In Picasso, for instance, Stein writes, "I was alone at this time in understanding him, perhaps because I was expressing the same thing in literature" (16). Most important, however, is the remarkable closeness of the two artists' aesthetic development, specifically at the time of the writing of Tender Buttons. As Picasso and others moved from one form of cubism to another—from analytic cubism to its very different relative, synthetic cubism—Stein was making parallel shifts in her own aesthetic, shifts that are manifested in Tender Buttons (Dubnick 32). Stein and Toklas spent the summer of 1912 in Spain, and though scholars disagree on the precise time-frame for the writing of Tender Buttons, we do know that much of it was written during this period. Significantly, it was shortly before Stein left Paris for this trip that Picasso completed his first cubist collage, Still-life with Chair Caning, marking his shift to synthetic cubism (Walker 130).

The artists we associate with synthetic cubism were not concerned with representing the world of reality in their paintings, though they used elements of that reality in dramatic fashion. Painters included concrete signs by using literal pieces of "real" objects (newspaper clippings, wallpaper, cigarette wrappings, tickets, sand, and so on. . .) in their paintings (Walker 130). Once included in a painting, these "signs" take up a somewhat paradoxical position. As Walker explains, the signs are "absolutely 'real,' literal pieces of the objects they signify, but they are starkly juxtaposed to one

another in an order that bears no resemblance to that of the everyday world from which they came. In Tender Buttons, Stein too uses particularly “concrete” signs. Though she does not include “real” bits of reality on the pages of her text, she does use more concrete language, words and phrases with which we associate specific objects and actions, than she does in other stages of her writing career. Dubnick argues that Tender Buttons makes more use of “concrete nouns, sensual adjectives, and action verbs than does her earlier style” (31). At the same time, however, Stein juxtaposes those concrete signs in ways that remove them from their context in the “real” world. She takes them out of their common order and places them into new, startling relationships and associations. By doing this, Stein presents otherwise concrete signs relatively and jarringly free of their referents.

Synthetic cubism involves, then, a particular relationship between the original object or objects referred to by the paintings and the signs in the painting that signify those objects (whether they be actual pieces of them or not). Some critics have suggested that cubist paintings mark an attempt by painters to “create works not contingent on the reality of the external world” (Hoffman 57). According to such scholars, cubist painting is not to be interpreted as being descriptive, as offering a particular perspective on a particular element of the world of actuality, but is instead to be seen as a more autonomous entity, to be experienced not for what it refers to outside of itself but as what it is, a composition of form, mass, color, texture, and line. While

this element is crucial to our understanding of the art form, it is important to recognize that the relationship between sign and signifier in synthetic cubism is not entirely severed. There certainly remains in these paintings a referential quality to the signs which are often the objects themselves that have been included on the canvas. The distinction is important for this study for, as Dubnick explains, "that the cubists' work was never nonrepresentational is not always clearly understood by those who compare Stein's writing with the work of those painters" (30). Nevertheless, cubist painters, as Dubnick argues persuasively, called for the elements of their art to be seen and valued as important entities in their own right, not simply as referents to a greater, more important world of reality. The cubists abandoned attempts to create "a mirror of reality," opting instead to juxtapose multiple signs and objects in order to create an "authentic new reality" (Dubnick 32-3). The painting, then, is related to but not a description of the "real" world which its objects and signs invoke.

The style of Stein's Tender Buttons works in a parallel fashion.

Dubnick explains:

Like the cubists, Stein abandons conventional description of the object, though she is still concerned with the object as her 'model'. But she inverts the traditional descriptive relationship of word to object. Rather than the word evoking the mental image of the object, the object evokes words (e.g., associations) that the writer arbitrarily

assembles into an independent linguistic object related to, but not descriptive of, the model or referent. (33)

The individual headings of the poems in Tender Buttons are signs—they correspond to objects and actions outside of language—but they also have qualities that are not accounted for by their referents. They look a certain way on the page, for instance, and they have a particular sound when they are spoken. Stein begins a section with a noun—say, for example, the noun “SAUCE”—and follows that noun not by describing the physical reality of sauce but by letting the word, as both referent and entity in its own right, lead her through a series of associations:

SAUCE

What is bay labored what is all be section, what is no much.

Sauce sam in. (Selected Writings 495)

Words here are associated with one another on a number of levels. There is some indication that the idea of an actual, edible sauce is involved, since the final words quickly become “sauce salmon” when spoken. There is clearly, likewise, some word play at the level of the visual and aural qualities of the words. Stein also engages in word play by placing particular words next to others with which they are not often associated. “Bay” and “labored,” by their new association here, can quickly become “belabored.” Stein does not, however, maintain any significant degree of consistency with such associations. The words “all be section,” for example, function in a different

way entirely. Here the “be” might be blended easily with its predecessor “all,” offering the more coherent phrase “I’ll be.” The “be” does not function in a parallel manner to the “bay” earlier in the passage, however, defying attempts to make it blend into its successor “section.” The word “section” itself can be unpacked in a variety of ways (i.e., “sex shown”). Stein’s word play is constantly shifting, refusing to be pinned down to a single interpretive approach. By placing common words in jarringly new contexts, Stein forces our attention to the word in an entirely new way.

It is important to note that the multiple associations that we find when reading the text of Tender Buttons operate both within and beyond artistic control. By placing uncontextualized and conventionally unassociated words into jarringly new contexts, Stein creates new levels of possible interpretation over which she cannot maintain complete control. The pun created from “sauce sam in” seems easily credited to Stein, but the text goes beyond such simple punning. Stein’s use of the parts of language in new and unconventional contexts creates so many associative possibilities that it becomes impossible, ultimately, to distinguish between the associations intended by Stein and those which naturally arise, noticed by the artist or not, by the new context itself. This degree of artistic control is modeled elsewhere in the text, as I will discuss later in this chapter. Artistic control, as modeled in Tender Buttons, is thus never absolute, given its position within linguistic

determination. It is, rather, a kind of ongoing negotiation with the determining powers of language.

Stein's affinities to cubism, particularly to synthetic cubism, are important to recognize, for they help to underscore some of the issues that are at stake with her language. They also help us to develop a new strategy for reading the text, one that requires less attention to the referential meanings of words and more attention to Stein's new ordering of those words.

Comparisons between Tender Buttons and cubism are most helpful, however, to the extent that they foreground the degree of autonomy placed on the signs themselves. In a cubist painting, a sign is not only important because of its referential quality, but it is also important because it has particular qualities of its own. In Tender Buttons Stein will show that language itself is much more than merely the mediating vehicle her readers might have assumed it to be. Language, while referring all the time to its referents, must be reckoned with in its own right. By making art from the parts of language rather than using language to make art from the world of reality, Stein draws our attention to the way language functions as a system of signs. By placing otherwise dissimilar words together in new contexts, she also suggests radically new layers of potential linguistic association. In so doing, Stein challenges language's rigid, deterministic authority and suggests that artistic will can itself impose some degree of challenge to language's most constrictive form.

Attempts to create glosses of meaning for any singular line in Tender Buttons are likely to end in contradiction and incompleteness. The text makes a point of permitting many possible meanings without privileging one in particular. We are reading less for Stein's description of the objects around her than for her intellectual and artistic consciousness in relation to a language that necessarily determines both ourselves and the world around us. Given the problems inherent in attempts to gloss Tender Buttons, some critics have argued that close readings of the text necessarily defy its most significant purpose. Marianne DeKoven, for instance, warns against attempting to pin the text down to any singular reading. She argues that if we "struggle to interpret or unify either the whole of Tender Buttons or any part of it . . . we violate the spirit of the work" (76). I am not convinced, however, that acknowledging the "spirit of the text," its purposeful refusal to reflect the monolithic perspective of conventional language use, necessarily forbids us from following through the text some of its most significant themes. There are dominant themes throughout the text that are highlighted by close reading, and the theme of language and its powers is among the most prominent of them. No reading which does not take into account the issue of language can hope to offer significant illumination of this remarkable text, and a reading which highlights Stein's language concerns on a number of

levels remains crucial, therefore, to any discussion of the “spirit” of Tender Buttons.

Stein’s confrontation with language in Tender Buttons shows her struggling with language’s ability both to determine and be determined by individual consciousness. In the text, Stein exposes the ordering principles inherent in linguistic constructs, showing that language does more to order the world and our perception of it than does the world order our use of language. Stein exposes language’s ability to create a particular reality according to its system of hierarchies and dualities and its reliance on categorization. At a number of important points in Tender Buttons, Stein makes use of theatrical metaphors, and it is the theater, ultimately, that allows her to develop a model of artistic expression that can negotiate some degree of agency even within the determining forces of language. In the first three pieces of the text, Stein invokes many different metaphors through which to describe language and its determining power. As the metaphors build on one another, they add to our understanding of Stein’s argument about language. Ultimately, in this section, language takes on a theatrical metaphor in the form of a costume. At this point in the text, we can see Stein’s attempt not only to expose the inherent powers of language, but also to hold language accountable to her own artistic will, imposing new orders upon the world and making a strong claim for the autonomy of the self. Many Stein scholars have noted the importance of language in Tender

Buttons, and their work will prove important to my own reading of the text. Allegra Stewart, Michael Kaufmann, Lisa Ruddick, and Jayne Walker, among others, have argued, as will I, that Stein's agenda with language in the text is at the heart of the most significant issues at stake in Tender Buttons. Beyond that, I will also argue that Stein's confrontation with language in the text reflects the larger modern struggle with particularly performance-bound notions of expression.

The first three pieces of Tender Buttons, "Carafe," "Glazed Glitter," and "A Substance in a Cushion," focus directly on Stein's vision of the problematic nature of language and illustrate her attempts to challenge the monolithic perspective of its most binding restrictions. They also set up several of the dominant images which run throughout the text and therefore present a useful focal point for my own study. In these pieces, language is portrayed in a number of ways. Early on it is presented as a kind of container, a cover, and a lacquer finish. Each of these metaphors adds to Stein's argument about language's deceptive qualities and language's ability to determine consciousness and perception. Finally, however, in the third piece from "Objects," Stein adopts the theatrical metaphor of language as a costume, making clear the performative implications of her sense of linguistic determination. Significantly, it is this metaphor that allows Stein a way to envision a negotiation between performativity and artistic autonomy. It is the theatrical metaphor, in other words, that offers Stein a way out of the

enigma posed by William James and others concerning the determined self. Given its importance to the rest of the work and Stein's argument about language, the first of the three pieces is worth quoting in full here:

A CARAFE, THAT IS A BLIND GLASS

A kind in glass and a cousin, a spectacle and nothing strange
a single hurt color and an arrangement in a system to pointing.
All this and not ordinary, not unordered in not resembling.

The difference is spreading. (Selected Writings 461)

Several critics have argued that one of the most important themes of "Objects" is that of vision. Vision, perspective, and the act of perceiving through language all remain important in this piece. For instance, the words "blind," "glass," and "spectacle" indicate that the act of seeing is at issue, and the notion that the glass is blind, if we read the word "glass" to mean an eye-glass, a reading supported by the appearance of "spectacle," would indicate that the issue of not seeing is also at stake. Kaufmann points out that the Old English root of "blind" is "blendan," mixed or confused, indicating perhaps that Stein's sense of vision here is not one that is entirely blinded in a contemporary sense of the word but is, rather, confused.

A carafe is a kind of container, and the word "glass" in the title of the piece, which I read above in terms of vision, can also be read to support the idea of a glass container of some kind. This carafe, as many have argued before me, can be read as Stein's first metaphor for language in Tender

Buttons. As "an arrangement in a system to pointing," it arranges systematically, "pointing" or directing our perception in particular, prearranged, ways. It is an enclosure, and if we keep in mind Stein's analogy with language, it becomes an enclosure of formulated thought. Language determines our experience with reality and orders it according to its system of enclosed categories. There is, in fact, a focus in the piece (and throughout Tender Buttons) on categories, as is indicated in the words "kind" and "cousin." Further, the "carafes" of language are difficult to see in and of themselves, as they are likely to be seen as one with their surroundings. As a glass container, the carafe's glass sides, its edges, blend in with its surroundings, making it difficult to discern exactly where it begins and ends. The "single hurt color" of the carafe, as Kaufmann argues, can be read as "the blended color of the glass, its contents, and its surroundings" (451). Language, though an entity in its own right, is difficult to see as such. The word "spectacle" is also somewhat complex here. As Walker explains, the carafe, language, is "presented as a 'spectacle' in the double sense of the word, both an exciting sight in itself and a focusing device, to create a new way of seeing" (135). Importantly, the container of language here is all-encompassing. Kaufmann offers an explanation of the line "a spectacle and nothing strange" by agreeing with those who see "spectacle" as eye-glass and by offering the Latin root of the word "strange,"—extraneum, which means "on the outside." Language is "nothing strange," then, in that it consumes all

difference in rigid arrangement (Kaufmann 453). If nothing is on the outside, then Stein seems to suggest here that there is no way of positing oneself outside of linguistic construction, a notion she will expand on elsewhere in the text as well. Words are blind glasses in two senses. They are focusing devices, offering us a particular if confused way of seeing. Language places elements of reality into kinds and cousins, containers that, ironically, blend all things together in rigid categorization. We might also consider, however, that the term "spectacle" can be read in a particularly theatrical light. Language presents us with a particular reality, but that reality is merely a theatrical illusion of some sort. As we participate in the spectacle, we are not expressing essential selves, definable free from language, but are merely actors, participants in a theatrical illusion.

Language, by its very nature, presents a reality that is divided up into categories that are based on resemblances and species, or "kinds." Such a rigid system is severely limiting, as it closes off a multitude of other potential relationships and determines a world of reality that is, according to Stein, unnecessarily monolithic. In the first few lines of "Carafe," we can see Stein's focus on several of language's "categories." "Kind," for example, can mean "type" or "species," but it can also mean "gentle." The two meanings are diverse but are nonetheless related by the idea of kinship. Ruddick points to this element of Tender Buttons, claiming that "the very quality of language as

familial—as a matter of likeness or loose kinship—causes uncentering” (197).

She explains further:

To categorize and objectify things, and to devalue the ‘lower’ term in each dualism (woman, nature, matter), amounts to a sacrifice or quasi killing of the dignity, richness, and uniqueness of the thing. (198)

Throughout the entire text of Tender Buttons, the words “arrangement,” “order,” and “system” recur regularly, emphasizing language’s rigid structure and its ability to create an unnecessarily rigid experience of the world.

Language is neither “ordinary” nor “unordered”; it does not, because it is a structured system of arrangement, “resemble” the world of reality but, rather, determines it. It is the spectacle that we assume to be a larger reality, but which is instead a production of theatrical illusion. The last line of the piece, “The difference is spreading,” can be read as an argument that the difference between the polymorphous potential of language and its contemporary state of rigidity is growing. Kaufmann suggests that we read the word “spreading” bearing in mind its etymological roots. He finds in Skeat’s dictionary (the etymological dictionary that several critics have argued was used heavily by Stein) that “spread” is allied to “sprout,” and argues that we read this spreading not as a “hopeful bloom . . . but a cancerous growth. The [spreading] extends, subsuming all in monolithic multiplicity” (452). The implication here is that language need not be as tightly constrictive as Stein finds it to be.

It is clear that Stein's words in this piece, and throughout Tender Buttons, are not disassociated from their referents. The idea of a physical carafe is important to our understanding of the piece. But, it is also clear that we cannot read the text only in these terms, for the interpretive possibilities of such a reading are extremely limiting and would miss Stein's larger purpose. As it is in the operas and plays, Stein's voice is foregrounded, her negotiation with language emphasized above all. We must also learn to read Stein's performance here as she confronts a language that necessarily situates and determines. Stein suggests in "Carafe" that words do much more than refer to or describe that world. Tender Buttons, as Kaufmann argues, "seeks to make language visible, so that its role in creating reality can be seen" (448).

The second piece in the "Objects" section, "Glazed Glitter," focuses on the "cover" of language that claims to have no inherent system of arrangement. The first line, "Nickel, what is nickel, it is originally rid of a cover" (Selected Writings 461), suggests that "original" nickel, nickel in itself, is free of concealment. But nickel is often used as a material for plating, for covering surfaces so as to make them seem as though they were as seamless and uncovered as nickel itself. Here language takes on a new although not unrelated metaphor from those it held in the first piece of the text. Language is not a blind glass here (although as Kaufmann points out, glaze comes from the same root as glass), but is nickel plate, a covering which we assume to be that which is beneath it but which is instead an entity in itself, constructing

reality instead of merely reflecting it. Here the nickel plate is "charming very charming," the glittering surface "handsome and convincing" (461). The final paragraph of the piece further illustrates the nature of this nickel plate. What seem to be protection and healing, "mercy and . . . medicine," have "no gratitude" in them. Kaufmann again refers to etymology with the word "gratitude," tracing it back to its Latin root "gratia," which is "kindness." What would seem to protect and cure is therefore actually without kindness, is restriction, limitation (Kaufmann 454). The spectacle of language is convincingly illusory, but it is also restricting. The reference to "Japanese" in this paragraph further underscores the glittering and deceptive nature of this nickel plated covering. "Japanese," as several critics have suggested, might refer here to japanning, a kind of lacquer. Stein uses this term again in a similar way later in Tender Buttons. In a piece from "Objects" entitled "Careless Water," Stein focuses on language as a product of culture, and she claims that "culture is Japanese" (470). In both cases, "Japanese" refers to an element that controls what we are able to see without calling attention to itself as an entity in its own right. This metaphor reflects the larger modern concern with a split between an external reality of some kind and our conceptions of it. In Tender Buttons, our conceptions, bound by language, create a laquer finish over reality, a finish that is difficult to see as such but which nevertheless determines our perception. We learn further in this piece that this covering "was chosen yesterday" and that it "showed spitting

and perhaps washing and polishing" (461). The smooth quality of the cover's surface creates a clarity that lulls us into thinking it a natural reflection of some pre- or extra-linguistic state of reality, but that clarity is also "the sinister clarity of habit. Habit washes away any traces of its beginning" (Kaufmann 455). Polishing, too, clears away evidence of age, ridding the surface of any indication of difference and making it ever more shining and full of "convincing" glitter. The spectacle of language, in other words, creates a kind of lacquer for our perception, convincingly binding all in a rigid system of categorization while not calling attention to itself as having any such powers at all. The covering "certainly showed no obligation," does not appear to have its own agenda, and can therefore easily deceive. Stein's text calls into question this assumption that language reflects a world that exists without it, arguing that, in fact, language creates the world of reality by controlling the act of perception.

