

Chapter 5

Modernist America

Williams, Stevens, Moore

Modernism and America: Whitman and Crane 104

William Carlos Williams 110

Marianne Moore 121

Wallace Stevens 129

Modernism and America: Whitman and Crane

Modernist poetry was not invented in America, but so many of its leading English-language poets were American that it is scarcely surprising how deeply its poetics are entwined with American cultural ideals. ‘Make it new’ was Pound’s literary slogan and equally America’s encouragement to all its citizens, immigrant and native-born, that the past could always be left behind and a future re-made. Like America, modernism demanded that forms of expression had to be found or chosen for oneself, rather than handed down or adopted through politeness. Breaking the rules of poetic form for freer self-expression also perfectly replayed America’s democratic break from rule by the British crown, and its later citizens’ escapes from other tyrannies. Explaining why he had adopted his radically all-inclusive free verse in *Leaves of Grass*, Walt Whitman told Ralph Waldo Emerson in 1874 that ‘the genius of all foreign literature is clipped and cut small, compared to our genius, and is essentially insulting to our usages, and to the organic compacts of These States’.¹ It’s a beautiful metaphor: European poetic forms are like palace topiary, artificial shapes clipped by the servants, but America and its poetry can never be hedged in or belong to privilege. Forty years later, the American modernist poetry magazine *Others* described its ‘revolutionary’ experiments as ‘the expression of a democracy of feeling rebelling against the aristocracy of form’.² Modernist poetry’s insistence that formal principles and intellectual meanings could never be found separately from an ongoing experience of encounter with the material was also thoroughly in keeping with the pragmatist strain in American

philosophy. Unity was always in the process of achievement for William James, for a finished state has the wrong kind of politics:

Things are 'with' one another, in many ways, but nothing includes everything, or dominates over everything. The word 'and' trails along after every sentence. Something always escapes . . . the pluralistic world is thus more like a federal republic than like an empire or a kingdom.³

The idea that things are 'with' each other but never contained by any overarching system is a principle of modernist syntax and modernist difficulty alike. And, of course, the modernist techniques of jumps and montages went well with the speed and multifarious levelling of America's roaring twenties, in its newly confident cities where people from every background were mingling, where the streets were a forest of competing signs and adverts, and relays of telephone switchboards could put anyone in touch instantly with anyone else. All modern cities had these, but America was *proud* of being distinctly further ahead and more modern than the rest. As Mina Loy noticed after her arrival from Europe, the avant-garde's experiments with hybrid and fused language encountered their real-world counterpart in American cities:

where latterly a thousand languages have been born, and each one, for the purposes of communication at least, English – English enriched and variegated with the grammatical structure and voice-inflection of many races, in novel alloy with the fundamental time-is-money idiom of the United States. Out of the welter of this unclassifiable speech, while professors of Harvard and Oxford labored to preserve 'God's English,' the muse of modern literature arose, and her tongue had been loosened in the melting pot.⁴

Nevertheless, there were reasons why Pound, Eliot or H. D. went to Europe to make what would become modernism. Pound's 'make it new', of course, is about re-energising the past rather than erasing it, and all three were in search of a tradition to continue, which an American ethic of breaking with the past and maximising individual choice could not supply. All wanted an alternative to the dominance of American commercialism in deciding what good taste was, and (like Stein) they feared the suffocatingly genteel culture of American art as it then was. One might describe the modernist style developed in London or Paris or Rapallo as a remarkable hybrid of American and European cultures, the join evident in Eliot's idea of a tradition 'which cannot be inherited', or H. D.'s cultivation of the ancient fragment written in the present continuous tense.⁵ Pound's conviction that politically one could have Jefferson *and* Mussolini, not just 'or', is perhaps another.

The modernism these exiles invented was not wholly American, in other words, and their absence meant the modernist poetry which developed in America alone was rather different. It was less concerned with finding a lost tradition which would resituate art within social or religious bounds, like Eliot or Yeats, because that tradition had never been there for its settlers. Nor was it so concerned with work which challenged art's relation to the state, like Pound or the European avant-gardes, because there was so little of the broad Schillerian tradition of state-subsidised culture to attack. It is far less full of dense allusions to vanished civilisations, not really interested in undemocratic politics, and rather more at ease with the immediate and vernacular. In the visual arts, Modernism had come to America through Alfred Stieglitz's journal *Camera Work* and the 1913 Armory show, both of which presented it in terms of the shock of the new – the former by asking readers to appreciate the photographic technology that brought them their first glimpse of the Picassos in Gertrude Stein's studio, the latter by compressing thirty years of competing European 'isms' into a single spectacular event framing modernism as an all-at-once assault on outdated decorum.⁶ American 'native' modernism rather followed suit in claiming its forms meant new, vital modes of unrestricted perception. Alfred Kreyenborg's little magazine *Others*, in which Stevens, Loy, Moore and Williams would all appear, advertised itself as the 'fresh natural product of American soil, uninhibited by American puritanism and untainted by Anglo-Saxon decadence.'⁷ And when Pound cajoled *Poetry* (Chicago) run by Harriet Monroe into publishing his 'Imagists', it's noticeable how quickly her American contributors seize the idea but don't search for inspiration in the reappearance of Greek gods or Chinese translations; their interest is in unfiltered impressions of the present, like Carl Sandburg's portraits of Chicago or Amy Lowell's rather leaden portraits of herself, while *Poetry* sought parallels in the naive art of children and of Native Americans.⁸ Truth to tell, America already had a straightforwardly declarative free verse in the populist work of Edgar Lee Masters or Vachel Lindsay, and the rapid expansion of Imagism in magazines like *Poetry* or *Seven Arts* really continued this trend towards everyday language and unrestrictive forms, rather than turning it in a really new direction.

The question which would distinguish American modernism, on the other hand, was first asked by Whitman himself: how are the poets of this most diverse country to be 'national expressers, comprehending and effusing for the men and women of the States, what is universal, native, common to all?'⁹ Whitman's own free verse searches for that universal in lines which stretch and swell to catalogue every type of American experience – women, slave and free. Without a narrative to fit stories into, or metrical lines to fit syllables into, it deliberately lacks any formal tension between parts and whole, because

Whitman's vision of democracy means everyone must be included; it is verse without hierarchies, internal conflicts or any choice to be made between one element and another. In other words, Whitman's provisional, self-revising form of narration was modernist before its time, and his idea of the endlessly expandable poem of America, where the all is in every part simultaneously, where there are no formal masters or slaves, where there is no 'high' or 'low' art, and where no experience is too shameful or too banal to be included, would become a blueprint for much later American verse, including Hart Crane's *The Bridge*, Charles Olson's *Maximus* and Allen Ginsberg's *Howl*.