An awareness of Stein's etymological knowledge is important for our reading of Tender Buttons, as several critics have argued and as my reading above shows. Kaufmann, Gass, and Stewart have all suggested, on various levels, that etymology reflects the most important key to the text, and they have provided a particular dictionary, Skeat's Etymological Dictionary of the English Language (1893), as the best reference guide. These critics argue that Stein blames the restrictive qualities of language on its centuries of

encasement in print and suggest that in Tender Buttons she is trying to get back to older, more “lively” uses for words. Stewart, for instance, argues that

Stein made a deliberate effort to revive the root meanings of English words—to recover the pictorial element in them and so attach them again to sensory perception. For primitive root meanings are essentially pictorial, though changes in the forms of the words that carry them have almost completely obscured this fact in English.

(78)

There is no question that Stein’s knowledge of and interest in etymology plays an important role in the text of Tender Buttons. Her interest in the classifying and categorizing nature of language explains at least in part her attention to the families of words in language, families that remain connected by their roots. I am not convinced, however, that Stein thought it possible to create an entire language that could access or reflect some pre-linguistic state simply by going back to words that were originally “pictorial.” In a 1946 interview, Stein discusses her awareness, at the time Tender Buttons was written, of the difficulty in putting *any* two words together without suffering the categorizing effects of language:

I took individual words and thought about them until I got their weight and volume complete and put them next to another word, and at this same time I found out very soon that there is no such thing as putting them together without sense. It is impossible to put them

together without sense. I made innumerable efforts to make words write without sense and found it impossible. Any human being putting down words had to make sense out of them. (Stein, "Transatlantic Interview" 18).

As mentioned above, word-families and even the simple act of putting down words, one beside the other, are important to our reading of the text because they illustrate Stein's awareness that perception will always be bound linguistically. Absolute materialization of language is ultimately impossible. Syntax is important, for it forces us to see words accordingly, and to perceive elements of reality only in particular kinds of relation to one another. In "Roastbeef," the opening piece of the "Food" section, Stein writes, "A sentence of a vagueness that is violence is authority and a mission and stumbling and also certainly also a prison" (481). Here, and elsewhere in the text, Stein suggests that the syntax of language creates a prison, a prison of formulated thought. Language necessarily defines things relationally, necessarily classifies, and therefore necessarily determines, and it was this fact that Stein set out to foreground and emphasize in Tender Buttons.

To return to "Glazed Glitter," it is helpful to emphasize those elements of the piece that speak of the spectacle of language as a deceiving cover. There are also hints in the piece, however, that are indicative of another level of Stein's agenda. In the middle of the second paragraph appear the lines "there is that hope and that interpretation and sometime, surely any is unwelcome,

sometime there is breath" (461). In these lines we can see Stein suggesting that though the cover is deceiving, blinding, convincing, and charming, there is nevertheless hope. "Interpretation" is important to this hope, an indication that we must, before we can have "breath," understand and be able to read this cover. Such breath will be "surely . . . unwelcome," for we will necessarily be emphasizing difference in a system designed to deny it, but hope nevertheless remains. In the third paragraph, in a line I discussed above, Stein writes, "There can be breakages in Japanese." If we take "Japanese" to refer to the lacquered cover of language itself, then this line too speaks of the possibility of "breaking" that cover, perhaps, again, in order to breathe. The final sentence of the piece is one that few critics make note of, but it also seems to suggest that Stein is discussing her own agenda with language: "perhaps if borrowing is not natural there is some use in giving" (461). Earlier lines in the piece suggest that the cover of language deceives us into thinking it "natural," though it is actually something very different. To "borrow" can mean to secure on trust, or, if we look again to Skeat's dictionary, it can mean something closer to its Old English root, *beorgan*, to protect or secure. To give, of course, is to bestow or impart. This last line may suggest, then, that there is something that can be done to the cover, some form of bestowing something upon it that would be "unwelcome" but might nevertheless create "breakages" in its lacquered finish. We might thus read the last line of "Glazed Glitter" to mean that if taking from (on faith) and

protecting conventionally rigid forms of language is not natural (because the system itself is not natural, as it would deceive us into thinking), then perhaps there is some possibility of breaking its finish and allowing for some degree of difference that it would otherwise deny. It is here that I see Stein most self-consciously discussing her own agenda in Tender Buttons. Stein wants not only to emphasize the deceptive nature and tightly bound conventionality of language, but she wants also to test the degree to which she can bring forth its contradictions and thereby create within new forms a place for her own voice. It is the third piece in the text, "A Substance in a Cushion," wherein Stein adopts the metaphor which will enable her to create such a model. By presenting consciousness in particularly theatrical terms, Stein argues that consciousness can challenge the rigidly categorizational system of conventional language and thereby exercise some degree of determination over the very structure that determines it. Artistic will, though still a performance, is offered a significant degree of agency.

The third piece in "Objects," "A Substance in a Cushion," adds to our understanding of Stein's perspective on language and develops the metaphor that enables Stein's most radical linguistic maneuver. The theme of a cover is carried forward in this piece in the form of a dress or a costume: "supposing that there is . . . a costume" (Selected Writings 462). The costume, like the glazed glitter or the blind glass of the earlier pieces, represents some kind of change, covering and/or enclosing, even creating, what we would otherwise

assume it to be revealing: "The change of color is likely and a difference a very little difference is prepared" (Selected Writings 462). As Marjorie Perloff points out, there is a tension throughout the piece between change and no-change, difference and sameness (Perloff 41), or, as Stein writes, "Supposing you do not like to change . . . supposing that there is regularity" (Selected Writings 462). The "costume" (and its cousin, "custom") of language changes what it "dresses," creates a difference in what we are able to see, and, as it covers consciousness itself, it determines consciousness as well. Again, selfhood is wrought in performative terms. References to "clothing" and "covers" which control that which is seen and references to "customs" and the "customary" appear throughout the text from this point on, strengthening Stein's connection between "costumes" and that which is customary. Near the end of the "Objects" section of the text, Stein writes, "put a match to the seam," as she argues for the importance of acknowledging these covers and clothes as merely that which is customary. Another interesting element of this piece, as Perloff points out, is that Stein spends much of it focusing on what certain things are *not*: "Sugar is not a vegetable," "A red thing is not a round thing," "the sash is not like anything mustard" (462-3). Nothing is what it seems to be underneath the coloring cover of language. Stein thus emphasizes the arbitrary nature of conventional language's rigid categories. The custom of language creates costumes as it

determines consciousness, which can therefore be seen as a performance of language.

As mentioned before, there is also evidence in this piece of the way in which Stein negotiated agency within such a determining relationship. This evidence comes in the form of a metaphor for language—that of a costume—that can help to illuminate her confrontation with language throughout the whole of Tender Buttons. In this piece, language becomes the very clothing in which Stein finds herself enrobed. Her hope is to overcome the custom-bound, habitual use of language's "costume" by wearing it consciously, by calling attention to it, and perhaps thereby wearing it out. She does not posit the possibility of a subjective position outside of linguistic determination. The trope of the theatrical, however, enables her to emphasize the artificiality of convention and to thereby challenge conventional language's most rigid restrictions. This suggests that by wearing the necessarily determining forces of language consciously, by performing linguistic determination, she might then negotiate some degree of autonomy and determining control of her own: "The best thing to do is to take it away and wear it and then be reckless reckless and resolved on returning gratitude" (462). Again, I think it important to recognize in the word "gratitude" its root connections both to "kindness" and to "freedom." This line indicates another ray of hope from Stein in that by staging the customs/costumes of language, one might hope to return some degree of kindness and freedom to those customs. Breaking

open the hardened and comfortable shell of conventional language would open the doors to the possibility for difference, for then things that were of little value according to language's rigid program of classification might be set free to be valued differently: "very likely the little things could be dearer" (462). Herein lies the importance of Stein's sense of artistic expression. To do this with and to language, to break open its hardened shell, Stein must submit to the difficult task of a "violent kind of delightfulness" and resist the calm and softness of the customary: "A little calm is so ordinary and in any case there is sweetness and some of that" (462). She must resist the convincing illusion of the costume and wear it self-consciously. That "the disgrace is not in carelessness" indicates that the problem does not stem from a mistake, from carelessness, but from the rigidity of the classifications of language that Stein wants so much to avoid (Kaufmann 457). Later, for example, in a piece entitled "Eggs" from the "Food" section of the text, Stein indicates that her hope is to "cut up alone the paved way which is harm," showing again her desire to break open the set way, the harmful way that language has laid for us (Selected Writings 488). This theme of breaking open language's rigid system of classification and deception therefore runs throughout the text of Tender Buttons. By taking familiar words out of their conventional contexts and placing them into jarringly new ones, Stein highlights language's power to point, to classify, and to order our perception of the world. Because our use of language is habitual, conventional, and

because we are not aware of language's powers, we therefore assume that our customary use of language reflects a world that is there pre-linguistically rather than recognizing both the determining powers of language and the dangers inherent in a reliance on a single, tightly bound system of classifications. In Tender Buttons Stein stages and performs language, wearing it as a costume in order to emphasize its determining characteristics and at the same time challenging its most rigid classifications.

This piece, "A Substance in a Cushion," also focuses on the habit-forming nature of language. The line "Sugar is not a vegetable" can be read as an illustration of language's inflexibility, its rigid perspective on the world. Sugar comes from living sugar cane, but as a finished, refined product, it is no longer able to grow, no longer "vegetable." Sugar is sweet, but there is a danger in that sweetness as well. Since the "spectacle" is so "convincing," our faithful reliance upon conventional language, which has become habitual because we do not notice or question language's own powers, leaves language in a particularly deadened state, unable itself to grow. Becoming "hardened" in our habits with language "leaves behind" a kind of callousness (Selected Writings 462). As Kaufmann explains, "such callousness, the non-sense (lack of sense) of 'common' sense—the cleaning habit in language covers difference and hides meaning" (455). That there is little "sense" in the system does not hamper our habitual, "common" use of it. Such callousness can create meanings far removed from other possible linguistic manifestations of the

elements of reality they would describe, making even dirt clean: "dirt is clean when there is a volume" (462). Our habits with language thus constitute a paradox. They further "harden" the shell or cover that is language, and yet they also create a comfortable, "soft," cushion that is "clean" and "regular in its appearance" (462). A short piece later in the "Objects" section refers again to language, suggesting again its inherent tendency to classify and our tendency to follow such classifications habitually. In "A TIME TO EAT," we find that language is "a pleasant simple habitual and tyrannical and authorised and educated and resumed and articulate separation" (472). Our habits with language are both hard to break and easy to fall into.

The French scholar Julia Kristeva provides a helpful model for understanding the linguistic positioning of Stein's voice in Tender Buttons. Kristeva's notion of the "writing subject" replaces traditional conceptions of authorship which rely heavily on the *author-ity* of the writer over the meanings present in his or her text. The writing subject, Kristeva argues, maintains a certain degree of autonomy, or intentionality, but, unlike the author, she also consists of certain non-conscious attributes, those connected with dominant ideology, for example, that likewise contribute to the writing subject's text and over which the writing subject has no control. The writer in this case is both acting upon and being acted upon by a complex web of historical forces. There is no position outside of linguistic form from which to challenge dominant ideology, for we are always situated, determined by

such external forces. As much as we must necessarily perform such dominant relationships, however, our ability to acknowledge this significant degree of determination allows us to challenge from within the very constrictions by which we are determined and which we do necessarily perform.

Drawing parallels between theatrical models and her own agenda for artistic expression enables Stein's subject to maintain the kind of agency found in the Kristevan model. The classical theatrical model posits a script which is then performed. As fixed as the script may be, each performance is inevitably different. Any performance might open new doors of interpretation while closing others. The script is realized in different ways and cannot ultimately control its own interpretation. This model parallels Stein's proposed relationship to language, the "script" by which we all are bound. She argues that artistic expression can open up our interpretive possibilities and suggest new relationships that might better suit the subject who finds herself performing the script. On the other hand, the model of consciousness presented by Stein, though certainly performative in many ways, is not at all levels clear. The metaphor of an "actor," after all, can only be carried so far. Since Stein does not suggest that the self exists apart from its determining relationships, especially that with language, there is no actor, then, apart from her role. There are only the roles determined by complex webs of relationships which themselves make selfhood possible. What

remains unclear in Stein's model is the precise origin of the subjective agency that is clearly a part of her larger agenda with artistic expression. Agency, here, is found in the artist's ability to self-consciously perform her determining relationships, thereby calling attention to and challenging the artificial ordering principles from which she can never entirely escape. Whether Stein would argue that agency is therefore an element of consciousness that is also produced or determined by external relationships, or whether she would suggest instead that agency is somehow more "essential" to the subject is not entirely clear. Nevertheless, Stein's model of artistic expression relies on the theatrical trope for the agency that it does claim, and, perhaps more importantly, Stein was not alone among her contemporaries in turning toward theatrical spaces in order to investigate and struggle with these modern questions about consciousness and artistic expression.

Clearly those approaches to Tender Buttons which would treat it only as a complex system of metaphors, a deeply encoded text designed to celebrate and hide a lesbian subtext, are not sufficient. The model of consciousness involved in the text suggests, instead, that writing might be seen as a mode of both discovery and creation. The text negotiates a position between two poles: the self is neither absolutely constructed by nor absolutely in control of its linguistic determination but is, rather, a performance of the interplay between such poles. The lesbian subtext of Tender Buttons should be considered

according to the model of the subject that the text upholds. The expression of sexuality in the text is therefore partly an acknowledged performance of Stein's own determination and partly an act of conscious agency. Any element of the writer's consciousness, including notions of sexuality, would therefore be both created and discovered through the conscious wearing of language's structures.

One of Stein's most significant achievements in Tender Buttons is, thus, the challenge she poses to the monolithic and rigid mode of perception that language provides. As she suggests in these first three pieces and, indeed, indicates throughout the entire work, her writing in Tender Buttons is an attempt, even from within a linguistic performance, to open up language, to break its convincing and handsome cover so that her readers will become aware of its deceptive nature and so that she can create in language a space for her own voice. In this model the artist moves between different forms of language which are more and less constrictive in order to actively challenge habitual linguistic structures. In the "Food" section of the text Stein writes, "What is the custom, the custom is in the centre" (483), making clear the connection between the customary use of language and its "centre," the singular perspective through which all else is defined. As the custom of language becomes a literal costume, Stein develops her notion of wearing custom self-consciously, thereby challenging its most rigid forms. It is this "centre" of custom from which Stein is seeking liberation. When she writes

at the beginning of "Rooms," the final section of Tender Buttons, "Act so that there is no use in a centre," she is arguing against the perspective of language that would rigidly classify. She is also building on her use of the theatrical metaphor. "Act" here is again suggestive of a performative view of consciousness. Stein's effort is not to escape the determining relationships that lead her to see consciousness in terms of performance. Consciousness from this perspective will always entail an "act." The line also suggests, however, that the subject is not without agency. That one might "act as if there is no use in a centre" implies that one can challenge the most rigidly conventional, the most centered formulations of one's own determining relationships. Stein's text refuses anything consistent, static, common—anything but multiple perspectives. This is one of the ways in which the text shows its influence by the cubist painters, whose works also "lack a privileged center; they provide no vantage point that allows the spectator's eye to resolve their iconography into familiar images" (Walker 141). Stein's desire to challenge language's rigidity, to open up our use of language to a new degree of multiplicity parallels her fascination with what she considered the new twentieth-century awareness of space triggered, in her mind, by the move from the automobile to the airplane. The language of Tender Buttons provides in most places many possible "meanings" for any given word or phrase while Stein simultaneously refuses to pretend that a single fixed perspective on the world of carafes, cushions, and even on the self can

maintain any significant degree of validity. By making art from the parts of language themselves, Stein also mirrors the agenda of the synthetic cubists. She calls attention to language's signs as having everything to do with perception itself. By consciously wearing these signs as a costume, Stein challenges their rigid fixity within the system of conventional language, opening up new realms of linguistic possibility by emphasizing a multitude of new associations for them. It is important to acknowledge the radical implications this model suggests for artistic expression. By loosening our reliance on conventional language's most constrictive categories, Stein creates not a language that can reflect alternative relationships and associations but one that actually posits those alternatives. The first piece of Tender Buttons involves the closed form of a carafe that restricts and binds all within rigid categorization. The final image in the work, however, is that of a fountain, suggesting a freedom from restriction that has been made possible by Stein's careful negotiation of her own performance within the theater of language.