But Whitman's technique would also leave a problem for modernism, because it links this ever-expanding awareness with an insistent self-narration. Admitting that 'the fear of conflicting and irreconcilable interiors, and the lack of a common skeleton, knitting all close, continually haunts me' (762), his hymns to diversity make the poet's prophetic 'I' that skeleton, so that everything that happens is also happening to a single 'I', and can only be registered by its effects on that 'I'. It's as if Whitman is constantly thrilling to the democratic poem of America that is manifesting itself through him, and then at his worst moments, overriding its diversity with his own prosy reportage:

I will effuse egotism and show it underlying all, and I will be the bard of
personality,
And I will show of male and female that either is but the equal of the
other,
. . . And I will show that there is no imperfection in the present, and can
be none in the future,
And I will show that whatever happens to anybody it may be turn'd to
beautiful results . . . ('Starting from Paumanok')

Now it might seem that the invention of the modernist syntax that merges self and world would remove this difficulty for Whitman's most direct successor, Hart Crane, allowing him to channel America rather than constantly foreground himself. Like Whitman before him and Ginsberg after him, Crane was attracted to the all-inclusive poem of the all-inclusive nation for private as well as political reasons: excluded by his homosexuality, from the beginning he dreamt of situations where hidden inward emotions would become one with public situations. An early poem, 'Garden Abstract', imagines an Eve figure longing for an apple, but, rather than eating it, to fuse herself with the tree on which it hangs:

And so she comes to dream herself the tree,
The wind possessing her, weaving her young veins,
Holding her to the sky and its quick blue . . .

'Veins' here fuses the thin tree-branches and blood pulsing inside the woman's body, while 'quick' links the windswept sky to her body's vigour. Transferred adjectives would be a mainstay of Crane's technique for all his short life, because they fuse the emotional life of the individual and the swirling currents of his social setting, like the blurring of figure and ground in a modernist picture. Crane once explained to the editor of *Poetry* magazine, Harriet Monroe, that his apparently illogical verb–noun combinations were a kind of 'short-hand' fusion of inward and outward.¹⁰ Citing Eliot's famous line from 'Rhapsody on a Windy Night', 'Every street-lamp that I pass/Beats like a fatalistic drum', he noted that no one has ever heard a street lamp beat: 'the relation between a *drum* and a *street lamp*' is created '*via the unmentioned throbbing of the heart and nerves in a distraught man*', Eliot's implied, invisible speaker.¹¹ Hurling through the subway between Manhattan and Brooklyn in 'The Tunnel' section of *The Bridge*, Crane's speaker is submerged into the clamour around him:

"What do you want? getting weak on the links? fandaddle daddy don't
ask for change—IS THIS
FOURTEENTH? it's half past six she said—if
you don't like my gate why did you
swing on it, why *didja*
swing on it
anyhow—"

And somehow anyhow swing—

The phonographs of hades in the brain
Are tunnels that re-wind themselves, and love
A burnt match skating in a urinal—

Hanging on to the swinging straps, the speaker is physically underground and, amid the screaming wheels and gasping brakes, metaphorically in a Hades full of inane jabber. But the subway network through which his body jolts is also the 'tunnels' wiring his own brain, as if what is happening to him is also already within him, endlessly looping and repeating. Obviously this subway journey's repetition recalls Eliot's damned commuters in *The Waste Land*, but in Crane's case it also recalls the repetitiveness of his own addictions: a later section connects being shaken about with the retching tremors of Edgar Allan Poe, poisoned by alcohol in a way Crane knew all too well. Even more compressed is the link between going underground and the gay underworld of public toilets, whose brief flares always end as a 'burnt match', with recriminations about pissing one's life away somewhere in the background. Public America and Crane's private life interpenetrate, as he desired, for poetry's resistance to industrialised anaesthesia demanded 'an extraordinary capacity

for surrender, at least temporarily, to the sensations of urban life'. Without that surrender, the modern world 'can not act creatively in our lives, until, like the unconscious nervous responses of our bodies, its connotations emanate from within – forming as spontaneous a terminology of poetic reference as the bucolic world of pasture, plow and barn'.¹²

But Whitman's problem of belated self-consciousness would recur in another way in *The Bridge*, for most of it is not nearly as modernist in feel as 'The Tunnel', and its diction does not surrender in the same way. The bridge is Brooklyn Bridge, its span a symbol for Crane's leaping between the poetry of the Romantic past and the industrial present, between the different states of America and the people within them, across borders of education, sexuality, race and class. With such an awesome Whitmanian mission, it's no wonder that Crane's address gets caught up in its own rapture:

So to thine Everpresence, beyond time
Like spears ensanguined of one tolling star
That bleeds infinity – the orphic strings,
Sidereal phalanxes, leap and converge;
– One Song, one Bridge of Fire!

(‘Atlantis’)

For all that the bridge-struts and the poet are meant to be the strings of Orpheus' lyre, resonating with the music of the spheres, these rapid switches of metaphor between spears and soldiers, lyres and bells, and the relentlessly high-Romantic diction leave the dominant impression of the poet singing very much on his own. Wishing to make every abstract thought intensely physical, Crane sounds overwhelmed and overwhelming in every line.

That exalted inability to keep anything in reserve and the neediness such torrents of metaphor betrayed kept Crane off the modernist map for a while. Though his early career was boosted by his friendship with two student-poets who would go on to become very influential critics, Allen Tate and Yvor Winters, their version of modernism saw the good poem as a model of impersonal balance and self-discipline, while Crane's willingness to risk everything for 'absolute beauty' and his self-destructive binges seemed only to confirm the opposite.¹³ As modernism's Romantic roots have become more accepted, Crane has generally made his way into the anthologies, but a case like his reveals the strain between any account of American modernism that acknowledges Whitman's paramount importance, and the more impersonal ethos associated with Pound and the Objectivists. Crane evidently thought himself in the modernist vanguard, being an early signatory to the 'Proclamation' of the surrealist-friendly modernist journal *transition*, which includes the claim that 'pure poetry is a lyrical absolute that seeks an a priori reality within

ourselves alone'.¹⁴ But how can this absolute subjectivity be reconciled with Williams's insistence in 'Paterson' that there are 'no ideas but in things', with Moore's impersonal assemblages of quotation, or with Wallace Stevens's constant reversals between the realms of inward imagination and outward reality?