The stage was important to Stein's developing aesthetic for many reasons. She used the theater in order to play out various notions of selfhood in a self-consciously controlled setting. There she could stop narrative and better examine the many remaining external relationships that determine the self. The importance of the stage for Stein is not limited, however, to her works written expressly for the theater, mostly significantly because notions of performance remain so crucial to her developing notion of consciousness

and artistic expression. As I commented in Chapter II, even these plays are deeply caught up in questions of language. In Tender Buttons, Stein concentrates her energies on perhaps the most immediate relationship that the self must have, for it is through language that we construct ourselves and others in the world of experience. Stein successfully exposes language's power to determine and, by adopting a small number of important theatrical metaphors, argues powerfully that artistic expression can nevertheless negotiate its own performance of its determining relationships by imposing at the same time its own agency. This particular staging of modern consciousness, then, is an attempt to resist the most conventional grounding of language, to open language up to a less rigid state in which it might be more responsive to multiple meanings, associations, relationships, and to that which has been historically devalued over and over again at any given moment of perception, of any moment of coming to self.

Chapter IV. Stevens' Verse Plays: The Drama of the Mind

*I know myself to be incalculable, since the causes of
what I am are incalculable.*

—Wallace Stevens, Carlos Among the Candles

*To look at ordinary things intensely, is not to see things as
they are.*

—Wallace Stevens, Bowl, Cat and Broomstick

Not often considered alongside the works of Gertrude Stein, the writings of Wallace Stevens are equally steeped in notions related to performance and the play. At first glance, these two modernists seem to have inhabited entirely different literary worlds. The differences between the two writers are great, and I do not wish to suggest otherwise. However, the central philosophical difficulties with which Stevens grappled throughout his literary career share affinities, on an important level, with the concerns central to Stein's canon. Both writers present related responses to the modern discourse surrounding both consciousness and the purpose and nature of artistic expression. Like Stein, Stevens is interested in the extent to which external relationships determine the self, and he is likewise interested throughout his career in the value and potential of artistic expression. In

addition, both of these modernist writers developed ways of staging particular moments of consciousness in order to understand better the modern self and its relation to artistic expression.

Unlike Stein's Tender Buttons, Stevens' work posits a reality that remains beyond the bounds of human construction. This reality is in a state of ever-changing flux, a "wave, interminably flowing" ("Peter Quince at the Clavier"). Sukenick calls it "a fluid, constantly changing present in which nothing endures and nothing has any end beyond itself" (35). Human perception's access to this reality, according to Stevens, is limited in a number of ways. For instance, reality is constantly changing, so human perceptions can maintain only temporary validity, and reality is much larger than the scope of a single perspective could ever come to terms with. At any given moment of consciousness, the self must see itself in the world according to a very limited perspective on reality. As consciousness perceives, it does so according to associations, and a poem, therefore, cannot hope to offer objective or finite descriptions of reality. It can, however, actively strip away old and stale associations and replace them with newer ones that might, even if only temporarily, offer a fresh relationship with reality. As a performance, however, poetic consciousness is not without agency. Poetic imagination, according to Stevens, includes the act of stripping away old associations, denying certain determining relationships while discovering and creating new ones. In this model, as in Stein's, artistic expression is not absolutely

determined but is a kind of negotiation, in this case between the acknowledgment that we must always remain determined by external relationships and the act of constantly stripping away and renewing such relationships.

Between the spring of 1916 and the fall of 1917, Stevens wrote and submitted for publication and production three plays, Three Travelers Watch a Sunrise (1916), Carlos Among the Candles (1917), and Bowl, Cat and Broomstick (1917). The plays are not often discussed in Stevens criticism, largely because they are considered to be something of an anomaly, an unsuccessful experiment in theater by a writer better suited to poetry. When the plays are included in larger discussions of Stevens, they are pointed to for their thematic affinities with some of the more important poems of Harmonium. What I suggest, however, is that the plays and the poetry have a more complex relationship than has been noted. In the poetry, as I will discuss in Chapter V, Stevens develops his central concerns with consciousness and with the role of art, and he develops a theory of poetics that holds the poem, and the artists' perspective within it, as a kind of staged performance—a moment necessarily determined by the limited associations human perspective provides. Throughout his career Stevens broke boundaries between the lyric and the dramatic, and at least one critic has argued persuasively that much of his poetry reflects a fusion of these forms (Kravac, "'As at a Theatre'"). This concern with theater is largely due to his

poetic theory, which depends upon the notion of self as performance. Given the importance of the abstract notion of a staged consciousness to his poetry, the plays provide an important beginning point for this study. In them we can see Stevens' concern with consciousness played out in a dramatic setting—a setting particularly appropriate, it would seem, to the kinds of issues of performance with which he is working. Further, all three plays investigate the performative relationship between consciousness and its external associations. In his poetry, Stevens describes the world in theatrical terms, and in these early plays we can see him beginning to develop some of the concerns that would keep him interested in the theater as a metaphor for modern consciousness throughout his career. The theater provided Stevens with an opportunity to rehearse some of the crucial poetic questions his aesthetic would grapple with for many years following his stint as a playwright. The theater can more readily emphasize the relational by placing voices within a clearly limited frame or context than can a written text. More importantly, the theater offered Stevens the opportunity to emphasize what he saw as the theatricality of the perceived world. Since he experimented with the genre only briefly, and only at the very beginnings of his poetic career, the plays cannot, obviously, provide the theatrical laboratory for his developing poetic theory in the way that Stein's theater often did for her. However, because his poetic theory is so heavily indebted to notions of performance, we should not overlook the plays entirely, nor relegate them to

the status of secondary texts, important only for what they can illuminate in the poems of Harmonium. The plays are of interest both because they highlight themes that are central to his most significant poetry and because those themes are closely related to the concept of the theater in a number of significant ways.

Stevens' interest in the theatrical qualities of writing did not begin with his plays. As Milton Bates points out, his early letters reveal a writer experimenting with the notion of writing as performance. For five years the young Wallace Stevens, working as a lawyer in New York City, courted his bride-to-be Elsie Kachel, still residing in Stevens' home town of Reading, Pennsylvania, through a series of love letters. These letters show the young poet at the beginning of his life-long concern with the construction of various poetic selves. In the letters Stevens puts on many different costumes, tries on different hats, performing at one moment the role of the serious scholar, at another the role of the fanciful but stern instructor, at yet another the role of the romantic lover. The cast of characters in these letters reveals the Stevens who, over twenty years later, would speak of the artist as a man on stage.

Poetry, he writes in 1940, must

construct a new stage. It has to be on that stage

And, like an insatiable actor, slowly and

With meditation, speak words that in the ear,

In the delicatest ear of the mind, repeat,

Exactly, that which it wants to hear. . . . ("Of Modern Poetry")

The Stevens we find in these letters is the young poet for whom notions of performance, on various levels, are already manifesting themselves in fascinating ways. In Elsie, Stevens found his first audience, and their early correspondence reads like a theater for the young poet, in which he experiments playfully with temporary moments of a constructed, performed self. Throughout his career, whether writing for an actual theater or writing in the metaphoric theater of his poetry, theatrical concepts remain crucial to Stevens. Notions of performance, mask, illusion, and theatrical perspective occupy central positions in Stevens' poetics long after he abandons the genre of drama itself.

Unlike Stein, who was interested in the theater from her earliest memories as a child, Stevens' interest in writing for the theater seems to have been sparked as much by the contemporary scene of American theater as by his own aesthetic inclination toward the dramatic arts. The early twentieth century marked a time of heavily symbolic experimentation and a strong reaction against realism in American theaters. Between 1916 and 1920, Poetry magazine published several articles attempting to define a new kind of drama. A. Walton Litz discusses the excitement about new forms of theatrical presentation that surrounded Stevens. Aside from the impression made by European and Asian uses of theater (Yeats' essay, "Certain Noble Plays of

Japan" was published in the United States in November of 1916), American playwrights saw themselves on the forefront of a new American art form. It was in 1916 that The Provincetown Players moved to Greenwich Village and committed themselves to staging many highly experimental plays. Among the first of these was a play called Lima Beans (produced in November 1916), written by Stevens' friend Alfred Kreymborg. In this play, characters "adopted the stylized movements of marionettes and the curtain festooned with vegetables played a leading role" (Litz 56). Stevens' friends Louise and Charles Eliot Norton also wrote plays, participating in the new dramatic aesthetic that "abandoned many conventions of realism in character depiction and setting to achieve a symbolic drama" (Kravec, "Bowl" 309). According to Litz, "it was the heyday of what [was called] the 'unstagelike play', and at Kreymborg's skylight loft on East 14th Street, or at Walter Arensberg's studio on West 67th Street, Stevens would have discussed these new attempts to fuse post-Impressionist painting, the new staging, modern dance, and contemporary poetry into a fresh and radical form" (56). Given Stevens' developing interest in the theatricality of human perspective and poetic imagination, it is not surprising that this new, highly symbolic theater scene might have sparked his interest. Like Stein's dramatic works, Stevens' plays would be highly stylized, abstract works, following few of the conventions associated with more traditional theater.

It was an announcement in Poetry magazine that stirred Stevens' interest enough for him to produce his first play. In 1916 the magazine advertised a contest for a one-act play in verse. Stevens submitted a new work, Three Travelers Watch a Sunrise, and in May of that year was notified by Harriet Monroe, Poetry's editor, that he had won the contest and that the play would be published in the magazine. The following passage is taken from Poetry's announcement of the prize-winning work and describes the editors' enthusiasm about the play:

[Three Travelers is] a strange and fantastic work of original genius, which, whatever its dramatic value, and however diverting or repelling its story, has extraordinary poetic beauty, and presents symbolically a profound truth of our mysterious earthly existence. As to its actability, opinions differ. Two or three experienced producers in the art theatre movement think that a stage production would clarify and intensify its subtle poetic significance and beauty; but most of the judges doubt if it would 'get across' to more than a fraction of the audience. ("Prize Announcement" 160)

The announcement goes on to explain that, though they know not where it may lead, Poetry encourages and supports the "original creative impulse" and "the outreaching experiment." Although they admit that such a course is neither "safe" nor "sane," the magazine expresses its desire nonetheless to "place its stake on human genius, and follow with loyalty the wayward torch

of beauty; even though ignorant where it will lead." "It is in this spirit," the announcement concludes, "that the judges award the prize of one hundred dollars . . . to Mr. Wallace Stevens for Three Travelers Watch a Sunrise." It was with a very significant degree of doubt as to the play's "actability" and to the response of potential audiences that Stevens was thus introduced as a playwright. Nevertheless, the magazine's editors found the play a herald of a new and exciting field of drama.

This award, won seven years prior to the publication of Harmonium, provided a great deal of encouragement to Stevens. Joan Richardson's biography Wallace Stevens: The Early Years 1879-1923 discusses the importance of this prize in Stevens' view of his own importance as an artist. She also suggests that, for at least a brief time, Stevens identified himself foremost as a playwright (452). Stevens was encouraged enough, in fact, to respond with two new plays when approached by the director of the Wisconsin Players, Laura Sherry. Sherry had expressed interest in Three Travelers and had asked Stevens if he would consider writing another play. He responded by sending her Carlos Among the Candles and Bowl, Cat and Broomstick. He was also, at the time, busy revising Three Travelers for an as yet unscheduled production, for which he was apparently quite eager. In a letter to Harriet Monroe, editor of Poetry, he writes of the award and of his plans to revise the play and suggests that he wants more than the accolades of having written a literary drama: "I am not proud because I desire to have the

play a play and not merely a poem, if possible" (Letters 194). His hope for success in the theater reflects his belief that the theater was particularly appropriate for the subject matter he found most important, and his excitement about the plays' potential success in production underscores the centrality of particularly theatrical elements to his aesthetic. Stevens certainly appreciated the recognition brought about by the award, but he was also excited about the success of the play because it "suggested that he could continue in this spirit, a spirit enlightened with a new and, as he hoped, better way of looking at the world and the place of human beings in it" (Richardson 455). In July of 1917, while working on an upcoming production of his second play at the hands of the Wisconsin Players, Stevens wrote to Monroe about Carlos, "I hope before the summer is over to send you an outburst. At the moment, my new play is being gone over to fit the setting. When it is in final form, I am going to send you a copy. Bancel La Farge is doing the setting, which threatens to be very much more poetic than the play itself" (Letters 201). The excitement over his plays would stop, however, as abruptly as it began, on opening night of his first play to see production.

On October 20, 1917, the Wisconsin Players presented a series of new, one-act plays at the Neighborhood Playhouse in New York. Among them was Carlos Among the Candles, with Bowl, Cat and Broomstick scheduled later in the week. Stevens had apparently gone to a significant degree of trouble over this opening production. He had enlisted John La Farge's son

Bancel to design the backdrops for Carlos and had encouraged him to continue his work even after the young painter stated that he could not accept the challenge because of his confusion over the play. Stevens persisted, and La Farge consented, providing a set of sketches that pleased Stevens, who called them "delicate and extremely suggestive" (Letters 291). Those sketches, however, were sent to the producer and painted on a large scale by "a school boy," and the process rendered the previously satisfactory design, in Stevens' words, "the opposite from delicate and suggestive" (Letters 291). Even more distressing to the hopeful new playwright was the fact that, in its only performance, the actor playing Carlos forgot the central three of the play's twelve pages (Richardson 481). For a play that was already highly experimental, such a performance led directly to a critical bashing, and the play was dropped from the bill immediately. A review in the New York Times called the play "a baffling monologue, intended neither for the stage nor the library" ("Wisconsin Players Here"). Another reviewer, Ralph Block of the New York Tribune, wrote of the play that "the process of this kind of entertainment . . . appears to be to say something that has no meaning at all with all the bearing of significance" (Block 27). A reviewer in The New York Post blamed the Wisconsin players for being "inept in their selection" of plays, dubbing Carlos a combination of "balderdash" and "buffonery" ("The Wisconsin Players"). The production of Bowl, Cat and Broomstick a few nights later appears to have been equally troubled (although detailed

information is not, to my knowledge, available), and all remaining scheduled performances were likewise canceled. Though the critical reception of these productions was not entirely derisive, it provided embarrassment ample enough to turn Stevens away from the theater and to encourage in him a lifelong sense of ambiguity toward the reception of art by a popular audience.

Stevens reacted strongly to the negative response to his plays, claiming later in a letter that it gave him "the horrors" (Letters 291). By the time the Provincetown Playhouse picked up Three Travelers for production in 1920, Stevens had completely lost interest in his plays and never bothered to see it even though he was in New York at the time, writing in a letter that he had "not the curiosity even to read it" (Letters 216). In a 1935 letter he claims that had it not been for this experience at the Neighborhood Theater, "I think it quite likely that I should have been more interested in the theatre" (Letters 291). Whether or not, as Richardson argues, Stevens' strong reaction to the reviews is attributable to the fact that he had a somewhat fragile literary ego at this point in his career, he apparently learned from the experience more than the importance of a high-quality production. In a 1935 letter, he describes the problems with the opening production and then writes,

The whole thing became ridiculous, and the people who were running the theatre refused to allow it to be put on a second time, and they were perfectly justified. I don't mean to criticize the producer, who had to work with what there was to work with, but this experience taught me

a great deal, in the sense that it taught me what poetry is, and is not, proper for the theater. (Letters 291).

Just after reading the reviews of the Carlos production, Stevens again wrote to Monroe:

[The critics] were justified—would have been in saying almost anything. One is tempted to put the blame on the performance. But the important thing is to learn something. . . . the possibility remains that there was little or nothing to perform . . . A theatre without action or characters ought to be within the range of human interests . . . Why not? But no. . . . the theatre is a definite thing; a play has a form and requirements, like a sonnet—there must be passion, development and so on. . . . I have nothing to say, however. It is all Swedish to me.

(Letters 203)

Stevens' excitement with and disappointment about the plays, as well as the creation of the plays themselves, seem to have been rooted largely, then, in public reception.

While Stevens' aesthetic interests in poetry began long before Poetry's play contest of 1916, the plays are not so unrelated to the rest of Stevens' career as has been previously supposed. Significantly, the subject matter of all three plays is a dramatic exploration of his own evolving poetics. He went to theater, that is, not as a way of leaving poetry behind but as a way of exploring his poetic sensibilities from a new and exciting perspective to which these

poetics are closely related. His abrupt turn away from the theater cannot be fully explained by his apparent embarrassment following the disastrous first productions of Carlos Among the Candles and Bowl, Cat and Broomstick. The productions went badly, but even Stevens admitted that all was not to be blamed on the particular production problems. Had that been the case, he might have renewed his vigor and fought for a better, more carefully wrought production. His turn away from the theater after such an unfavorable audience response may be read, instead, as indicative of the importance, in Stevens' mind, of the ideas in the plays that were becoming lost in such productions. Even if the theater seemed particularly appropriate for the kind of things he wished to present, Stevens nevertheless learned that such "poetry" was not necessarily so appropriate for his contemporary theater, no matter how heavily experimental and symbol-driven that contemporary theater scene seemed to be. I do not wish here to claim that the plays are more successful, as plays, than has been argued in the past. I simply suggest that the plays merit serious investigation since they offered Stevens a new perspective through which to view poetry and that that perspective would remain central to his poetics long after the writing of the plays themselves. Though he turned away from writing for the actual theater in 1917, Stevens would nevertheless continue to develop his aesthetic around these early investigations into the theatricality of perception. This central concern can be

traced throughout his much more significant poetry, and it is for this reason that a close examination of the three plays bears significance.

i

Three Travelers Watch a Sunrise was published in Poetry magazine after winning its 1916 award for a one-act play and was later collected by Samuel French Morse for the first edition of Opus Posthumous (1957). This play, like the others, investigates the relationship between consciousness and its external relationships and offers early evidence of Stevens' later claims that poetic imagination "must be abstract" and "must change." Three Travelers opens with three Chinese men and their two Negro servants reaching a hilltop, made to resemble the hills of eastern Pennsylvania, early on an August morning in order to watch the sunrise. The three Chinese men talk about a number of things while waiting for the anticipated event, including the nature of a porcelain bottle, the sun itself, and the nature of perception. One of them mentions that he has learned of a search being conducted on the hill for "an Italian [who] disappeared with his neighbor's daughter" (Opus Posthumous 156), and the three men then discuss, in a necessarily abstract manner, the possible nature of this affair. At the end of the play, some tree branches on the hilltop are pushed aside in order to reveal the body of the young Italian swinging dead from a tree. A young woman, slumped on the ground near the body, is distraught at the loss of her lover.

The three Chinese men comment on the scene before two of them help the woman down the hillside, leaving only one of them behind to see the sunrise.

The play sets up the classic Stevensian relationship between consciousness and reality by placing three travelers, alien to the setting, in the woods of Pennsylvania. J. M. Furniss discusses the ways in which this play illuminates some of the basic foundations of Stevens' thought. The three Chinese on a Pennsylvania hilltop, according to Furniss, represent Stevens' notion of modern people struggling to renew their relationship with a world that is not theirs (206). The sunrise itself offers a figurative establishment of a fresh relationship with reality. The Chinese men carry with them a lantern and light candles, representative of the light of imagination. The sun, on the other hand, stands as "a figure for the absolutely not-us" (Furniss 206), and as it rises, it challenges anew the relationship between the imaginations of the three travelers and the reality that presses in as the sun begins another day. The three Chinese men are significant, however, for more than simply their status as being alien to the Pennsylvania hilltop upon which we first meet them. During the months surrounding the writing of this play, Stevens wrote of being directly influenced by the Orient for a number of reasons. Richardson points out that Stevens was not alone among his contemporaries in his interest in the East. Yeats, for example, had expressed admiration for the mask element of the Noh plays of Japan. For Stevens, however, interest

in the East had less to do with the "structure and dramatic effects of Oriental drama" than it did with "epistemological and ethical differences Oriental thought offered to a Western audience" (Richardson 455). That is, Richardson finds in Stevens' published and unpublished letters a great deal of interest, at this point in his life, in "the Orientals' easy acceptance of change as the only permanent or 'true' aspect of reality and with how this acceptance affected attitudes toward death" (455). Since attitudes toward both change and death lie at the heart of the play, it therefore seems not surprising to find three Chinese men serving as the catalysts for the play's central conflict.

The play begins with a conversation between these three Chinese men. The Second Chinese claims that "[a]ll you need, / To find poetry, / Is to look for it with a lantern" (Opus Posthumous 149). This opening remark sets the stage for the focus of the dialogue to come, as the rest of the play demonstrates a concern with the nature of poetic meaning in relation to the world of reality. Before the body of the young lover is discovered, the three men direct their attention to a porcelain bottle that has been brought to the top of the hill in one of two baskets carried by the servants. Richardson suggests that we consider the bottle in light of Keats' Grecian urn, since both "generate preoccupation with death, change, and immortality" (454). The major difference, of course, is that Keats' urn presents a pictorial narrative which freezes its characters in immortality. For Stevens, the polished surface of the bottle has as many different meanings as there are perspectives on it, as is

suggested in the play by the different attitudes of the three Chinese toward the bottle. As Richardson observes, "Stevens' polished surfaces constantly change with the coming and going of light, whether natural light . . . or the human light of imagination" (454). One of the men, the Third Chinese, suggests that the porcelain itself cannot be entirely apprehended. After the First Chinese lights a candle and places it next to the bottle, throwing the light of a particular perspective on it, the Third Chinese responds thus: "There is a seclusion of porcelain / That humanity never invades" (Opus Posthumous 151). Here the Third Chinese, the character who will take on the most significance of the three by the end of this discussion, suggests that all human access to reality comes through the imagination, which itself, represented here by a candle, can shape reality only according to its own very much limited perspective. In the spirit of modernist thinking, and particularly in the spirit of Nietzsche, there remains here a reality beneath surface forms of consciousness. Human perception is shown to be an utterly limited faculty, unable even to apprehend a porcelain bottle with any degree of entirety.

The bottle in the play has another function, however, and that is to illustrate Stevens' notion that just as human imagination shapes the world of reality, so too does reality push back, challenging previous human perceptions. The following passage, spoken by the Second Chinese, considers this ability of reality to invade and therefore challenge human contemplation:

If it be supposed that we are three figures / Painted on porcelain
As we sit here, / That we are painted on this very bottle,
The hermit of the place, / Holding this candle to us,
Would wonder; / But if it be supposed
That we are painted as warriors,
The candle would tremble in his hands;
Or if it be supposed, for example,
That we are painted as three dead men,
He could not see the steadiest light / For sorrow.
It would be true / If the emperor himself / Held the candle.
He would forget the porcelain / For the figures painted on it.

(Opus Posthumous 153-54)

The Third Chinese responds by claiming "I dislike the invasion / And long for Windless pavilions. / And yet it may be true / That nothing is beautiful / Except with reference to ourselves, / Nor ugly, / Nor high, / Nor low" (Opus Posthumous 154). This discussion sets in motion Stevens' depiction of human life as a struggle of the necessarily imaginative renderings of reality against the pressure from reality that pushes ever against those conceptions. Stevens suggests in a letter to Harriet Monroe about this play that at least part of his intention was to "demonstrate that just as objects in nature offset us. . . so, on the other hand, we affect objects in nature, by projecting our moods, emotions etc." (Letters 194). It is important to note that when the Second

Chinese proposes the hypothetical situation above ("If it be supposed that we are three figures painted on porcelain..."), he is inserting the three characters in the play into yet another fiction to be perceived by yet another audience. Aware, of course, that these figures are already limited to the theater of Stevens' play, we are asked to consider the validity of traditional demarcations between "real" and fictional experience. Since every moment of perception is necessarily limited by the mind's inability to grasp either the complexity or the impermanence of the flux of reality, perceptions that seem to reveal the world to us in fact reveal only an illusion of the world. For Stevens, our illusory perspective on the world is often articulated in terms of the theatrical—what seems to be a window to reality is instead only a theatrical illusion, a staged event that cannot, because of the limits of human perception, hope to access the flux of reality that lies forever beyond it. The play suggests that consciousness itself is something of a performance within the theatricality of perception, at any given time merely a momentary stay, defined by limited and limiting relationships, against the inevitable counteraction of reality, which imposes itself and challenges the validity of any particular theatrical illusion. A person, then, acts according to a momentary and necessarily artificial relationship with ever-changing reality.

Few critics have paid sufficient attention to the distinctions between Stevens' three Chinese characters. Many have simply repeated Joseph Riddel's assertion, in The Clairvoyant Eye (1965) that

[t]he various responses of the three Chinese to the scene are kinds and degrees of response possible within an aesthetic scale. Very simply, the Chinese represent three abstract attitudes one may take vis-à-vis otherness: The First Chinese is a devotee of objective, tangible reality, including necessarily its rude violence; the Third Chinese is purely subjective, speaking only as he feels; while the Second Chinese, the theoretician, is a realist between two extremes. (58)

If we pay attention only to the dialogue of the play preceding the appearance of the dead body and the distraught woman, such a reading seems sufficient. The First Chinese speaks of the world in terms of his senses. He speaks of water and melons and the gossip he has heard. Instead of heeding his physical senses, the Second Chinese prefers to apply to reality a series of "maxims," and most of his responses are attempts to match a particular theory to his experiences. The Third Chinese "dislike[s] the invasion" of reality and wishes instead for impossible "windless pavilions." Several critics have noted these distinctions, but only recently has J. M. Furniss suggested that we look beyond what the three say and pay attention likewise to what they actually do, particularly in the end of the play when confronted with the dead body of the young lover.

As the three Chinese make of the sunrise or the bottle different realities according to their different perspectives, "we are encouraged to judge the relative value of those realities" (Furniss 205). The First Chinese accepts

reality in the form of his senses. He cannot be sustained either by ruminations on porcelain or maxims about reality, and he plays an instrument while waiting for water and the sunrise. When the dead body is revealed, forcing upon the three a particularly violent form of reality and challenging most directly their relationships to that reality, the First Chinese drops the instrument that has so far sustained him and leaves the scene before sunrise, helping the young woman down the hill. Furniss suggests that "the first traveler's 'fixed' purpose is vicarious gratification of his sensual nature. . . . Because he relies upon fixed association, he is paralyzed by the presence of death" (209). The First Chinese has sung a ballad about the love affair he has heard rumors of but is now "so stunned by the embodiment of what has been art" that he cannot stay and face the new day. A relationship with reality in which one relies solely on sensory experience therefore fails the First Chinese, who is unable to acknowledge the reality of death and face the sunrise, the manifestation of a renewed relationship with otherness.

The Second Chinese, on the other hand, seems to be entirely abstracted from the physical. He "encounters the world through the lens of his scholarly maxims, and he is dominated by one in particular that colors all experience for him: 'It is the invasion of humanity / That counts'" (Furniss 209). Unable to respond to the physical world in which he lives, the Second Chinese, too, has a fixed relationship with reality, but it is one fixed on the maxims that sustain him. Throughout the play he is holding not an

instrument but a book of maxims, which, like the First Chinese, he drops on the stage when the dead body and the distraught lover are revealed. He too leaves the hilltop before sunrise, unable to adapt to this sudden and violent invasion of humanity and to renew his relationship with the world. For the Second Chinese, reality is merely a construction of maxims, and these maxims fail when they are "inundated" with new sensory input (Furniss 210).

It is the Third Chinese who stands best as Stevens' figure of the poet and furthers Stevens' development of an artistic model in a world in which human perception is necessarily theatrical. His desire for "windless pavilions" where "there would be no creaking" (the tree branch holding up the dead body creaks throughout the play, warning of its advancing invasion) reflects his desire to bring to the sunrise no preconceived notions of what the sun will illuminate. In a discussion about the porcelain bottle and the as-yet unrisen sun, the Third Chinese remarks,

there are indeterminate moments
Before it rises . . .
Before one can tell
What the bottle is going to be—
Porcelain, Venetian glass,
Egyptian . . . (Opus Posthumous 152)

Later he suggests that though "it may be true" that "nothing is beautiful / Except with reference to ourselves," he nevertheless longs for the ability to escape as much as possible the "invasion of humanity" that fills us with predetermining associations. He longs to find the "seclusion of sunrise, / Before it shines on any house" and the "seclusion of porcelain / That humanity never invades" (Opus Posthumous 151). The Third Chinese is a predecessor to later manifestations of Stevens' conceptualized poet who can strip away all previous associations to get at the "first idea" and create meaningful, if momentary, stays against the impending invasion of humanity. The ability of the Third Chinese to renew his relationship with reality depends on a willingness to scrape away fixed relationships. As the First and Second Chinese relate to the world in fixed ways, they are unable to accept the changes that will inevitably occur. The Third Chinese, however, accepts that human perception is illusory, that each moment of perception is merely a staged event. The Third Chinese does not escape theatrical perception any more than the other two do, but he can continue to be renewed, to seek and discover new theatrical manifestations of himself in the world. Stevens echoes the artistic model of Stein's Tender Buttons here in suggesting that it is the acknowledgment of perception as illusory that allows the artist the freedom to reshape his or her own performance within a theatrical world. For the Third Chinese, it is this ability to maintain a non-fixed relationship with reality, to rid himself of as many associations, whether

theoretical or sensual, as possible that enables him to renew his relationship with reality, to stay on for the sunrise, even after this invasion of humanity in its most violent and sensual form. He must deny the validity of old theatrical frameworks in order to make room for the new.

Noting the futility of fixed associations, the Third Chinese greets the sunrise at the end of the play with the following claim:

Red is not only / The color of blood, / Or
Of a man's eyes, / Or
Of a girl's. / And as the red of the sun
Is one thing to me / And one thing to another,
So it is the green of one tree / And the green of another,
Which without it would all be black.
Sunrise is multiplied, / Like the earth on which it shines,
By the eyes that open on it, / Even dead eyes,
As red is multiplied by the leaves of trees. (Opus Posthumous 161)

The sunrise is multiplied by as many perceptions as there are. Each perception, because limited, does not reflect the sunrise itself but reflects instead a theatrical illusion which is different for each of "the eyes that open on it." That the Third Chinese can recognize the great degree of multiplicity in the unperceived world of reality while at the same time wishing for the windless pavilions which would free him from association places him at the heart of Stevens' struggle concerning the role of the poet.

Three Travelers Watch a Sunrise thus demonstrates a number of issues that will remain central to the later Stevens. The figure of the Third Chinese, if read as an early version of Stevens' poet, suggests the importance of the poet's maintaining non-fixed external relationships, and suggests also the importance of the poet's stripping himself of as many associations as possible in order to create new, if momentary, relationships with invading reality. In order to do that, he must accept the theatrical nature of all moments of perception. By constantly denying the determining relationships in any given theatrical perception, he can constantly renew his relationship to reality and avoid becoming fixed in stale metaphor. Acknowledgment of the theatrical nature of perceived reality remains crucial to the approach toward reality taken by the Third Chinese, who, while nevertheless longing for windless pavilions, can continue to renew the relationship between his own imagination and the necessary invasion of human association.

ii

Two months after the ill-fated production of Carlos Among the Candles by the Wisconsin Players, Harriet Monroe published the play in Poetry magazine with as much enthusiasm as that with which she had presented Three Travelers a year before. This enthusiasm may stem in part from the fact that critical responses to the printed plays were far more favorable than the scathing theater reviews. The play was also collected in

the first edition of Opus Posthumous (1957). Carlos focuses much more intently than does Three Travelers on a particular element of consciousness. In staging a particular moment of consciousness, Stevens here presents the problem of defining one's self free from external relationships. That is, the play focuses more than do the others on the notion that the self, at any given moment, is a performance of its associations. The play's lone character, Carlos, leaps into consciousness at the beginning of the play and expresses his awareness of himself according to his immediate relationship with his surroundings. At any given moment in the play, then, Carlos is clearly and self-consciously a performance of the associations that connect him to his surroundings. As he does in Three Travelers, Stevens presents his concern with the temporary and theatrical nature of all such moments of coming to self.

The setting for the play is a single room, with two doors on either side of the stage and a large round window in the middle at the back of the stage. This window is covered by long curtains throughout most of the one-act play. In the room at the beginning of the play are two tables, each of which is covered with unlit candles. Carlos, "an eccentric pedant of about forty," enters the room with a "leap," carrying only a single, thin, lighted taper. He examines the room and proceeds to light the candles one at a time, commenting on the changes in his consciousness as he does so. After lighting twenty-four candles, he opens the curtains before the window to see

if the light changes the darkness outside as it has changed the darkness inside. Upon his doing so, a strong gust of wind blows through the window and extinguishes several of the candles. Carlos then extinguishes those candles which are left burning, doing so one at a time, and commenting again on the perceived changes as he proceeds. When only one candle remains burning, he extinguishes his own taper and springs out of the window, exclaiming as he goes, "Oh, ho! Here is matter beyond invention" (Opus Posthumous 167).

Above all else, Carlos is an illustration of Stevens' notion that moments of consciousness are formed by associations with external relationships. In a letter to Bancel La Farge concerning the sets for the play's production, Stevens included a note about his intentions for the play:

[Carlos] is intended to illustrate the theory that people are affected by what is around them. This is an old idea, insofar as it relates to the environment in a general sense. But the idea is just as valid if applied to the minutiae of one's surroundings. Take, for example, (instead of a mountain or a morgue), a single candle. (Letters 201)

Here, as in Three Travelers, the light of a candle represents the light of Carlos' imagination. As Carlos lights the candles with the light of his own taper, he imposes upon the space around him a renewed sense of himself. It is as if his surroundings create the costume by which he identifies himself. His consciousness changes as the costume of his environment changes, for he is a part of that space and sees himself accordingly.

Several critics have suggested that Carlos' leaping into the room is synonymous with his leaping into a moment of consciousness. For instance, upon lighting a single candle, he steps back and regards it:

How the solitude of this candle penetrates me! I light a candle in the darkness. It fills the darkness with solitude, which becomes my own. I become a part of the solitude of the candle. (163)

Carlos also comments on the degree to which he is aware of such determining relationships. Still with only one candle on stage lit, he claims that

[t]o think of this light and of myself . . . it is a duty . . . If I looked in at that window and saw a single candle burning in an empty room . . . but if I saw a figure . . . If, now , I felt that there was someone outside . . . But it is not only here and now . . . It is in the morning . . . the difference between a small window and a large window . . . a blue window and a green window . . . It is in the afternoon and in the evening . . . in effects, so drifting, that I know myself to be incalculable, since the causes of what I am are incalculable. (164).

Leaping into a moment of consciousness, then, entails coming to terms with one's self within the theater of one's surroundings. Self-consciousness plays an important role here. Carlos sees himself in relation to the candle and is filled with the solitude he associates with this candle. He imagines seeing himself or another inside the solitary room through the window and suggests

that still further changes in consciousness would necessarily occur. On top of that, the color and size of the window through which one could observe would make a further difference. Because of the multitude of possible costumes, Carlos finds himself to be "incalculable." His consciousness is neither coherent nor stable, but is rather, at any given time, a performance of the associations to which he can self-consciously envision himself in relation.