The problem has led several recent studies to argue that there are really two streams of 'native' American modernism, 'objective' and 'subjective'. 'Objective' modernism is said to come from Imagism, Pound and Williams through to the Objectivists and forward to the 'Language' poets of the 1970s, all concerned with making the poem an impersonal presentation of things or signs without grounding their significance in the poet's self or feelings. 'Subjective' modernism is said to be the line from Whitman, Symbolism and Crane to Stevens and perhaps Ginsberg, emphasising the poet's lyrical representation of his own emotions faced with the world.¹⁵ While there are some differences along these lines, it is not a distinction I want to employ here. It's not just that the subjective-objective division has difficulties placing some of its poets; Zukofsky nominated Moore and Stevens among his Objectivists, for example, while Williams insisted on the artist's personality: the poet 'writes to free himself, to annihilate every machine, every science, to escape defiant through consciousness and accuracy of emotional expression', he thought.¹⁶ More importantly, categorising modernists by their position on a line between subject and object omits the crucial *intersubjectivity* of modernist poetics, the democratic America their formal experiments are always in search of. No matter whether it is talking about inner states, outer things or the fabric of the language itself, their poetry has an irreducible social dimension because it is always trying to recalibrate the usual hierarchies of value and order, not least the ones that set self and world at odds. As Krzysztof Ziarek puts it with the modernist avant-garde in mind, 'art's transforming works not on the level of objects, people or things, but in terms of a modality of relating, which, in the forms of perception, knowledge, acting or valuing, determines the connective tissue of what we experience as reality'.¹⁷ From Whitman forward, American modernist experiment is all about remaking that connective tissue into something more universal and more democratic, and understanding Williams, Stevens and Moore means grasping the social appeal they are making in the way they arrange their words to be heard.

William Carlos Williams

Still, it has to be said that Williams himself encouraged his readers to see him as a poet committed to objects, and to a form which would present things

directly without tidying them up or smearing them with emotional jam. An early essay declares:

The true value is that peculiarity which gives an object a character by itself. The associational or sentimental value is the false. Its imposition is due to lack of imagination, to an easy lateral sliding. The attention has been held too rigid on the one plane instead of following a more flexible, jagged resort . . . The thing that stands eternally in the way of really good writing is always one: the virtual impossibility of lifting to the imagination those things which lie under the direct scrutiny of the senses, close to the nose.¹⁸

If we are to avoid projecting associations onto things, the poem's form itself must be as 'jagged' as the thing, not neatly sewn up, or narrating some kind of satisfying moral closure. Williams has become celebrated in poetry anthologies as the democratic modernist whose imagination slices up sentences jaggedly, cutting away all extraneous words and punctuation to get at the sheer baffling *thereness* of the object, the red wheelbarrow or the old lady munching plums ('To a Poor Old Woman'). But this account of Williams's simplicity misses the social dimension of this 'direct scrutiny', and the demands it makes on the reader, as in 'Young Woman at a Window':

She sits with
tears on

her cheek
her cheek on

her hand
the child

in her lap
his nose

pressed
to the glass

It is as objective, ordinary, unexalted description as you could want, without a trace of comment or moralising. As with many Williams poems, there is so little judgement that at first reading the feeling is slightly 'yes, and so what'? But the poem's subtlety starts with that feeling of not knowing what to do with it. Although it is one sentence, the lack of punctuation and five little blocks of text (you can scarcely call them stanzas) make it resemble one of Pound's ideogram stanzas in *The Cantos*, which you can read upwardly and downwardly rather than following the syntax. They give the poem a blocked, spurting feel like

the teardrops held on the woman's cheek. As you wind through the sentence, though, you can feel how the way Williams has paired the lines pulls against its natural rhythms. The verse encloses the pauses after 'cheek', 'hand' and 'lap', where commas would normally go, and puts stanza gaps between parts of the sentence that syntactically should flow. Compare the first version of this poem, which breaks its stanzas in more natural places:

While she sits
there

with tears on
her cheek

her cheek on
her hand

this little child
who robs her

knows nothing of
his theft

but rubs his
nose

It has the same lumpy feel, but without the counter-pull of the syntax, its blocks remain inert gobbets, with one-word lines like 'there' sounding flat and sentimentally bare. By the second version, Williams could cut out the details about the child robbing the young mother of her life, because the push-and-pull of the syntax against the stanza breaks was now describing the emotional closeness and resistance between mother and child for him. She cradles him, he wants to press up against the window; she loves her child but can't help but resent the way that he is now running her life for her. We can *guess* that she sees her child will keep her poor, is wondering how different life might have been if she hadn't got pregnant, and hates herself for thinking such things. We can wonder about fathers and responsibilities, and also wonder why we are so quick to blame or judge. But it's important that the poem doesn't tell us what to think about it, because overt appeal or commentary would override just this balance of sympathy and distance that the poem's static form is trying to create in its reader's imagination.

For all his talk of presenting things directly, Williams's lifelong interest was much more in the social relationships implied by the way the poem organises them. Although 'no ideas but in things' became one of his mantras ('Paterson'), the phrase originally comes in a poem which imagines the multifarious life of

the city of Paterson as the thoughts of a philosopher called Paterson, so that the ‘actual florid detail of cheap carpet’, or a ‘canary singing’, or ‘geraniums in tin cans’ are all ‘the divisions and imbalances / of his whole concept’.¹⁹ The poem is not about geraniums or lurid carpets, but the kind of idea which can bring these things and their owners into a democratic balance. It is a warning to poetic thought not to impose abstract systems on the sensuous or overlook the ordinary and local if it is ever to see the world as a ‘whole concept’:

A poem is touched by no quality it borrows from a logical recital of events *nor from the events themselves* but solely from that attenuated power which draws perhaps many broken things into a dance giving them thus full being.²⁰

This formal ‘dance’ opens a new way to link events and social relations through the untraditional way that what’s described comes at you. Williams’s poems are not, therefore, simply presenting an imaginative rearrangement of things for us to stare at. Believing that imagination is ‘an actual force comparable to electricity’, his poems are a kind of force-field, in the sense that they make art by holding together scraps of non-artistic life – other people’s insults, menus, soda signs, or eventually the whole city of Paterson, New Jersey, in the five-book epic of *Paterson* (1946–58) – into a charged whole into which you, as a reader, also have to step.²¹ To feel the motion of his poems’ form is to begin this process, as in the fabulous later poem, ‘To Close’, made from the scrappy misunderstandings of a desperate phone call to the Williams house and surgery:

Will you please rush down and see
ma baby. You know, the one I talked
to you about last night

What was that?

Is this the baby specialist?

Yes, but perhaps you mean my son,
can’t you wait until . . . ?