As the play proceeds, Carlos continues to light candles and to reflect upon the relative changes in his own consciousness. With two candles burning, he claims "the associations have drifted a little and changed, and I have followed in this change . . . It is as if a company of two or three people had just separated, or as if they were about to gather" (164). These associations of other people, brought about by the lighting of the second candle, have made it so that the solitude of the single candle has dissolved. With a third lighted candle, Carlos feels even further removed from the solitude: "It is no longer as if a company had just separated. It is only as if it were about to gather . . . as if one were soon to forget the room because of the people in the room" (164). Interestingly, Carlos here suggests again a degree of control over his surroundings. He lights the candles, of course, but he also anticipates the lighting of more candles. Hence, he can interpret the three lit candles as anticipatory of a larger gathering. With four candles lit, Carlos feels a sense of "magnificence," with five, "splendor." Upon lighting the sixth candle, Carlos explains,

In how short a time have I been solitary, then respectable—in a company so cold as to be stately, then elegant, then conscious of luxury, even magnificence; and now I come, gradually, to the beginning of splendor. Truly, I am a modern. (165)

Carlos' surroundings provide him with a costume, provide him with the particular lens through which to envision himself. As Carlos parades about the stage wearing his determining relationships self-consciously, he is reminiscent of Stein in Tender Buttons, draped in the costume of language, choosing a metaphorical stage by which to challenge language's most binding restrictions. Carlos is no artist, however, but is merely a representation of Stevens' notion that our external relationships, both those within our control and those not in our control, determine our perception of self and world. After twelve candles have been lit, the stage directions suggest that Carlos' spirits have been raised by the brilliance of the light. He lights still twelve more candles so that all of the candles are burning, and then he flings aside the curtains covering the window. Each new perception involves the throwing aside of yet another curtain, revealing yet another stage. As he looks out the window, at what before had been only a darkness that "expels," he sees, because of the new light, the tall stalks of flowers outside, and his world of associations multiplies even further. In place of darkness or even of the solitude of a single candle, he now feels the presence of "servants, as fat as

plums, bearing pineapples from the Azores . . . because of twenty-four candles, burning together, as if their light had dispelled a phantasm" (166).

It is not possible, however, for Carlos to control or maintain his sense of splendor for long. The more his lights cast themselves onto his surroundings, the more the surroundings push back against his self-constructed magnificence. With the curtains pulled away from the window, a "strong gust of wind suddenly blows into the room, extinguishing several of the candles" (166). Upon this sudden loss of light, Carlos responds by reconsidering his previous sense of splendor: "That, too, was a phantasm." Noting the temporary nature of any such performances, Carlos then begins to extinguish the remaining candles, reflecting along the way on how his consciousness now changes with the loss of each flame. Again, he not only asserts a new awareness of self with each new arrangement of lit candles, but he also anticipates further loss so that each level of association is now filled not with the excitement of the initial lighting of the candles but with "sorrow," "regret," and "desolation." At the end of the play, he leaps back out of this moment of consciousness, out of the lighted space and into the darkness that precedes consciousness. As Carlos "speaks with elation" about his leap, "Here is a matter beyond invention," Stevens makes clear his position within this theatrical modernist dilemma—one in which reality can only be perceived within moments of metaphor-laden association, bound like a stage by walls and curtains and limited to temporality. All moments of

coming to self are temporary performances of the metaphors through which we relate to the world of reality.

Though Carlos offers a direct treatment of a theatrical consciousness, it also holds some important connotations for artistic expression. Carlos, as was mentioned above, is "an eccentric pedant of about forty," and he is, as one critic has pointed out, "as fastidiously aesthetic and exquisitely allusive in his speech as Stevens sometimes appeared to his friends" (Morse 82). Most readings of the play assume that Carlos is representative of, if not fully a caricature of, Stevens himself. Carlos indeed poses the question central to Stevens' lifelong concern with the value of a poet in a theatrical world. Metaphor is necessary to our apprehension of self in relation to reality; it is the inevitable result of imagination, but it is also temporary. Carlos' leap into and out of a moment of consciousness reflects "the narrow circle of man's creative possibility" (Riddle 61). Carlos has invented the world within the room according to his candles, but he cannot maintain his construction and must eventually leap back out into the darkness. If we read Carlos to be a reflection either of Stevens' poet or of Stevens himself, then we have in his character an early manifestation of the aesthetic problem that is central to Stevens' entire canon. Artistic expression cannot be seen as the expression of a permanent or essential artistic soul but is, instead, the expression of a self that is at any given moment a performance of its various associations. The relationships reflected in metaphor determine our perception of the world

and of ourselves. The relational does not merely describe but rather constructs versions of selfhood as our surroundings provide the costumes necessary for consciousness. Furthermore, associations must necessarily change. In this particular staging of such a consciousness, Stevens emphasizes the fleeting nature of the validity of metaphor and in doing so underscores the aesthetic problem he would grapple with throughout much of the rest of his career.

iii

Bowl, Cat and Broomstick, produced only once by the Neighborhood Playhouse in New York in 1917, was passed over for publication by the first edition of Opus Posthumous (1957). The play did not appear in print until 1969, when it was published in the Quarterly Review of Literature, and it has since been reprinted in both The Palm at the End of the Mind and Milton J. Bates' revised edition of Opus Posthumous. Interestingly, the play was recently produced, probably for the first time since its opening production in 1917, during the summer of 1997 at HERE theater in New York City. According to director David Levine, the audience "responded very well" and the production was successful ("News and Comments" 211). Nevertheless, the play has remained largely unknown both in theatrical circles and in the discourse surrounding Stevens' work. Partly because of the obscure nature of the play and partly because it remained only in typescript for so long, few

critics have examined it closely. As at least one recent critic has suggested, however, the play is significant in what it shows us about Stevens' developing aesthetic at the time (Kravec, "Bowl"). The play is the most complex of the three, and it develops further some of the themes already discussed in Three Travelers and Carlos. Specifically, the play confronts again the notion that we become self-conscious in relation to that which surrounds us. Our surroundings provide the costume of consciousness that we, in turn, enact. Consciousness is necessarily a performance of the stage of human perception. The play also confronts the problem of a stale or static relationship between reality and the imagination. Again Stevens illustrates why he would suggest, years later, that the supreme fiction "must change," why the poet must continually sweep away the associations of old theaters in order to make way for the new. Further, Bowl, Cat and Broomstick illustrates Stevens' concern with the difficulty of a poet's maintaining his integrity and still remaining a poet of his time. And, finally, in this play which marks his departure from the theater and a renewed commitment to poetry, Stevens confronts the problematic aesthetic of his juvenile poetry and sweeps the stage clear of some of his earlier assumptions and forms.

The play opens with two characters, Bowl and Cat, reading from and discussing a book of poetry. The year is 1667, and the poems they are reading are said to have been published in 1660. Bowl is the more erudite and pedantic of the two, translating the poetry from French for the benefit of Cat.

Bowl is a gaunt figure and is dressed in a black gown. Cat is "smaller and more supple" and wears a tight green costume. Broomstick, an older figure wearing the costume of a French peasant, comes in early on and joins the conversation. Bowl and Cat are reading the poems of Claire Dupray and, having decided to forego the preface for now, are attempting to read the poems according to their interpretation of the portrait of the poet, which is printed on the frontispiece of the book. They find the poet in the portrait to be young, fresh, and beautiful, and they read her poems accordingly as young, fresh, and beautiful examples of a poetic mind. Broomstick casts doubt on their assumptions, however, and suggests that he would rather read the poems first alone, without heeding the portrait, in order to discern the degree to which they are young or fresh or anything else. When he finds the metaphors of the poetry to be stale ones, he suggests that they are not young but old, and deems, therefore, that the poet should be, according to the biographical readings employed by Bowl and Cat, an older woman. His position is vindicated at the end of the play when a reading of the preface reveals the fact that the portrait on the frontispiece was made over twenty years prior to the publication of the book and that the writer of the poems was not the young woman pictured but a woman forty-six years old. At this revelation, Bowl hurries off the stage declaring that he has been a fool, and Cat collapses.

A cursory reading of the play poses some elementary questions about its arrangement of setting and characters. Why, for instance, is the play set in the seventeenth century, and why are the characters named after two household objects and the common cat? The play seems also, at first, not to belong at all in the Stevens canon. However, a careful examination of the more important aesthetic issues at stake in the three characters' conversation can prove illuminating for questions concerning the play as a whole, including those of cast and setting. The question central to the aesthetic issues at stake in the play, as was mentioned above, concerns whether or not it is possible for a poet to remain of his day and yet still maintain his integrity or validity as a poet. The problem is first illustrated in the reading of Dupray's poems by Bowl and Cat. They are intrigued by the poems and find them to be extensions of the beauty they see in the portrait of the artist. In describing one of Dupray's poems, Bowl excitedly reports that the poem

makes an image of the greatest intensity. Nothing in nature could have revealed what her imagination and sensibility have revealed.

How true that is to my conception of Claire Dupray! She is beautiful.

Her poems are beautiful. (Opus Posthumous 173)

While translating Dupray's poetry, Bowl might suggest to us a similarity between Dupray's poetic vision and the reflections of Carlos as he lights his candles. That is, the poetry reveals the relationship between Dupray's own poetic imagination and the world of reality:

In the movement of trees, I find my own agitation. If it be morning, the mood of poplars, filled with sunlight, glistening in the dark west-wind, is already my own. If it be noon, the tossing of the elm trees in the golden sky has an identity with my own exulting. (173)

These associations, the movement of trees with personal agitation, the noon sun with personal exaltation, are what Bowl and Cat, because they are so taken by the beauty in the portrait, find refreshing. "How new she is!," exclaims Bowl (174).

The play emphasizes, much like the other two, a dramatization of the notion that consciousness derives its costume of identity from the associations it perceives. The theme is clearly depicted in the poetry of Dupray, as the passage above suggests, but it is also clear at the level of the characters themselves. Such a reading helps to make sense of the seemingly strange costumes Stevens requires. Bowl's gown is black and is covered with a faded silver pattern. Cat, as mentioned above, wears a tight green costume. Two of the poems with which these characters are most smitten concern, respectively, twilight and the green stalks of flowers. So, as Maureen Kravec has pointed out, "as Bowl and Cat, respectively, read Claire's poems about twilight and about flowers with long green stalks, we see an early appearance of the theme that the reader becomes what he reads" ("Bowl" 312). As in Carlos, here too the costume of environment determines consciousness. The play also suggests how Stevens' sense of a theatrical consciousness creates a

problem for his poetics. The illusory nature of perception is perhaps inevitable, but it remains insufficient as an aesthetic sensibility as long as the metaphors remain stale. That the pompous and erudite Bowl is gaunt suggests simply at the level of characterization that the words "he so hungrily devours are providing him and Cat insufficient sustenance" (Kravec, "Bowl" 312). Further, both Bowl and Cat "typify an exaggerated aesthetic sensibility in their tendency to equate sensual opulence with spiritual vitality, their desire to freeze earthly beauty in a timeless paradise" (Kravec, "Bowl" 312). The characters parallel the First and Second Chinese of Three Travelers in that their perceptions are based on fixed relationships. They remain fixed, therefore, in the stalest of theatrical illusions.

Broomstick, an older, sturdier figure than the other two, is neither as pedantic as Bowl nor as easily swayed by the cult of beauty that fascinates both Bowl and Cat. In response to their enthusiasm over the poems, Broomstick exclaims,

Pshaw! And imagine Bowl's thinking [them] new. Only because he wanted to think well of his poetess. She is young. Therefore she is new. Or therefore her poetry is young. That is one of the most persistent of all fallacies. (175)

Broomstick's complaint stems from his reading of Dupray's metaphors, which he finds to be firmly rooted in a past age:

This emotional waste, like the first poem, the one about twilight, this stale monism like 'The Shadow in the Trees,' this sophisticated green, green, green—it is all thirty years old at the least. . . . I might even put it in the last century. . . . What I hold against Claire Dupray, above everything else, is just that she is not herself in her day. To be herself she must be free. She looks free. But she is not free in spirit. (175)

When asked for an explanation, he suggests that "to be free, Claire Dupray must be as free from today as from yesterday. . . . Look at people the world over. The extent and degree of imitation is appalling" (175). While Bowl is excited by the poems, exclaiming "what an extraordinary effect one gets from seeing things as they are, that is to say: from looking at ordinary things intensely!" (173), Broomstick makes clear a position that will remain central to Stevens' aesthetic: "to look at ordinary things intensely, is not to see things as they are" (173). To look at things intensely is to see the framework of an illusion, and to do so without first sweeping away both past and present associations is to remain trapped within that stage of illusion, unable to adapt to the ever-impending flux of reality. Given the ever-changing nature of Stevens' reality, a stale relationship to it places us even further from meaningful perception than we would be had we the willingness to strip away old associations in an act of continual renewal. Stevens will never suggest that the poet can access and then express things as they are, free from the conscious associations that otherwise bind them. Metaphors become stale

and must be replaced, and our relationship to reality must be continuously swept clear and reformed. The metaphor that enables Stevens' model here is closely associated with the theatrical. If the artist can acknowledge the theatricality of perception and can sweep away stale association, he can create new theaters which reflect new relationships but which must eventually, of course, be swept away, too.

According to Broomstick, poets such as Claire Dupray become trapped in a theater of stale associations:

How little it would take to turn the poets into the only true comedians!
There's no truer comedy than this hodge-podge of men and sunlight,
women and moonlight, houses and clouds, and so on. (170)

To become trapped in established associations is to become enslaved by a previously constructed, artificial ordering principle. Broomstick adds, "just as the relations of man and moonlight, women and moonlight, man and mountains, women and waves, and so on, are undefined, so the relations of eyes and legs, lips and cheeks, and that kind of thing, are equally undefined" (171). Dupray imitates "the point of view and the feelings of a generation ago" (175). Since Dupray, in Broomstick's mind, relies on stale associations and therefore imitates the point of view of another generation (whether her own or a past one would make little difference), he declares that she cannot be the young and fresh poet the others insist upon but is, instead, reflective of Bowl and Cat's obsession with portraiture, "a poetess in the old-maidenly

sense of the word, not the vivid creature you conceive her to be" (175).

Broomstick's victory upon the revelation that the poet of the book was forty-six at the time of publication is a symbolic victory, for he is not, of course, arguing that age itself has anything to do with the quality of poetry. He is arguing that a person must be as free as possible of the age in which she lives, as well as free from the age of yesterday. Stevens' depiction of the world as it is perceived speaks of a kind of theater, and he suggests in this play and elsewhere that the poet must constantly acknowledge the inevitable illusion of perception in order to renew his or her relationship with the world. Only then will Claire Dupray be the vivid and fresh poet Bowl and Cat long for.

Despite the relative clarity of his argument, the issue of Stevens' choice for characterization in the play remains somewhat baffling. Kravec has suggested that Stevens makes the first two characters a bowl and a cat in order to "undercut [their] intellectual posings" ("Bowl" 311), but that does little in the way of explaining why the intellectual victor in the play bears the identity of a broomstick. As images, a cat and bowl serve each other—they maintain a fairly clear and fixed relationship. A broomstick, however, stands more for what it gets rid of than anything else. If, on the other hand, we associate the cat with perception based above all on senses, and the bowl with perception based on its ability to collect and hold things, we might arrive at another reading. What the play suggests is that it is the poet's job neither to perceive the world through his senses nor to seek meaning through a collection of

other poets' words (the bowl, after all, is a gaunt pedant) but continually to sweep away all such associations. In this sense, Cat and Bowl evince characteristics similar to those of the First and Second Chinese of Three Travelers, even as Broomstick, the single voice here of renewal and change, resembles the Third Chinese of that earlier play. The broomstick certainly functions as a symbol for the violence that is necessary for poetic renewal. Like the Third Chinese who alone can withstand the dead body on stage in the final scene of Three Travelers, Broomstick here is significant for his ability to accept a violent degree of change.

An important influence for Bowl, Cat and Broomstick was John Dryden's "An Essay of Dramatick Poesie," published in 1667 or 1668. Maureen Kravec has explored this connection fully in her essay "Bowl, Cat and Broomstick: Sweeping the Stage of Souvenirs," and though this chapter does not permit space for a full discussion of Kravec's findings, a brief summary of her essay will help to provide the necessary context for Stevens' play here. The play offers its most clear allusion to Dryden in Stevens' choice for the date of this conversation about the poetry of Claire Dupray in that the play takes place in 1667. Kravec offers a number of suggestions as to Dryden's significance here, but the most important is that in Dryden's essay he discusses the problem of writers imitating one another. According to Dryden, "betwixt the shaking off of an old habit, and the introducing of a new, there should be difficulty" (107). Kravec explains that Stevens was interested in

Dryden's sense of aesthetic change, as both writers were concerned that poets must "avoid the pitfalls of copying the ideas of even their own generation," that "progress cannot be made simply through imitation of what already exists" (318).

There is also an important allusion in the play to the early influences and poems of Stevens' himself. The attack on the poetry of Claire Dupray may be read as an attack on early twentieth-century assumptions about the importance of the symbolists in France. The play was written in 1916, "thirty years after the ascendancy of the symbolists in France and the aesthetes in England, whose poems exerted a strong influence on Stevens' collegiate style and concept of the poet's persona" (Kravec, "Bowl" 311). Kravec also points out that Dryden, too, questioned "the assumption that French models are the best for the authors' own cultural contexts" ("Bowl" 311). Dupray's poetry alludes not only to Stevens' earliest influences but to his early poems as well. One of the poems that Cat and Bowl show particular excitement about is entitled "Le Bouquet." A passage of the poem is read on stage:

Green, green, green—no doubt, this indicates the stalks—green, green,
green, green, green, yellow, green, yellow, green, green, gray, green,
yellow, yellow, white, white, white, green— (174)

The poem confuses the sensible Broomstick, who then attacks its stale use of language. The poem resembles closely one of Stevens' college poems entitled, appropriately, "Colors":

Pale orange, green and crimson and
white, and gold and brown.

Lapis-lazuli and orange, and opaque green,
faun-color, black and gold. ("Colors" 3-4)

Another of Dupray's poems bears the title "Banal Sojourn," the same as an early Stevens poem which is often read as an attempt at realistic description. When, in a poem already discussed here, Dupray writes about the trees mirroring her own feelings, she parodies Stevens' "Blanche McCarthy," another early poem which he omitted from his Collected Poems.

Importantly, therefore, the play calls attention to Stevens' previous poetic assumptions and experiments in order to scrutinize and ultimately to banish them from his new poetic stage. The play banishes Stevens' early attempts to "[see] things as they are" by "looking at ordinary things intensely." All three of the plays, in fact, include characters defined by Stevens as "pedantic." The Second Chinese, Carlos, and Bowl all suffer from an inability to renew sufficiently their relationship with reality as that reality changes and presses in on their particularly pedantic perceptions. These plays can be read, then, as theatrical performances of Stevens himself, a poet struggling with the aesthetic problems created when consciousness becomes a performance.

In Three Travelers Watch a Sunrise, Carlos Among the Candles, and Bowl, Cat and Broomstick, Stevens develops and illustrates a problem central to his entire career. As long as the relationship between imagination and

reality is bound by our need to impose our own associations onto reality and likewise to become a part of and exist in relation to that reality, human perception can never access fully the world of reality as it exists in an unordered, pre-conscious form. Poetic expression is therefore limited to what amounts to a theater of association it must rely on for its own momentary performance and is particularly problematic if those associations are merely adopted ones, imitations of either a past or a present age. Performative consciousness based on purely passive determination would deny the subject any agency at all. The medium of drama is what allowed Stevens to emphasize the performative nature of consciousness and to develop a model by which he could claim agency for the subject of artistic will. Stevens' plays put the poetic consciousness on a stage in order to illustrate its stage-like limitations. For the rest of his career, the stage continues to stand as a metaphor for the modern problem of consciousness itself. Any given moment of consciousness is necessarily staged; each time we become conscious of ourselves in the world, we leap onto Carlos' stage and begin lighting candles that help to define and give shape to that stage and our place in it. As we become aware of ourselves in relation to others, we will see the world in new ways only according to our ability to renew the relationship by getting rid of stale associations, and we can do this only by acknowledging the theatricality of perception. This acknowledgment allows the artist to strip away old theatrical associations and create new ones, creating and discovering

his own performances as he does so. It is the Third Chinese who can renew his relationship with reality because he can accept the significant degree of change that comes with getting rid of such associations, and it is Broomstick, he who can sweep away, who can see the aesthetic problems caused by a reliance on stale metaphors.

When Stevens left the theater after the 1917 productions of Carlos and Bowl, he was embarrassed sufficiently to keep from even publishing the latter of these, the only one by then not in print. He would take with him, however, this notion of consciousness as a temporary mask and poetic expression as temporary performance. He leaves the theater but not the play, retaining a poetic aesthetic closely tied to notions of the stage. Theatrical metaphors appear throughout his poetry and play an important role in his developing aesthetic. The plays do more in the way of underlining the central enigma in Stevens' poetics than they do in providing answers, but ultimately, they are helpful both for their illustration of this problem and their continued presence, metaphorically, in his later poetry.

Chapter V. Willful Illusions: Stevens' Poetry and the Performance of Poetic Consciousness

*A tempest cracked on the theatre. Quickly,
The wind beat in the roof and half the walls.
The ruin stood still in an external world.*

—Wallace Stevens, "Repetitions of a Young Captain"

*It has / to construct a new stage
And, like an insatiable actor, slowly and
With meditation, speak words that in the ear,
In the delicatest ear of the mind, repeat,
Exactly, that which it wants to hear . . .*

—Wallace Stevens, "Of Modern Poetry"

With an interest in writing for the theater behind him, Stevens continued to explore issues related to the notion of consciousness and the nature of artistic expression. However, in his continuing exploration of these concepts, Stevens did not entirely leave behind his interest in the theater. Throughout the poetry in Collected Poems and Opus Posthumous, Stevens investigates some of the central themes of his plays, among them the notion that consciousness reflects a performance of its external relationships and the

notion that artistic expression cannot, because of the limits of human perception, represent the multiplicitous flux of reality in its totality. The theater and related metaphors maintain an important position throughout his poems. Commentary on Stevens' poetry most often focuses on the theory of poetry thought to be imbedded in the poems, and, indeed, Stevens seems to be writing as directly about the nature of poetry as anything else. However, few critics have paid sufficient attention to the nature of the theatrical in the poems, and such an examination can help to clarify certain elements of Stevens' poetic, since in key places throughout his poetic canon he adopts the metaphor of the theater to describe his vision of the modern world and poetry's place within it. As he does this, Stevens establishes the notion that poetry is a process more than an end, a continual searching for old illusions that must be destroyed and the new ones that might, for a moment, hold back the pressure of reality. In this model, the poet acknowledges that all perceptions are limited, unable to represent a reality that is always in flux and creates momentary stays against a reality that will always challenge and destroy them. Poetic consciousness in this model is also in process, continually donning new costumes only to destroy them in the act of renewal. Poetic imagination leads to an important degree of agency in the theatrical world, for it is the powerful imagination that can accept change as the most significant feature of consciousness and can go about the task of destroying the old metaphors that stand in the way of a fresh relationship

with the world and the positing of a new, if only momentary, self within the world.

A central concern of a great majority of the discourse surrounding Stevens' poetry is the relationship, as Stevens presents it, between the imagination and reality. Indeed, this relationship is the focus of a great many Stevens poems. It is also the subject of several of his essays, and the critical discourse seems to agree, for the most part, that the issue is central to our understanding of Stevens' body of work. Beyond such agreement, however, critical paths diverge. As B. J. Leggett explains in Wallace Stevens and Poetic Theory: Conceiving the Supreme Fiction, different approaches to the body of poetry have yielded a great variety of conclusions about Stevens' poetics. Leggett identifies two poles between which most criticism has been located. At one end of the critical spectrum are those who would read Stevens as the "poet of reality." These readings are reflected by such commentators as J. Hillis Miller, in his early reading of Stevens in Poets of Reality, and Helen Regueiro, in The Limits of Imagination: Wordsworth, Yeats, and Stevens, among many others. These studies argue that Stevens sees poetry as a vehicle that can strip the imagination of certain associations in order for it to access somehow the flux of reality. The imagination, in this framework, becomes an "instrument for the experience of being" (Leggett, Wallace Stevens 5). On the other end of the spectrum are those who argue for a Nietzschean reading of Stevens' concept of reality as one that is too vast and too multiplicitous for

human perception ever to reach a moment of access to it that is in any way complete or definitive. Leggett offers Alan Perlis' Wallace Stevens: A World of Transforming Shapes as an example of the kind of study which most opposes those of Regueiro and the early Miller. Perlis' study assumes "reality's imperviousness to the imagination" and argues that, for Stevens, poetic imagination is that force which can and should, happily, transform the world according to its own constructs. In this model the imagination is not a necessary instrument for the experience of being but is, rather, a supreme and necessary end in itself. It doesn't so much help us "get at" reality as it constructs a particular version of it.

Leggett characterizes these different poles of Stevens criticism by emphasizing their respective readings of the first adage and subtitle of "Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction": "It Must Be Abstract." A brief overview of Leggett's distinctions here will prove helpful in situating my own argument more carefully among the vast amount of work that has already been done on Stevens' poetry. Stevens' use of theatrical metaphors further problematizes a particular critical distinction that other critics, such as Leggett, have also challenged. Readings of the dictum "It Must Be Abstract" tend to align themselves with one of the two major poles of Stevens discourse outlined above. According to Leggett, a majority of these readings fall into one of two categories:

Either abstraction is defined in a conventional sense as something disassociated from the concrete, the specific, the sensuous—that is, abstraction as artifice, idea, concept, generalization—or it is argued that Stevens is employing the term in a manner that runs counter to normal usage so that it comes to mean, for him, almost the opposite of what Pound meant when he warned the poet to ‘Go in fear of abstractions.’ (Leggett, Wallace Stevens 19)

As Leggett explains, many of those critics who would read Stevens as a “poet of reality” see his call for abstraction at the beginning of “Notes” as a call for a kind of “drawing away.” Such readings suggest that the phrase refers to the need, on the part of the poet, to take certain elements from the flux of reality and to draw them into a poetic form. Curiously, under such classifications, as Leggett has pointed out, “abstraction” comes then to mean something very like its opposite in traditional usage: something akin to “concrete.” For the early J. Hillis Miller, for instance, the ability for the poet to “abstract” involves “the power to carry the image of the very thing alive and undistorted into the mind” (Miller 248). In addition to Miller, Leggett places Harold Bloom, Frank Kermode, Roy Harvey Pearce, and Louis Martz among those who read “abstract” as the act of drawing out particular elements of reality.

A more conventional reading of the phrase “it must be abstract” can be found in the work of those critics who argue that Stevens assumes reality to be inaccessible and that his vision of poetic expression is highly constructive.

For these readers—Frank Doggett, Denis Donoghue, and Randall Jarrell, for example—“abstract” takes on a more traditional meaning. Here the term suggests something along the lines of “quasi-philosophical ideas or concepts” or, simply, a “higher level of generalizing” (Leggett, Wallace Stevens 18-9). But what Leggett suggests, importantly, is that these two fairly well-classified definitions of the phrase “abstract” are not necessarily sufficient.

By tracing the direct influence of I. A. Richards’ Coleridge on Imagination, an important source for Stevens in the early 1940s, Leggett argues for another way of reading Stevens’ claim that “It Must Be Abstract.” Richards examines the imagination/reality duality with which Stevens scholars have since wrestled, and suggests that the two conventional ways of viewing this dualism are not as contradictory or oppositional as has been assumed. According to Leggett, Richards offered Stevens a way to posit both the imagination and reality as being of equal importance. In this model, all human concepts of the world are necessarily fictions, imposed meanings on an otherwise meaningless flux. “Abstract,” in this sense, becomes the image of particulars as they appear in the mind: “any human utterance, from the most elementary description to the loftiest poetry, *must* be abstract” (Leggett, Wallace Stevens 33). Poetry cannot access the flux of reality, cannot get at “the very thing,” because it is always bound by “the artificial and therefore abstract nature of language” (Leggett, Wallace Stevens 39). But neither is Stevens suggesting, according to this reading, that poetry should therefore be more

general or abstract in its level of thought. "[E]ven the most sensuous detail", explains Leggett, "remains radically a product of abstraction" (40). Leggett, then, reads "It Must Be Abstract" not so much as a call for what poetry should do, as do both of the critical schools discussed above, but as a call for what poetry necessarily already is: "to acknowledge, as Richards does, that the world external to the mind has no meaning in itself, and that any formulation of it in thought or language is a myth, is to acknowledge as well that the 'all-inclusive myth' would of necessity be an abstraction" (Leggett, Wallace Stevens 32). Leggett's reading of Stevens' "abstraction" offers some room for both of the otherwise contradictory readings of that term evident in the two poles of Stevens scholarship discussed above. Stevens' supreme fiction does include the concrete, the particular, but acknowledges as it does this that it is necessarily a fiction.

Stevens' notion of the abstract characteristic of poetic expression has everything to do with his thinking about the nature of human consciousness and human perception. His model of artistic expression is a complex one, involving the particulars of a reality that in its entirety remains an ungraspable flux. As mentioned above, Leggett draws as his major source for his reading of Stevens' abstraction the work of I. A. Richards, but he also claims that "Notes" was a poem that Stevens "had been edging toward for more than twenty years" (27). Indeed, the poetics within the poem are those that had been taking shape through a number of different emphases

throughout Stevens' entire poetic career. One of the significant images Stevens uses as he develops this notion of the necessary abstraction reflected by the poetic imagination is that of the theater. The abstraction of the poetic imagination as we find it in Stevens' mature verse is a construct that has many roots in Stevens' early and continuing interest in the theater, and an examination of the development of the theatrical metaphor in Stevens' poetry can prove helpful in further illuminating this important element of his poetics. Stevens adopts the trope of the theater to describe his vision of modern life in a general sense, his vision of modern consciousness, and, most importantly, his vision of artistic expression. However, before discussing the development of the theatrical metaphor as it relates to Stevens' concept of poetic expression, it is helpful first to examine that metaphor as it appears in relation to the modern condition and consciousness in more general terms, for such is the foundation upon which he develops his poetics.

i

Stevens uses the metaphor of the theater in several instances to describe the condition of life in the modern world. "Repetitions of a Young Captain," first published in the 1947 collection Transport to Summer, provides the most powerful use of the theatrical metaphor in describing what has been left behind after a cultural loss of faith in the existence of gods. The poem begins,

A tempest cracked on the theatre. Quickly,
The wind beat in the roof and half the walls.
The ruin stood still in an external world.

(Collected Poems 306)

A crack in our understanding of perception has led to the realization that perception reveals not what we had long thought it to reveal. That is, the crack reveals the object of our perception to be not the natural, divinely created world but a theater, a man-made form built for the purpose of representation. As Miller suggests, "the fact that it can be destroyed proves that even when it existed it was not what it seemed. It seemed a divine gift, something as solid as the earth itself. Now man knows that all along it was a painted scene" (Poets of Reality 218).

The loss of a divinely created world underlies Stevens' poetics as manifested throughout his collected poems, and this loss is crucial to our understanding of the role of Stevens' new "theatre." In "Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction," Stevens writes that "heaven" has "expelled us and our images," and that "[t]he death of one god is the death of all" (Collected Poems 381). The modern world does not so much reflect the loss of a particular god as it does the loss of the ability to posit the existence of any gods at all. In his 1951 essay "Two or Three Ideas," Stevens discusses the nature of the "age of disbelief," focusing specifically on the impact sustained at the loss of a viable divinity:

To see the gods dispelled in mid-air and dissolve like clouds is one of the great human experiences. It is not as if they had gone over the horizon to disappear for a time; nor as if they had been overcome by other gods of greater power and profounder knowledge. It is simply that they came to nothing. . . . What was most extraordinary is that they left no mementoes behind, no thrones, no mystic rings, no texts either of the soil or of the soul. It was as if they had never inhabited the earth. There was no crying out for their return. ("Two or Three Ideas" 260)

As Miller explains, "there was no crying out for their return because man knew they would never come back. They would never come back because they had never been there at all" (Poets of Reality 219). The gods are thus revealed to have been projections of mankind: "The people . . . made the gods" ("Two or Three Ideas" 261).

The loss of gods leaves behind a profound sense of vacancy and annihilation. In "Esthétique Du Mal," for instance, Stevens writes "How cold the vacancy / When the phantoms are gone and the shaken realist / First sees reality" (Collected Poems 320). This sense of vacancy can be found in earlier poems, too, such as in the "nothingness" of the observer in "The Snow Man": "the listener . . . nothing himself, beholds / Nothing that is not there and the nothing that is" (Collected Poems 10). Stevens writes further on the loss of gods in the essay "Two or Three Ideas": "It was their annihilation, not ours,

and yet it left us feeling that in a measure we, too, had been annihilated. It left us feeling dispossessed and alone in a solitude, like children without parents, in a home that seemed deserted, in which the amical rooms and halls had taken on a look of hardness and emptiness" (Opus Posthumous 260). In his 1947, "Three Academic Pieces," Stevens writes, "the structure of reality because of the range of resemblances that it contains is measurably an adult make-believe" (75). The "rooms" of our "home," those cordoned off sections of the world of reality that had been thought to be of divine creation, are revealed to be merely theatrical illusions of divine creation, constructed and imposed by humankind.

When it is revealed that the gods have been merely human projections, then modern man, according to Stevens, is left facing a reality that is far less familiar, left to live in a world that is no longer his own. Where once we were "Danes in Denmark," people belonging to a meaningful world that included us, we find now that we are in a world that is painfully "not us." We become, in Miller's words, "Dane[s] in Greece or Patagonia" (Poets of Reality 217). The world becomes unfamiliar once the acknowledgment is made that previous ordering principles have been far from divine, have been, in fact, man-made. Herein lies the basis of Stevens' view of the reality that exists apart from human perception. "Repetitions of a Young Captain" continues as follows: "[the theatre] had been real. It was not now. / The rip of the wind and the glittering were real now, / In the spectacle

of a new reality" (Collected Poems 306). We can read the term "spectacle" here in two ways. A typical reading of the poem suggests that this new reality is a spectacle of that which is particularly not us; it is a new display of sorts which we can view but of which we are not a part. If we push this reading further, however, and consider the term as a continuation of the theatrical metaphor on which the entire poem seems to be based, then "spectacle" takes on a particularly artificial meaning—it becomes a kind of staging, a particular representation of the thing and not the thing itself. The spectacle of our perception thus leads always to representations. It is for this reason that in "The Pure Good of Theory" Stevens writes,

It is never the thing but the version of the thing:

The fragrance of the woman not her self,

Her self in her manner not the solid block. (Collected Poems 333)

The new reality becomes what we have also discovered the old one to have been all along—a staged and illusory event, an artificial rendering of an ultimately ungraspable flux of reality. As early as 1909, Stevens considered the modern condition in terms of the theater. In a letter to Elsie he writes, "We are where we have never been, listening to what we have never heard. We are in a dark place listening . . . And is it all on a stage? And can't you possibly close your eyes and, by imagination, feel that it is perfectly real?" (Letters 149-50).