I, I, I don’t think it’s brEAtthin’

The ever-busy Dr Williams Sr resents the interruption, and the broken punctuation and rhythmless prose betray his distracted cross-purposes with the caller. But then the ‘I, I, I’ of the last line suddenly makes him – and you – catch the caller’s own panicky breathing in the gaps, hearing the living body behind the words in the little scream of ‘brEAtthin’’. Suddenly neither reader

nor speaker are processing information but hearing someone breathing when a baby is not, and from trying 'to close' the call, we suddenly fear it's too close to call. That disarming moment of connection is what all Williams's form aims for: when he said that the modern poet's task was to cut away all 'presupposed measures,' he meant both traditional poetic forms and social classifications, anything that would hinder the reader from getting things clear and whole, a 'unity of understanding'.²²

Williams consequently came to despise the high-cultural snobbery that thought true poetry couldn't have real, unglamorous, poor America in it. Although he could see Manhattan's skyline being built and rebuilt on the grey, marshy horizon, his practice as a busy doctor in rapidly suburbanising Rutherford, New Jersey, was a cultural world away from the avant-garde *salons* cultivated by Walter Arensburg or Alfred Steiglitz where he had first encountered modernist artists such as Marcel Duchamp, Mina Loy, Marsden Hartley and Charles Demuth in 1917–18. While such metropolitan and internationalist circles would not be Williams's natural home, his poems do apply something of Duchamp's avant-garde principle that there should be no borders between art and Rutherford, that art could be taken 'ready-made' from its conversations, neon signs or grocery lists. His poorer patients drove him to distraction, but he had a profound sense that his poetry was already being made where he lived, in the desperate bursts of spring in the trees alongside the filthy river Passaic, in notes on the fridge ('This is just to say') or the down-at-heel lives he briefly came into contact with as a town doctor. The early poem, 'Portrait of a Woman in Bed', for instance, makes its stanzas from chopping up the complaints of the bed-ridden Robitza, a squatter faced with eviction. 'I won't work / and I've got no cash', she declares, and then lashes out immediately, 'What are you going to do / about it?' This defiant despair is the hallmark of what follows:

My two boys?
 —they're keen!
 Let the rich lady
 care for them—
 they'll beat the school
 or
 let them go to the gutter—
 that ends trouble.

This house is empty
 isn't it?
 Then it's mine
 because I need it.

Oh, I won't starve
while there's the Bible
to make them feed me.

Refusing to pay her dues or accept pity, taking charity but denying anyone thanks, Robitza rebuffs anyone who tries to get involved with her, and the poem's jerky, stop-start rhythm, with its sudden short lines, refuses to let you fall in with it, always making *you* readjust to Robitza's outbursts. Her Polish-Austrian immigrant name and free-loading attitude is meant to evoke racist fears of hard-working Americans being swamped by free-riding scroungers, but by making the poem a monologue Williams puts his reader instead uncomfortably on the receiving end. Outrageously ungrateful, Robitza's cynicism also angrily exposes the obligations and dues which the charitable expect in return, and whose formal counterpart would be any regular rhythms or approved forms of rhyme and stanza-shape where the poetry-reading classes know what they'll get. 'I wanted to throw her in the face of the town,' Williams commented in the 1950s. 'The whores are better than my townspeople.'²³ The only weapon Robitza has left is to put the upright citizen or middle-class doctor on the defensive:

You could have closed the door
when you came in;
do it when you go out
I'm tired.

Williams had not yet (1917) fully discovered the power of his line-breaks to charge the whole line, but here his early style of rebellious exclamations and take-it-or-leave-it unfinishedness finds its perfect subject.

But this belief that the poem could rearrange unpoetic material doesn't mean that Williams was a crusading poet of the poor – indeed, he was to run into trouble from the critics at *Partisan Review* in the 1930s for not being socially committed enough. That early statement about wanting the object's 'character by itself' is taken from a journal entry where Williams is arguing with Wallace Stevens, who had described him as having a passion for 'the anti-poetic'.²⁴ Stevens meant that Williams deliberately chose ugly subjects for his poems, and re-framed them in such a way as to bring out their poetic potential. Williams was angered by this interpretation, because he refused to recognize there was anything intrinsically anti-poetic in the first place, and thought Stevens's division betrayed a man who has 'taken to "society" in self-defense'.²⁵ To Williams, the imagination was not an enclave, but a space where everything could be itself and be in balance with everything else, the only place where the

reader could have the ‘oneness of experience’ denied equally by social divisions, Puritan repressions, market exchange-values and traditional forms.²⁶ ‘There is no use pretending that we live in a closed “poetic” world in which we do not need to know what is going on about us and then think we can invent poetry’, he once commented.²⁷ By incorporating adverts, real speech and ‘found’ texts, Williams’s poetry is not simply making art from everyday life, but revealing the latent and potential art in ordinary life, art where ‘all things and ages meet in fellowship. Thus only can they, peculiar and perfect, find their release.’²⁸ This democratic, open and directly involving relationship his poems sought would later become his model for American culture to renew itself; ‘the question of FORM is so important’, he claimed, ‘because it is the very matter itself of a culture.’²⁹

Spring and All (1923) was the first volume to announce this task, and its furious sequence of mixed-up chapter headings, angry replies to his critics, semi-automatic writings on art, and luminous, spaced-out poems remains one of the most radical volumes of modernist poetry ever published. Its basic theme is that the imagination must make things new, here and now, and as witness to this urgent pressure Williams doesn’t care to cross out any of the false starts or delete the variations on his theme that ‘there is a constant barrier between the reader and his consciousness of immediate contact with the world.’³⁰ The imagination is the only force that can break through this barrier, and every restriction which gets in the way of the impulse must be left for dead, as spring leaves winter behind. Second thoughts, coordinated argument and the set forms of traditional poetry are analogues of all *external* systems of coercion which divide us:

What I put down of value will have this value: an escape from crude symbolism, the annihilation of strained associations, complicated ritualistic forms designed to separate the work from ‘reality’ – such as rhyme, meter as meter and not as the essential of the work, one of its words . . . The word must be put down for itself, not as a symbol of nature but a part, cognizant of the whole – aware – civilised. (189)

This sounds like a recipe for *Spring and All*’s most famous poem, ‘The Red Wheelbarrow’, which depends on the tension between declaring that ‘so much depends’ and the innocuous barrow, tension mirrored in the frequent, steady line-breaks which give enormous emphasis to very simple words. Trying to name quite what depends on the red wheelbarrow would ruin it; the poem simply puts its finger on the pressure between something being just ‘for itself’ and ‘cognizant of the whole’. But that poem’s simplicity is unusual. Most of the volume contains complex interplays of three or four lines of thought – ‘a

multiplication of impulses that by their several flights, crossing at all eccentric angles, *might* enlighten', as Williams described Moore's verse – and the reader's task is to imagine herself into the 'whole – aware – civilized' plane on which they all spontaneously intersect, giving 'the feeling of completion by revealing the oneness of experience'.³¹ The poem which follows this statement lingers over Juan Gris's cubist picture 'Roses':