"Of Modern Poetry" also builds its argument on the notion of the theatricality of the modern condition. This poem carries important implications for the role of the poet in the world that has become a theater, implications I will discuss in a later section of this chapter, but it is important here in that it is perhaps Stevens' best known example of the theatrical metaphor on which his exploration of the role of the poet is based. Before the world was revealed to be a theater, the poem argues, the poem had only to follow the script: "the scene was set; it repeated what / Was in the script" (Collected Poems 239). But then "the theatre was changed / To something else" (Collected Poems 239). The discovery that divine creation has been but a man-made projection posits a reality far beyond the scope of human perception, and makes any stable, actual world, any world that is not invented, a distanced one, one very much not of ourselves: "we live in a place / That is not our own and, much more, not ourselves . . . We are the mimics" (Collected Poems 384). According to Stevens' model, the world is a theater because of the discovery that, in a world without gods, all human perception is limited, unable to discover the world of reality in its totality. Perception, that which we once believed to be our ability to reveal adequately the world of reality is discovered instead to be only artificial and highly limited illusions of a reality ultimately beyond the scope of any such human construct. Our theaters of perception are motivated by that world of reality, and we include parts of that reality in our spectacles, but now that we know

our perception is limited to its ability to create a theater, the theater that once was, that which seemed flawless (and was therefore invisible), is no longer. It is this "crack" in the modern theater of perception that allows us to recognize its very theatricality. The illusion is revealed as illusion, the costumes are revealed as costumes, and the room itself, what we once thought a window to the world, is revealed as a stage. Discovering the theatricality of the world makes simply following the script no longer tenable, for we have discovered that the script is not of divine making. It is this revelation that cancels out the possibility of the return of the gods, and it is this revelation that also casts light on Stevens' particular presentation of the theatricality of consciousness.

Stevens' portrayal of modern consciousness is rendered as well through the use of theatrical metaphors in a number of ways throughout his collected poems. The word "act," which appears in several instances where Stevens seems to be discussing perception, should be read with his metaphor of the theatrical state of the modern world in mind. That the poem is, for example, "the act of the mind" suggests not just that the poem is the mind's "activity" but also that it reflects a theatrical or "acted" consciousness. This reading suggests an understanding of the poet himself, of course, as something of an "actor." As Stevens comes to see perception as a failed attempt to represent reality, he also suggests that consciousness is fully involved in the theaters of perception. Consciousness is not an essential being that finds expression through poetry as much as it is a temporary

illusion that is enabled by its relationships with others and with its surroundings. Before discussing the ways in which poetic expression is portrayed as a reflection of "acting," however, I want first to examine more carefully Stevens' notion of consciousness in general. In particular, notions of the self as a manifestation of its external relationships play a significant role in his poetics. It will prove useful to look, momentarily, beyond Stevens' direct invocation of theatrical tropes in order to ascertain the particular elements of selfhood that are at stake in his broader vision of modern consciousness.

"Theory," an early Stevens poem first published in Harmonium, illustrates the basic notion that identity is formed by the acknowledgment of the self's external relationships. The poem is short enough to quote in full:

I am what is around me.

Women understand this.

One is not duchess

A hundred yards from a carriage.

These, then are portraits:

A black vestibule;

A high bed sheltered by curtains.

These are merely instances. (Collected Poems 86-7)

This poem offers an argument similar to those made in Carlos Among the Candles and Bowl, Cat and Broomstick, suggesting that consciousness

becomes that which surrounds it. The poem accomplishes two things. First, it suggests that the essence of the speaker's self ("I am") is imbedded in its external relationships and that those relationships are limited. The associations that define us, whether involving a "high bed" or not, are always necessarily "sheltered by curtains," for such associations mark the stages of perception in which we define ourselves. As Christoph Irmscher explains in his essay "Theory as Mask in Wallace Stevens," "we are given a definition that is then, as we are made to believe, exemplified or illustrated in the following lines by references to a mysterious 'duchess' and her environment ('black vestibule,' 'high bed')" (123). The argument of the first seven lines of the poem is that, because they understand the necessity of the proper environment, "women understand" Stevens' "theory" of consciousness. If a person can be defined by her environment, then a black vestibule would surely do for a portrait. The second thing the poem accomplishes, however, is encapsulated in its final line: "These are merely instances." What this suggests is that though definitions of the self rely on its environment, such external relationships are infinite, which in turn suggests, of course, that the manifestations of self would likewise be unlimited. Here we are reminded of Carlos, who declares that "I know myself to be incalculable, since the causes of what I am are incalculable" (Opus Posthumous 164).

In "Mrs. Alfred Uruguay," first published in Parts of a World, Stevens develops his vision of external relationships providing the necessary

framework for selfhood, and he also investigates the problem of defining the self free from such frameworks. The poem offers two opposing figures, that of the lady concerned with "elegance," dressed in rich velvet, and a youth, "dressed poorly," who ultimately proves to be the one of "capable" imagination. The woman, Mrs. Alfred Uruguay, provides an important example for this discussion in that she attempts to rid herself of external relationships in order to get at herself. Consequently she, of course, fails. As Albert Gelpi suggests, the "lady's neurotic search to arrive at the real in herself traps her in denial of body and the self" (65). In the "browns and blues of evening," Mrs. Alfred Uruguay tells the donkey upon which she rides,

'I have said no
to everything, in order to get at myself.
I have wiped away moonlight like mud. Your innocent
ear

And I, if I rode naked, are what remain.' (Collected Poems 249)

In "wiping" away the moonlight as if it were "mud," the woman wishes to get to that part of herself which exists apart from the framework of external relationships. Her hope speaks of a kind of dualism that would posit clear distinctions between self and other, but by wiping away the moonlight, she "leaves no point of reference either for the real or for the self" (Carroll 129). Margaret Dickie, in an essay exploring Stevens' portrayal of modern subjectivity, explains that Mrs. Alfred Uruguay "has erred in assuming that

there is a self beyond the things that she has denied" (28). The poem continues by declaring the woman's failure: "Her no and no made yes impossible" (Collected Poems 249). After ridding herself of the "mud" of "moonlight" and attempting to find herself entirely apart from that which surrounds her, the "moonlight crumbled into degenerate forms, / While she approached the real" (Collected Poems 249). Both Mrs. Alfred Uruguay and the world apart from which she attempts to identify herself fall away when she attempts to negate her surroundings. There is no self, then, apart from the self which appears in the particular framework of its external relationships: "Her dress and the moonlight may become one; but they can be neither taken off nor wiped away without obliterating her subjectivity. . . . There is no center here, but only external details through which subjectivity moves" (Dickie 28). Mrs. Alfred Uruguay's attempt at nakedness fails.

In canto VIII of the "It Must Change" section of "Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction," we find a figure similar to Mrs. Alfred Uruguay in the character of Nanzia Nunzio. Like Mrs. Alfred Uruguay, Nanzia Nunzio strips herself of her "clothing" in order to present some kind of pure self to her spouse, Ozymandias:

On her trip around the world, Nanzia Nunzio
Confronted Ozymandias. She went
Alone and like a vestal long-prepared.

I am the spouse. She took her necklace off
And laid it in the sand. As I am, I am
The spouse. She opened her stone-studded belt.

I am the spouse, divested of bright gold,
The spouse beyond emeralds or amethyst,
Beyond the burning body that I bear.

I am the woman stripped more nakedly
Than nakedness . . . (Collected Poems 395-6)

Even as she strips items of her clothing off of her body, Nanzia Nunzio fails in her attempt to reach a self that does not rely on the framework of external relationships. In her mind, the pure self that she wishes to uncover is ultimately not identifiable without reference to the other, without reference to Ozymandias. Stripped of clothing, she claims again and again that "I am the spouse." Instead of escaping the bounds of the framework her clothing reflects, she merely manages to change frameworks altogether. And Ozymandias is quick to point to this fact:

Then Ozymandias said the spouse, the bride
Is never naked. A fictive covering

Weaves always glistening from the heart and mind.

(Collected Poems 396).

The frameworks of external relationships, then, are necessary for any moment of consciousness, are necessary for a self either to know itself or to be known. Though Stevens does not, in these instances, adopt theatrical metaphors directly, the vision of consciousness presented in Mrs. Alfred Uruguay and Nanzia Nunzio illuminates some of the central characteristics of the portrayals of selfhood that are drawn elsewhere in specifically performative terms.

The poem "Examination of the Hero in a Time of War" posits a vision of consciousness in theatrical terms which builds on the model suggested in the two figures discussed above. The notion of the inseparability of the self and a given framework of external relationships is echoed in this poem in the theatrical terms of an actor and his role. In this poem, we find that the hero is he who "Acts in reality, adds nothing / To what he does. He is the heroic / Actor and act but not divided. / It is a part of his conception, / That he be not conceived, being real" (Collected Poems 279). This vision of consciousness presents any given moment of selfhood as a necessarily theatrical moment, the self/actor inseparable from the role which is itself manifested in the self's external relationships and which is inherently artificial. The actor has no self apart from the costume of his external relationships. This concept of the theatricality of consciousness is closely related to figures in Stevens' poems

which do not directly invoke the trope of the theater. Mrs. Alfred Uruguay and Nanzia Nunzio fail in their attempts to establish selfhood apart from the frameworks—the particular stagings—that selfhood requires. The fact that the necessary frameworks through which consciousness can be manifested are constantly in flux suggests the infinite number of the “causes of what I am,” and it speaks of an infinitely large field of possible relationships, possible selves. This perspective on consciousness reminds us of Stein’s efforts on the stage to examine the self as it moves about within such intricate fields. In both cases, there remains without these relationships no center, for the relationships are precisely what provide the opportunity for the acting out of selfhood to take place.

ii

As Stevens develops the figure of the poet throughout his collected poems, it becomes clear that it is onto the stage of a theatrical world that the poet must step. The hero in “Examination of the Hero in a Time of War” makes no attempt to envision himself beyond his theatrical limitations: “It is part of his conception, / That he be not conceived being real” (Collected Poems 279). It is by acknowledging himself as a performance that Stevens’ ideal poet, as he is rendered through several poems, is able to resist entrapment in stale theaters of perception. In “Mrs. Alfred Uruguay,” the female figure fails in her attempt at naked selfhood in denial of all else, but

there is also, of course, the "youth," "dressed poorly," who, we are told, is a figure of "capable imagination." This figure, though not rendered in theatrical terms, clarifies Stevens' vision of how the poet must go about his task. The clothing of the youth in the poem contrasts with the fine and elegant velvet of Mrs. Alfred Uruguay. That he is "dressed poorly" does not, however, suggest that he is somehow free from a given framework of external relationships. The poverty of his clothes by no means parallels the nakedness sought by the other figure in the poem. The youth, importantly, remains fully clothed, though inelegantly. We learn near the end of the poem that this youth is the "eventual victor" on the hillside where Mrs. Alfred Uruguay has clearly failed. The important difference between the two figures is that the youth knows that reality cannot be understood from outside of it; he posits no distinction between himself and his surroundings, accepting fully his costume in the world of reality as he perceives it. As the youth descends the mountain, "[l]ost in an integration of the martyrs' bones" and "[r]ushing from what was real," he is able to attain the elegance that ultimately eludes Mrs. Alfred Uruguay. The youth

Rode over the picket rocks, rode down the road,
And, capable, created in his mind,
Eventual victor, out of the martyrs' bones,
The ultimate elegance: the imagined land.

(Collected Poems 250).

The word "capable" is repeated four times in the section of the poem most concerned with the youth of imaginative powers, and clearly his imagination is what sets him apart from Mrs. Alfred Uruguay. That he goes into the world of reality looking not to separate himself from the world but to bring elements of that world into his imagination is what allows him to find the "ultimate elegance: the imagined land." It is important, too, that the youth rides down the mountain, seeking not a perspective on the world from heights above it, such as a mountain-top view might provide, but instead an act of immersion in the elements of that world. While Mrs. Alfred Uruguay loses both self and world when she attempts to make a distinction between the two, stripping herself of her external relationships on the false assumption that a self lies underneath, the youth of capable imagination attempts no such distinction, and, even though "poorly dressed," in the end he finds an elegance more vast, finds in fact the "ultimate elegance," in his relationship with the external world he readily accepts. His literal costume reflects a resistance to fixed ways of being in the world and a willingness to accept a larger vision of selfhood, one whose most significant inherent feature is change. Again, neither the youth nor Mrs. Alfred Uruguay are discussed in particularly theatrical terms, but they highlight specific characteristics of Stevens' concerns with modern consciousness and artistic

expression that remain crucial to his development of a larger theatrical model.

The figure in "Landscape With Boat," like Mrs. Alfred Uruguay, makes the mistake of trying to distinguish things from one another in an attempt to get at a reality that remains ultimately inaccessible:

He brushed away the thunder, then the clouds,
Then the colossal illusion of heaven. Yet still
The sky was blue. He wanted imperceptible air.
He wanted to see. He wanted the eye to see
And not be touched by blue. . . .

. . . he rejected, he denied, to arrive

At the neutral centre, the ominous element,

The single-colored, colorless, primitive. (Collected Poems 242)

His efforts, of course, are doomed to sure failure, since "he never supposed / That he might be truth, himself, or part of it" (242). The figure of the poet that Stevens develops in pieces like "Of Modern Poetry" and "Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction" will immerse himself fully in the world around him. Making no pretense of escaping the theatricality of consciousness or perspective, he will strive to learn more about his surroundings. Charles Altieri explains that, according to Stevens, "it is only by grasping what we share through historical and seasonal change that we can hope to purge our idealizations of all of the ideological baggage that otherwise would betray

them to history's junk heap of dead metaphors" (Painterly Abstraction 322). In "Of Modern Poetry," for example, the poem "has to be living, to learn the speech of the place. / It has to face the men of the time and to meet / The women of the time. It has to think about war / And it has to find what will suffice" (Collected Poems 240). Acknowledging the necessity of consciousness manifesting itself through its external relationships, the poet readily immerses himself in his own in order to create meaningful, if still theatrical, moments of satisfaction.

Throughout the poems, Stevens continues to assert his notion of the theatricality of consciousness and to develop his model of poetic expression that maintains agency even within the limits of theatrical perception. The poet, of course, is subject to the same distanced and inaccessible world of reality as are others. One element of perception that is of a considerable amount of concern to Stevens, and which is particularly important in a consideration of his notion of the role of the poet, involves the position and function of language in this theatrical world. Much like Stein, Stevens is concerned with language's rigidity, its system of ordering reality according to a fixed set of relationships that necessarily deny a wealth of other simultaneous relationships. "To fix it," Stevens argues in "The Noble Rider and the Sound of Words," "is to end it" (34). For Stevens, this characteristic of language further perpetuates the inaccessibility of the flux of reality. Specifically, Stevens suggests in several poems that the moment we name a thing in

language is the very moment that we lose the thing itself. In "The Noble Rider," Stevens argues that "a poet's words are of things that do not exist without the words" (32). We lose the thing because its name makes it into only a symbol, different from other words, other symbols, according to the particular ways in which it is classified in language. Dickie points out that in Stevens' model language can neither express nor reveal but, rather, is limited to its ability to distinguish one thing from another:

Speech does not reveal the inner to the outer world. It does no more than distinguish one external thing from another: the oranges from the peignoirs, the donkey from the woman, the velvet from moonlight, the emerald or amethyst from the necklace. (32)

Language reflects human perception and our inability ever to know things outside of linguistic, relational metaphor. Ultimately, each name designated in language remains "a name for something that never could be named" (Collected Poems 381). In Stevens' model, language isolates that which is otherwise not isolated and in doing so loses that which it attempts to describe.

Leggett explains Stevens' thinking on this point as revolving on a kind of paradox. Stevens argues that the thing can be most closely known only when all of its linguistic representations, all of our words for it, have been discarded. The paradox is that the more we know a thing, the more we can create linguistic structures of and around it, the more we necessarily abstract

the thing into the very structure that can erase all understanding—stale metaphor:

This is the paradox of an object that can be known only after all our words for it have been discarded—or, to put it in Stevens's terms, that can be known only by the completely ignorant man. Stevens turns the conventional notion of obscurity and accessibility on its head, since, in terms of language, it is at the point of its greatest (or absolute) obscurity that the object is most accessible. (Leggett, Wallace Stevens 130)

Linguistic fixity is the enemy, in Stevens' model, to maintaining a fresh relationship with the ever inaccessible world of reality. The man in the poem "The Latest Freed Man," therefore, is "[t]ired of the old descriptions of the world" and finds his freedom in a moment that is without old metaphor: "It was how he was free. It was how his freedom came. / It was being without description" (Collected Poems 205). The second section of "Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction" speaks to the need for poetry, therefore, to constantly destroy and rebuild the metaphors through which we view the world: "It Must Change." The statue of General Du Puy in this section of "Notes" serves well as an example of the problem Stevens finds with our tendency to fix things in permanent status. The general, fixed in "inhuman bronze" rests "immobile" (Collected Poems 391). Because of his permanence, the general becomes unreal ("There never had been, never could be, such / a man"), and ultimately the statue loses its relevance: "Nothing had happened because

nothing had changed. / Yet the General was rubbish in the end" (392).