The rose is obsolete
but each petal ends in
an edge, the double facet
cementing the grooved
columns of air – The edge
cuts without cutting
meets – nothing – renews
itself in metal or porcelain –
whither? It ends –

The rose is one of the most hackneyed symbols available for any artist, but Gris's picture has escaped the 'obsolete' because it's a collage, painting an arrangement of roses and vases on layers of wallpaper which already have roses on them.³² Rather than trying to imitate a rose, Gris's picture gives you the layering of various representations of roses, and Williams's poem is talking through his experience of a visual whole made from layered fragments (he later described himself as here 'experimenting with the mode of the French painters – the fragmentation of Picasso').³³ What fascinates him is the way Gris's various overlapping layers of paper are like rose petals – the spaces of the rose within itself – and how this visual experience of borders that 'cut without cutting' reanimates the whole symbolic association of roses with love:

It is at the edge of the
petal that love waits
Crisp, worked to defeat
laboredness – fragile
plucked, moist, half-raised
cold, precise, touching
What
The place between the petal's
edge and the

Love is nothing like a rose if that rose is a cliché, because love has to mean appreciation of uniqueness. But love is like the way a rose's petals relate to

themselves, the ‘cold, precise, touching’ edges like intimacy with a shiver of distance, their casual delicacy like the emotional grace it takes to ‘defeat laboredness’. And Williams’s poem’s own sharp edges – all those sliced-off line-breaks – are rhythmically part of what he means; like keeping any relationship alive, reading involves letting the line be, suspending confirmation while hoping for more, and living with the unfinished. What looks like a string of broken thoughts becomes part of the delicate connection the poem wants to make between the physical experience of edges and layers and the meaning of love itself, a connection which would be impossible without the perceptual reorientations of modern art’s collage or Williams’s torn fragments.

While the poems are busy reassembling ordinary perceptions into a new holistic form, however, the prose is unable to decide whether art should be thought of as a reality independent of the everyday world, or something underlying that world. In just one of many instances:

—the illusion once dispensed with, painting has this problem before it:
replace not the forms but the reality of experience with its own—

is followed swiftly by:

now works of art cannot be left in this category of France’s ‘lie,’ they
must be real, not ‘realism’ but reality itself— (204)

Williams insists simultaneously that ‘the imagination’ is self-directed, because it can’t just be a copy of the world, and is also the world’s deepest structure, since it is ‘the imagination on which reality rides’ (225). What links these opposing views, of course, is that Williams can’t bear the idea of an art restricted by anything, and so he switches seamlessly between the notion that poetry is uniquely free from the pressure of reality to one where poetry is entirely co-extensive with deep reality, and so has nothing outside it which could pressure it. Since he also thought ‘a work of art is important only as evidence, in its structure, of a new world which it has been created to affirm’ (196), this paradox would come to have some important consequences for his dreams of what America should be. Believing that in poetry the ‘individual [can] raise to some approximate co-extension with the universe’, or that ‘the local is the only thing that is the universal’, Williams came to think of true democracy as the state in which every reader finds ‘the undiscovered language of yourself’, and yet by doing so connects immediately to everyone else without compromise, tension or intervening structures, a promise which would make him a grandfather of the individualist communism of the hippie generation (‘all suppressions . . . are confessions that the bomb has entered our lives’, as the late poem ‘Asphodel, that Greeny Flower’ puts it).³⁴ It also allows him to

occupy the modernists' typically ambivalent position towards 'the people'. Like Yeats as much as Whitman, Williams thought the poet's power derived from connecting with the folk, and he would later claim with great enthusiasm that his flexible forms had a natural American 'variable foot' whose stretchability derived from the latent poetry of ordinary immigrant American speech. On the other hand, he knew the citizens of Rutherford were not interested in understanding their true nature in his complex and individual poetry; as *Spring and All* notes rather sourly at the beginning of its experiment, 'if anything of moment results, so much the more likely that no one will want to see it'.³⁵ At once the nexus of popular feeling and a fierce individual, Williams the poet is often 'willing and then fearful of making contact with that which makes up the substance of the reality in which the poem is supposed to reside'.³⁶ Poem XXVI in *Spring and All* starts, for instance, by celebrating the crowd's enjoyment of sport as a model for art's 'play' or 'dance' (235), 'all to no end save beauty / the eternal'. In keeping with Williams's belief in universal beauty, team loyalties of different sports fans seem to play no part. But the beauty of the crowd is then 'to be warned against // saluted and defied', since in its unreflective immediacy, it is 'alive, venomous', the 'Inquisition, the / Revolution'. *The Embodiment of Knowledge*, Williams's harangue on the need for a holistic education, would even briefly lament 'the deceptive ideal of democracy with its attendant loss of human dignity', because democracy had come to mean mass-market conformity rather than local idiom, and only the local, the individual and the specific can be truly universal.³⁷ *In the American Grain* rewrites America's founding fathers as a series of pioneering Nietzschean heroes, living and fighting 'without resentment', 'free and independent, unyielding to the herd', and living in an authentic relationship to their particular soil, against the homogenising and polluting forces of Puritanism and capitalism whose effects were plain to see in the ruin of the Passaic Falls near his home.³⁸

These individualistic-folk politics point back to the central irony of *Spring and All*; that while its vision of 'a new world naked' ('By the road to the contagious hospital') is forged in furious rivalry with T. S. Eliot, it often ends up doubling him. Williams thought Eliot had led poetry down the wrong path, back to Europe and back to repression with his ideas of tradition. Alluding to Eliot's *Sibyl*, *Spring and All* sneers that 'the voice of the Delphic Oracle itself, what was it? A poisonous gas from a rock's cleft', and calls Eliot and his ilk 'THE TRADITIONALISTS OF PLAGIARISM', who 'have had the governing of the mob through all the repetitious years' and who 'resent the new order' (185). But in his search for the truly new, Williams then restates some of the cornerstone ideas of 'Tradition and the Individual Talent': that Homer, cave-painting and the present are 'one piece' (189), the atomised lack of peasant tradition that

makes ‘the pure products of America / go crazy’ (‘To Elsie’, 217), and that the artist’s personal life has no importance to his compositions. And some of the poems seem to be replaying *The Waste Land* in Rutherford: the wind crosses the brown fields and shakes the dry leaves on the road to the contagious hospital; an old woman moans ‘I can’t die’, like the Sybil (216), a jazz band plays (and boasts, ironically, ‘you can’t copy it’ (216)), young men stand with lilacs in the doorways, someone laments ‘la la’ on a beach (222), and the whole thing is a mixed-up sequences of intertextual poems (there are quotations from ‘Prufrock’ and Pound) about ‘an approach with difficulty from / the dead – the winter casing of grief’ (193). Williams might reply that he’s updating Eliot into contemporary, ordinary American without the mythological complexities. But the impression remains that *Spring and All*’s democratic newness is driven by interpersonal rivalry as well as open-minded relations to objects, and that the imagination needs to address human conflict if its individualist politics are to be plausible.

Paterson is an epic built from thirty years’ worth of Williams’ work trying to do just that, to find an imaginative ‘radiant gist’ from the mental and physical wastelands of this industrial town and its correspondent minds. With Pound, Williams associated degradation and polluted squalor with Alexander Hamilton, whose economics had turned America into the property of corporations and banks, and whose politics had sacrificed local states’ devolved democracy into the domineering federalist government most Americans thought they had left behind in Europe. Like Pound, there is a strong connection in Williams’s mind between set forms of verse and the control of the many by the few in federal government and finance capitalism. However, alongside the various forms of ‘false credit’ diagnosed – artificial inflation, European verse forms, mistaken gender relations, bad taste – Williams includes a letter from a former friend, lover and patient, which accuses him of being part of the problem:

The very circumstance of your birth and social background provided you with an escape from life in the raw; and you confuse that protection from life with an *inability* to live – and are thus able to regard literature as nothing more than a desperate last extremity resulting from that illusionary inability to live.³⁹

The accusation is that *Paterson*’s search for the authentic, both in its content and its technique of incorporating found texts and direct speech, is itself a kind of middle-class aestheticisation of the raw – and never more so than in Williams’s use of this private letter in the poem itself. It’s an accusation which is never really answered, but it does open on to some of the conflicts embedded in Williams’s best-known, and seemingly innocuous poem, ‘This is

Just to Say'. Made from a fridge note, the cluster of meaning it draws into the few words depends on the reader filling in the background of a busy couple at cross-purposes, not eating or talking together, and the minor disappointments and resentments that build up so that a small act comes to stand, like the poetic word, for a complex of feelings and tensions accumulated over years. The short lines drag out the moment of guilty realisation ('and which / you were probably / saving / for breakfast') in order to make an apology which, by continuing at exactly the same pace, sounds secretly rather pleased with itself:

Forgive me
they were
so sweet
and so cold

The defiant pleasure suggests someone asserting a self as much as asking for forgiveness, knowing they will be forgiven (no stolen fruit in a marriage) and wanting nonetheless to provoke again by closing with that shudder of remembered pleasure, rather than the other person. The emotional tugs between independence and dependence in this tiny poem expand out into the marriage whose constraints Williams resented and whose security he wanted, and also the communism to which he was attracted and far too individualistic to adopt. They are also, perhaps, a delicate piece of poetic self-criticism. The writer of real imagination, he had written in *Spring and All*, would be able to 'enjoy, to taste, to engage the free world, not a world which he carries like a bag of food, always fearful lest he drop something or someone get more than he'. Such a world would be:

sufficient to itself, removed from him (as it most certainly is) with which he has bitter and delicious relations and from which he is independent – moving at will from one thing and another – as he pleases, unbound – complete. (207)

'This is Just to Say' suggests, on the other hand, how much this mutual independence of subject and object is the pioneer's fantasy: the world one has to deal with is already shared, or owned, by other people.

Marianne Moore

Williams's friend Marianne Moore also made poetry to scrutinise those appetites for possession. Virtue, for her, is found in an unselfish open-mindedness; vice in egoism and prejudice, in art and in social life alike. One

of her 'Labors of Hercules' (1921) is to persuade musical traditionalists 'that the piano is a free field for etching', a frustration one might expect from a modernist. But she swiftly moves to its social equivalent:

to convince snake-charming controversialists
that one keeps on knowing
'that the Negro is not brutal
that the Jew is not greedy
that the Oriental is not immoral
that the German is not a Hun.'

Moore's poetics of open-mindedness, however, have none of Williams's pressured, improvisatory feel. They leap from topic to topic without warning, and accumulate an intimidatingly wide range of references without making it clear what is actually quotation or why it matters. They use formal devices which experiment with fate and randomness, rather than shapes driven by flows of feeling. Though the diction is precise, the perspectives are multiple and the irony mobile. 'It is not easy to say what one of Miss Moore's longer poems is about', confessed R. P. Blackmur in 1935, because 'what it is about is what it does, and not at any one place but all along. The parts stir each other up.'⁴⁰ But though everything is in motion, all the parts orbit around a common cluster of principles, that 'snobbishness is a stupidity' ('The Labors of Hercules'), that 'unself-righteousness humbles inspection' ('Efforts of Affection'), and that 'unobtrusiveness is dazzling' ('Voracities and Verities').

The unobtrusive dazzles everywhere in the poems, not least in their bric-a-brac of sources (a leaflet on the speaking clock in 'Four Quartz Clocks', Walton's *Compleat Angler*, a jam-jar label in 'Camellia Sabina'). The hero in 'The Steeplejack' is the person able to enjoy the modest pleasures of a fishing town as if it were an exotic world tour, finding 'the tropics at first hand' in the small seaside flowers looming weirdly out of the fog, or Dürer's painting techniques in the purple-green tints of the sea. Her famous animal poems, such as 'The Pangolin', 'To a Snail', 'The Jerboa' or 'The Plumet Basilisk', all take pleasure and instruction from the creatures' modest and unaggressive manner of living. The exotic Malay Dragon of 'The Plumet Basilisk', for instance, lives humbly among 'unfragrant orchids, on the unnutritious nut-tree', yet, gliding from branch to branch, has the knack of 'conferring wings on what it grasps'. And that is also what the poems are trying to encourage in their own reader's attention: to widen what they notice, to value the unobtrusive, and to set free the imagination at the same time as it grasps each element of the poem.

But Moore was too smart a moralist not to realise that any poem made in loud and direct opposition to snobs, racists or swaggering egoists would simply reduplicate their self-righteous posturing. Lecturing her reader about

being humble would put her in the position of the human steam-roller she criticised for crushing ‘all the particles down / into close conformity’ with a single moral or artistic law (‘To a Steam-Roller’). ‘A poem is not a poem, surely, unless there is a margin of undidactic implication, – an area which the reader can make his own’, she remarked of her poems against war.⁴¹ The indirectness of modernist form was her way to dazzle and tease her readers instead into a unsuspecting sensation of playful self-discipline, or a deeply unselfish enjoyment. Like Williams, that meant poetry whose mix of highbrow and lowbrow is meant to upset our normal sense of importance, and, like Stevens, poetry which is constantly seeing things at unlikely angles in order to work round its reader’s defences. Like Pound, it also made her difficult, as Moore confessed to her brother:

I reckonise my trouble, as being too oblique & obscure, as a result of hating Crudeness (& Alvin E Magary condescension and insulting didacticism). Always what I learn to regret, I try to avoid in the next try, it is very hard to REarrange a thing that has fallen in to the mold already.⁴²

But though she promises to mend her ways, this paragraph actually justifies difficulty as a fear of being impolite, pushy or superior to her reader. Indeed, one might say for Moore that modernist aesthetics were always ethics, and her games with the reader a search for a better set of manners for American life.