Stevens' figure of capable imagination, his successful poet, will resist the tendency to fix things in bronze, to make permanent that which inherently is not so. To do this, he will have to acknowledge the temporality of all metaphors so that he can scrape away old ones to make room for new theaters of perception.

Resisting fixity creates a significant paradox for the poet, however, whose very medium is a language based on the principle the poet seeks most to avoid. Stevens argues that the poet cannot name the thing without losing it in stale metaphor. As Dickie explains,

Speech can follow process—the divesting of all external details, the saying no to everything, the disrobing—but it cannot get beyond the end of such process. It can weave a covering for nakedness; but it can expose nothing more naked than nakedness. (32)

But, though the poet cannot therefore access the flux of reality, he can nevertheless come as close as possible by resisting old, standard, and familiar metaphors. He can present elements of perceived reality by way of new, unconventional, and startling metaphors. Leggett explains,

The problem for the poet attempting to capture this moment is that it is a nonlinguistic phenomenon; the closest the poet can come to it is in an unconventional figure, one that refuses to name the moment in

a traditional way or to suggest an identifiable connection with the object. (Wallace Stevens 130)

The thing becomes most accessible (though complete accessibility remains impossible) when the language used to describe it becomes the most startling, the most unconventional. The use of unconventional metaphors allows the poet to present a particular vision of the world, one which is, of course, still limited, still only a momentary production, as if it were an actual glimpse at "the very thing" itself, as if it were a moment of realist presentation. When readers receive the image in a non-conventional way, they are reminded of what it is like to experience reality before placing that experience into linguistic constructs. Therefore, "the prattle that occurs at the moment when the old world is reduced to first idea must give only the *illusion* of nondescription; it must resist the intelligence *almost* successfully" (Leggett, Wallace Stevens 131). Once the unconventional metaphor is made, however, it quickly becomes stale and falls into the trap of conventional metaphor. It is for this reason, Stevens argues, that the "supreme" poem must change. It must resist the tendency to fix elements of reality in permanent relationships by relying on stale metaphors, and it must instead constantly strip away old metaphors, become ignorant of past ways of seeing, in order to create new, if momentary, orders. These moments of illusory order are classified in several poems as theatrical productions, and, since they are those perceptions

produced by minds of capable imagination, they are the necessary theatrical moments that can renew our relationship with the ungraspable universe.

The three most extended treatments of the role of artistic expression within a theatrical world are found in "As at a Theatre," which was not included in the Collected Poems but which appears in both major editions of Opus Posthumous; the much more famous and commonly anthologized "Of Modern Poetry"; and "Auroras of Autumn," also included in Collected Poems. All three poems reflect a mature Stevens poetic. "Of Modern Poetry" was first published in 1942 in Parts of a World, and Samuel French Morse, editor of the first edition of Opus Posthumous, dates the composition of "As at a Theatre" at 1950. "Auroras of Autumn" was first published in a collection of the same name in 1950. Importantly, these poems reflect a development of particular ideas about the theatricality of consciousness found throughout his entire canon, beginning with the three plays of 1916 and 1917.

The first line of "As at a Theatre" posits one of Stevens' favorite symbols for the act of perception in relation to the ever-changing world: "Another sunlight might make another world" (Opus Posthumous 118). The addition of a single light creating a new world is an idea that begins in Carlos Among the Candles and continues throughout many of Stevens' more significant works. In this case, the world revealed under the new light might be "green, more or less, in green and blue in blue" (118). Following this line in the first stanza are a number of similes describing the newly created world.

The new perspective will yield a world that is unfamiliar: "Like taste distasting the first fruit of a vine, / Like an eye too young to grapple its primitive" (118). The world as it is revealed through this new perspective will also, of course, be necessarily artificial. It is "like the artifice of a new reality" (118), but it will nevertheless provide some degree of satisfaction for the mind which seeks such new relationships. The vision created by artistic expression is acknowledged to be artificial and temporary from the beginning, but it remains of value in its ability to satisfy the mind's need to renew its relationship with reality:

The curtains, when pulled, might show another whole,
An azure outre-terre, oranged and rosed,
At the elbow of Copernicus, a sphere,
A universe without life's limp and lack,
Philosopher' end . . . What difference would it make,

So long as the mind, for once, fulfilled itself? (Opus Posthumous 119)

A poem creates a particular illusion "as at a theatre," and in doing so offers temporary satisfaction in the newness and unconventionality of its ordering principles. It is an "unofficial view of being" ("The Noble Rider" 41). The theater of Stevens' poetic involves only these momentary stays against the inevitable revelations that will pull aside the curtains of one particular stage and necessitate the creation of a new vision, scraping away the "green and blue in blue" to make room for the "azure outre-terre, oranged and rosed."

Several Stevens poems portray the ideal poem, in as much as it must involve a scraping away of old metaphors, as a particular kind of violence. "Man and Bottle," for example, argues that the poem "lashes more fiercely than the wind, / As the mind, to find what will suffice, destroys / Romantic tenements of rose and ice" (Collected Poems 238). The violence necessary for poetic renewal has its roots in the figure of Broomstick, who sweeps the stage of stale metaphor in Stevens' final play, though only in one of the very earliest of his stagings.

The poet in "Of Modern Poetry" has inherited a world that is revealed to have been only a convincing theater of illusion. Without an awareness of the theatricality of perception, all the poet had to do was repeat "what was in the script" (Collected Poems 239). Once the theatricality of perception is revealed, however, the theater itself changes "to something else." The past becomes a "souvenir," merely a reminder of a theater so real that one could rest in it, unaware of the illusion. Now the poem, as the first line tells us, is "of the mind in the act of finding / What will suffice" (239). That the poem marks not a finished product of the mind but shows "the mind in the act of finding" suggests the relentless refutation of anything fixed in Stevens' poetics. In his mature verse this theme is echoed in several ways. Several critics have pointed out, for example, Stevens' resistance to the totality suggested by the idea of a book. "Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction," one of

his most significant poems, presents itself importantly as "notes toward" rather than presenting itself as the final word on poetry.

The poet of "Of Modern Poetry" must immerse himself in the costume of his surroundings, his age, so that he relies not on stale metaphor for his perception but on the ever-changing flux of his surroundings, and he must then create a new theater:

It has
To construct a new stage. It has to be on that stage
And, like an insatiable actor, slowly and
With meditation, speak words that in the ear,
In the delicatest ear of the mind, repeat,
Exactly, that which it wants to hear.

The poet here becomes an actor upon his own stage within the theater of the modern world. He is "insatiable" in that he is never satisfied and is always, therefore, seeking new meanings, stripping off old costumes and donning new ones. Sukenick explains that "here, the act is that of the mind as it continually meditates the words which are an exact expression of the mind, words which have the right sound to the 'ear of the mind,' and which compose, therefore, apt modern poetry" (107). The audience, the poem continues, is "invisible" as the poet writes, but as they read the poem, it will seem so apt that they will feel as if they were reading of themselves. The poet as actor plays the role of one who can make sense of the world:

The actor is

A metaphysician in the dark, twanging
An instrument, twanging a wiry string that gives
Sounds passing through sudden rightnesses, wholly
Containing the mind, below which it cannot descend,
Beyond which it has no will to rise. (Collected Poems 240)

The poet, in using unconventional metaphor and presenting elements of reality, in as much as they exist in the mind, in startling new relationships, unfixes their familiarity and creates a sense, if only momentary, of "sudden rightness." Stevens ends the poem by suggesting that the actual subject of the poem is of little importance: It "may / Be of a man skating, a woman dancing, a woman / Combing. The poem of the act of the mind" (240).

Ultimately, the poem is not about its given subject as much as it is about the act of the mind as it seeks to confront reality. It is not theater for the purpose of showing a reality that will always exist beyond it; it is, rather, a continual seeking; it is, as Stevens writes in "Repetitions of a Young Captain," "theatre for theatre" (Collected Poems 309). And given Stevens' portrayal of modern consciousness, it is important to remember that the "act" of the mind is both the "activity" of the poetic mind and the requisite "acting-out" of consciousness that is necessary for any moment of poetic expression to occur.

"Auroras of Autumn" presents a meditation on one of Stevens' most significant themes, the theme which is central to his use of theatrical

metaphors—that of change. The poem considers the breaking down of all attempts at order under the pressure of the ever-changing flux of reality. The title (both of the poem itself and the collection in which it was first published) refers to the lights of the aurora borealis. Stevens writes in a 1954 letter: “The auroras of autumn are . . . the aurora borealis which we have now and then in Hartford, sometimes quite strong enough to attract attention from indoors. These lights symbolize a tragic and desolate background” (Letters 852). The “tragic and desolate background” that provides a focal point for the poem is the background of change, the flux of reality, that continues to break down all existing orders. Given the focus of the poem, it is not surprising to see Stevens turn again to his metaphor for human perception in the midst of universal change.

The figure of the father who appears in the fourth canto of the poem appears to symbolize the creative imagination, that force which, as is seen elsewhere in Stevens’ poetry, both acknowledges and accepts change, bidding farewell to old orders and therefore able to accept and construct the new. The father “says yes / To no / and in saying yes he says farewell,” accepts a canceling of the past (Collected Poems 414). Because of his ability to accept change, he “leaps from heaven to heaven more rapidly / Than bad angels leap from heaven to hell in flames” (414). He also, importantly, acknowledges that a given moment of definition reflects not the final form of the world but “actors approaching, in company, in their masks” (414). In the

fifth canto, the father figure creates one of these moments of theater in the form of a festival. He "fetches tellers of tales / and musicians who mute much, muse much, on the / tales" (415). He produces the momentary stay against the impending chaos of the universe by constructing a staged event:

The father fetches pageants out of the air,
Scenes of the theatre, vistas and blocks of woods
And curtains like a naive pretense of sleep. (415)

The poem is about change, though, not the moments that seem temporarily to defy it, and so the theater constructed as a festival in this instance must, of course, crumble. The theatrical production becomes lost again into the formlessness from which it was created:

What festival? This loud, disordered mooch?
These hospitalers? These brute-like guests?
These musicians dubbing at a tragedy,
A-dub, a-dub, which is made up of this:
That there are no lines to speak? There is no play.
Or, the persons act one merely by being here. (416)

All of the organization is reduced at once to a "disordered mooch." The theatrical moments of definition or order come from and return to the undefinable, unordered flux of reality. Canto six begins "[i]t is a theatre floating through the clouds, / Itself a cloud" (416). Merely by "being here," we are actors participating in the illusion of order, an illusion that is grounded

only in the clouds of the ever-changing flux and which will ultimately be broken down. Artistic expression in this model is the "act" of the poetic mind, that mind which, in a conscious moment acknowledged to be itself illusion, is able to accept change and scrape away diligently, even violently, old ordering principles in order to present new, if only momentary, illusions of definition and order.

In Stevens' modern world, all moments of consciousness are arrived at by way of illusion and costume. The poetic imagination accepts the illusory nature of perception and accepts, therefore, a costume of change. Poems in this model reflect only moments of a continual process. In the process, the poems act as momentary structural ordering devices which posit both a particular vision of the world and a particular version of self in the world. In this model, external relationships provide a theatrical role of sorts, creating a self that will necessarily don various other costumes as it moves within the ever-changing flux of the world of reality. It is this model of a theatricalized consciousness that first appears in earlier forms in the plays themselves but which clearly remains important to the larger Stevens poetic. It is a complex model, though, and not without some slippage in the theatrical metaphors Stevens so often invokes. Traditional notions of "actor" involve both the playing of a role and the consciousness that is separate from that role, aware of its own "act" as being different from itself. What Stevens' model suggests is that any moment of selfhood involves a kind of costuming,

and that, since the costume necessarily changes as do the external relationships, this costuming is not reflective of an essential core self. What, then, lies underneath the costume remains somewhat problematic. There is no actor here, free to leave her role and exist apart from it. In this model, we have a vision of consciousness that is much like Stevens' vision of perception itself. There is no way of escaping the theater of either perception or the self, for human perception and consciousness rely on some basic illusions. Charles Altieri's Painterly Abstractions in Modernist American Poetry examines Stevens' sense of abstraction in relation to the visual art of modern painting, and he offers a useful distinction for this discussion of Stevens' model as it relates to artistic expression and the self:

Rather than expressing an authorial subject, the work establishes possible versions of aligning the self to the world that do not admit conventional subject-object boundaries. (Painterly Abstraction 40)

It is partly through the use of a symbolic theater that Stevens is able to posit a poetic mode that resists a complete engulfing of poetic consciousness by history's tendency to consume all in dead metaphor. The model of poetry drawn out by Stevens suggests a degree of agency in that imagination that can "say no" to old metaphors in order to produce startlingly new, if soon to become dead, possible relationships between self and world. Self becomes a process more than an end, continually moving from forcing new orders to the discovery in those new orders of forms which must then be scraped away.

Like that of Stein, then, Stevens' model posits the artist as simultaneously creating and discovering his or her own self. It is the imaginative act of the destruction of old ordering principles that allows the poetic imagination an important degree of agency on the ever-changing stage of the theatrical modern world.

In the Stevensian model, the modern world, void of the possibility of divine creation, is a world newly exposed as theater. Stevens' early interest in the theater likely had a great deal more to do with his concern with the theatricality of the modern world than it did with the conventions of the theater itself. Nevertheless, his experiments with the genre allowed him the opportunity to dramatize some of his most significant concerns having to do with artistic expression in a world that cannot escape illusion and mask. The issues thus played out in Stevens' early theater find their most developed manifestations in his body of poetry. For Stevens, the symbolic theater enables the poet's agency as he commits himself to the process of the destruction and creation of illusions which suggest a never-ending series of ways of being in the world.

Afterword

This project raises a number of questions about the role of theater in twentieth century developments of the subject and about the importance of theater spaces to modern artists in particular. While contemporary theorists wrestle with issues raised by the performative subject, it seems clear that some of the central characteristics of that subject are being confronted much earlier in the work of key modernist writers. Although this study has pointed to some such characteristics, it is by no means a comprehensive discussion of the earlier stages of theories about performativity. This study is also suggestive of a much larger argument concerning the importance of theatrical spaces to modernist writers other than Stein and Stevens. That the modern era was one that saw so many of its writers turn to the theater in a variety of unconventional ways suggests that the space itself—the stage—was of particular importance to some of the most central modern enigmas.

As mentioned earlier in this dissertation, existing studies of modern theater and its importance to modern poets are either quite limiting in their perspective or significantly dated. There are a handful of full-length discussions of “modern verse drama” that consider the plays of some of the more important modern poets but none that consider sufficiently the relationship between these plays and the larger agendas, those which

transcend genre, of the poets involved. In short, the study that examines thoroughly the relation between theatrical spaces and the modern subject remains, as yet, unwritten. The suggestion raised by this project that calls for further study is that a number of modern poets, a number not limited to Stein and Stevens, turned to theatrical spaces because the modern subject (and its implications for artistic expression) could be investigated and negotiated most directly in the theater, and that the theater was of importance because of the particularly theatrical characteristics involved in modern visions of consciousness and expression. This discussion of Stein and Stevens has attempted to make only the beginnings of such an argument, and the expansion of this study to other authors would strengthen its implications significantly.

T. S. Eliot, in particular, seems an important figure to investigate carefully. His inclusion would broaden the scope of this ongoing project considerably because it would enable much larger assertions about the importance of theater to specific and broad-reaching modern issues. Throughout much of his work, Eliot is certainly concerned with questions about subjectivity and artistic expression that are closely related to the concerns of Stein and Stevens already examined here. Prufrock presents a fascinating example of a subject lost in its various external associations, unable to escape his own constantly shifting and "incalculable" manifestations of self, or even to walk out of the door, because of his own

self-conscious fear of being lost in the complex web of relationships that he imagines as he contemplates his immediate future. Prufrock, like Stevens' Carlos, is aware of the multitude of manifestations of selfhood that are constructed externally. And, these various imagined selves are more theatrical than essential. Prufrock speaks of the need to "prepare a face" to meet others and about the artificiality of that face, which will be revised throughout a "hundred visions and revisions." He imagines himself in particularly theatrical terms, too, when he looks to Hamlet for a model of the subject he longs to find for himself. Even within a "play," though, Prufrock is aware of his lack of agency, and he commits himself to the position of an attendant lord or a fool. He is able to construct moments of an imagined selfhood but is not able to sustain such illusions because of the ever-intruding web of external relationships that will deny him agency: "Till human voices wake us, and we drown." Eliot's plays have drawn more critical attention than those of Stein or Stevens, but scholars have not yet sufficiently examined the relationship between the dramatic works and the poetry in light of Eliot's specific concerns about modern consciousness and artistic expression.

Future studies aside, however, it remains important to acknowledge what we can say after examining the importance of theatrical spaces to the developing poetics of Gertrude Stein and Wallace Stevens. Neither writer turned to the theater for its traditional merits—its ability to re-present a

narrative in a conventionally realist fashion. For Stein, the theater proved an invaluable space because it allowed her to emphasize selves at all times in relation to their particular landscapes. It was also the artistic medium which allowed her more than other literary genres the opportunity to materialize the signs of her art—the parts of language with which she composes. For Stevens, the theater proved an important space because it served as a powerful metaphor for his particular view of modern consciousness. If he would develop a viable poetics, he would have to confront the problems implied in those arguments that see the self as a performance in a theatrical modern world. In their non-dramatic works, both writers develop theatrical tropes as tools through which to negotiate agency for the artistic voice which must discover itself through its external relationships at the same time that it creates itself anew by challenging and renewing those determining forces.

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