‘The Jerboa’ is a good example of her manner of proceeding. Entitled ‘Too Much’, the first section is a slightly zany list of Roman and Egyptian aristocracy’s bad taste in architecture, zoo-keeping and interior decoration, all of which is a symptom of their rapacious desire to use the whole world as the stage-props for their empires. Animals are ‘looked on as theirs’, and put in displays, or stuffed and made into containers to hold remains of other animals. In this idealised garden scenery,

Dwarfs here and there, lent
to an evident
poetry of frog grays,
duck-egg greens and egg-plant blues, a fantasy
and a verisimilitude that were
right to those with, everywhere,
power over the poor.

By contrast, the section titled ‘Abundance’ shows how the Jerboa:

a small desert rat
and not famous, that

lives without water, has
happiness.⁴³

Despite living in a desert, the Jerboa lives in ‘abundance’ thanks to its happily unpossessive ease with its surroundings, its ‘shining silver house // of sand’, a contrast that has a political edge to it. The poem opens with a giant ‘fir-cone’ of bronze, which, though constructed by a ‘freedman’ of Rome, is so repulsive that the mental habits of slavery and empire-building are still unconsciously informing its pointless gigantism. The bad taste of ancient empires she enumerates is, then, a discreet warning about American super-sizing; on the contrary, the ‘free-born’ Jerboa is explicitly allied with Africa’s ‘untouched’ people, before they were brought as slaves to America. In other words, we cannot pride ourselves on leaving slavery behind, because the same *attitude* is still there in the modern consumerism which ransacks the world for decoration.

But in suggesting that the ‘verisimilitude’ of Roman, British or American art is in fact driven by its imperial self-image, then ‘The Jerboa’ is also a poem about the way that non-realist kinds of representation are trying to do something different. In fact, everything that Moore says about the Jerboa is also a hope for the way her own poems go about things. Whether ‘abroad’ or ‘at home’, the neat and nimble Jerboa is always within its element, moving with incredible speed as it feeds by gleaning (taking unwanted leftovers from harvest fields, like the biblical Ruth). Shyly cosmopolitan, Moore’s poems, too, are always self-consciously precise and carefully worked, moving from topic to topic ‘as if on wings’, and nourishing themselves on scraps of phrase and thought gleaned from an enormous array of inconspicuous sources – in this case, a series of articles in the *Illustrated London News*, a publishers’ catalogue and a book on zoology. Other poems happily absorb Puritan devotions, comics, newspapers, women’s magazines, pamphlets and junk mail, and when she writes that the Jerboa ‘honours the sand by assuming its color’, this is a perfect description of her own camouflage techniques with these sources. Working through her library of clippings, Moore would underline words that caught her imagination and would stitch the poem together by using them as a series of hints and prompts. Of course, other modernists made many poems from allusions and references. But Pound’s or Eliot’s quotations are meant to show the artist’s personality being fused into the Tradition or the Tao, whereas there is no such transtemporal law or power for Moore, and no drama of self-sacrifice or shamanic channelling. Her patchwork of unobtrusive sources emphasises instead ‘the secondary qua secondary, the pointedly unauthoritative’ – like the Jerboa itself, definitively ‘not famous’.⁴⁴

This fluid relationship with her verbal surroundings does not mean, however, that Moore simply eliminates herself for the sake of her sources. Marked quotations are so frequently cut up that the words are not memorable in themselves, but simply ‘flies in amber’, phrases haphazardly arrested in the slow-moving process of the poem’s genesis.⁴⁵ Others are made to serve purposes far different from their original author’s intentions. We learn in ‘To a Snail’, for instance, that what we admire in its self-withdrawing style is “a method of conclusions”; / “a knowledge of principles”. Patient work in the Moore archive has revealed that the original source of these quotations, Duns Scotus, actually opposed them as two different kinds of knowledge: the principles that come from theology and the conclusions of applied philosophy or science. But you would be hard put to know that from the poem, for Moore supplies only a vague reference, and that is omitted in later editions. Rather than a succinct allusion, the quotations become simply marked points in the process of thought, attention, statement and anticipation of others’ responses which makes the conversational performance of a Moore poem. Cristanne Miller has helpfully pointed out how much this continual turning-round of phrases resembles Moore’s family correspondence, where a word or phrase will be borrowed and adapted in successive letters between different members, so that its meaning is always being shaped by this communal process of interaction which no one person can claim to own.⁴⁶ As the Jerboa is unpossessively at one with its surroundings, so Moore’s quotations often minimise the distance between herself and others’ words, and imply how much she saw her own poems borne along in the stream of other people’s discourse. And as if to confirm all this self-reference, the Jerboa’s rapid movement proceeds

by fifths and sevenths,
in leaps of two lengths
like the uneven notes
of the Bedouin flute [. . .]

in a stanza pattern whose first two lines are five syllables long and whose last has seven.

But writing about the Jerboa’s happy camouflage in this highly self-referential way has a twist to it. For if Moore is proclaiming the virtues of a nearly invisible self – Jerboas were not filmed in the wild until a few years ago – she is doing so self-consciously, by drawing in an incredible array of unlikely historical sources, and making all sorts of playful comparisons to her own poem as you read it. This combination of withdrawal and spectacle runs through all her work, signalled early on by the reworking of Imagism in ‘To a Snail’:

If 'compression is the first grace of style,'
 you have it. Contractility is a virtue
 as modesty is a virtue.

Moore finds the ideal Imagist poem in the snail's ability to compress itself into its shell, so that substance and its formal housing are become one thing, as free verse poets wanted. Where Amy Lowell's and Richard Aldington's preface to *Some Imagist Poets* had declared that these cut-down poems signified 'individualism in literature, liberty of art, abandonment of existing forms', however, here we are meant to notice that the poem-snail could be longer and isn't.⁴⁷ Although that strategic absence is what Moore calls 'modesty', it is actually an invitation to look more closely, for like the snail's 'absence of feet' and lack of 'adornment', only looking will lead you to understand the firm 'principle that is hid'. Rather like Rembrandt's portraits of Dutch Calvinists, who are always dressed in very *expensive* black, or the 'faultless simplicity' of Baudelaire's Dandy, Moore's principle that 'omissions are not accidents' makes withdrawal itself a sign and a manoeuvre.⁴⁸ As the later poem 'Silence' puts it, 'The deepest feeling always shows itself in silence; / not in silence, but restraint.' One of the ways it is being restrained, in fact, is in not saying that this was actually not her father's phrase but her mother's, whose criticism of her poetry Moore sometimes found heavy-handed: the restraint in the act of quoting her mother on restraint becomes a unique comment on herself resisting and conforming at once.

This principle of reticence-as-display was also the pattern of Moore's life. When she was not shaping the course of modernism with New York's artistic and cultural elite as an editor at *The Dial*, she lived as a quiet, church-going spinster caring for her mother, dressing in second-hand black suits, reading her Bible and writing quantities of encouraging letters to friends, the great and the unknown. Yet those letters always describe with great attention what other people were wearing, and the photos she had taken in her carefully altered suits are posed like mannerist portraits.⁴⁹ This passion for clothing and style, as well as for the carefully assembled museum collections which her own poems resemble, is not a hypocritical denial of her insistence on the unobtrusive. Nor is it simply a coded nudge that behind all this stylised presentation some buried authentic lesbian or other self could be decoded. Certainly she had no prejudices against more overtly homosexual friends such as H. D., W. H. Auden or her protégée Elizabeth Bishop, and her great poem on 'Marriage', probably inspired by an unwelcome proposal from her publisher, is noticeably unenthralled by the idea. But it is unconvinced because the respectability of the marriage contract seems to enmesh its protagonists in the vain possessiveness and sexist self-admiration she wanted to discourage

in any kind of relationship.⁵⁰ The poem ends by borrowing Webster's famous statement about American democracy, 'Liberty and union / now and forever' as a motto for partners to remain committed but not identical: she pointedly omits Webster's third phrase, 'one and inseparable', because any real 'union' of states or lovers actually depends on their separability. And so 'Marriage' criticises domineering not only within its quotations about marriage, but by stacking them in dizzying irony against each other, so the reader can never be certain which side she is on – unlike her warring couple who never grasp that one is 'not rich but poor / when one can always seem so right'. Moore was so insistently aware of other people's wants and fears, and the counter-claim of her own feelings, that her theatrical modesties should be seen as a manner of deflecting and realigning these pressures into an arrangement which frees both parties – from the roles of detective and criminal in biographical sleuthing, and from 'authorities whose hopes / are shaped by mercenaries', as 'The Paper Nautilus' puts it, in order to bring them into the mood which can enjoy a poem or the person 'with nothing that ambition can buy or take away' ('The Steeplejack'). Celibacy itself is another kind of reticence-as-display, but to treat it as a coded invitation is to miss the point.

Sometimes Moore discouraged the interpretatively ambitious by being deliberately misleading. Her notes to 'Pedantic Literalist', for instance, send the reference-hunter to Richard Baxter's puritan devotional *The Saints' Everlasting Rest*, not because all the quotations are to be found there – some are in fact from Blake's *Milton* – but in order to frustrate any would-be pedantic literalist who misconceives his duty, and to lure him into reading a work about grace in the process. More often Moore's games with intentions are manifest in her choice of syllabic metre. Counting the line-lengths by syllable numbers is normal in French, but in English is rare: almost the whole of traditional verse-form arranges its rhythm by spacing the stresses at regular points. (If you read that sentence over again to yourself aloud, you will see what I mean by regular spacing of the natural speech stresses.) But syllabics organise lines by a set number of syllables, stressed or not, and there is nothing in the rhythm, syntax or word order to suggest that where they break is anything more than arbitrary. 'The Fish', for instance, describes an underwater crevasse in terms which could also apply to its own line-breaks:

All
 external
 marks of abuse are present on this
 defiant edifice –
 all the physical features of

ac-
 cident – lack
 of cornice, dynamite grooves, burns, and
 hatchet strokes, these things stand
 out on it; the chasm-side is
 dead. [. . .]

Having found her pattern, Moore would use these same syllable-counts for stanza after stanza, so that sentences which sound entirely unforced when read aloud will turn out to be perfectly destined, and the rhymes seem to be discovered as the sentence is broken open, like sixpences in a Christmas pudding. In an early essay, she had noted that ‘in the case of rhymed verse, a distinctive tone of voice is dependent on naturalistic effects, and naturalistic effects are so rare in rhyme as almost not to exist.’⁵¹ Drawing rhymes from unaccented syllables like ‘and’ or ‘this’ was Moore’s way of finding such rarities, and sounding ‘distinctive’ through not being not self-insistently ‘poetical’. ‘I have an objection to the reversed order of words and to using words for the sake of the rhythm that would be omitted if one were writing prose’, she told a correspondent in 1934.⁵² But although she added that ‘I value an effect of naturalness’, it is the word ‘effect’ which should be emphasised, because the fact that the rhyming words are not grammatically the most significant ones in the sentence also gives the poem the curious feeling that it might have been arranged differently. Just as her use of quotations has similarities with Williams or the avant-garde programmes to discover poetry latently present in ephemera, so the procedural artifice of Moore’s syllabics also charges her stanzas with the feeling that *any* word could, if set off aright, rhyme, and that what we perceive as intentional significance is also the way it just turned out. Although the poet is directing everything in deliberate display, by making *everything* potentially significant she is actually withdrawing from the scene, so that the quotations and formal coincidences create accidental or possible meanings beyond her initial calculation. Moore’s titles which turn out to be the first word of the poem (as here, with ‘The fish / Wade / Through black jade’, or ‘An Octopus / of ice’) work the same way; what apparently holds it all together turns out to be merely the initial word of a sentence, retrospectively promoted as the real substance develops in many other directions.

These experiments in non-domineering organisation are recreating in formal terms the open attentiveness she wanted in all public life:

Art which ‘cuts its facets from within’ can mitigate suffering, can even be an instrument of happiness; as also forgiveness . . . seems essential to happiness. Reinhold Niebuhr recently drew attention in *The Nation* to

the fact that the cure for international incompatibilities is not diplomacy but contrition.⁵³

It's quite a leap from poetic organisation to world peace, but in Moore's mind, they are one movement. That belief in the value of admitting one's failures may also explain why she was forever rewriting her poems. Naturally reticent, Moore was both horrified and gratified to receive a copy of her first volume of poems in 1921 when her well-meaning friends H. D. and Bryher brought it out without her knowledge. She had not finished working on them, she exclaimed, but she had still not finished working on them by 1935 when T. S. Eliot brought out a *Selected Poems*, nor by the time of *Collected Poems* of 1951. In fact, this idea of the poem always in process was so important to Moore that she built it in to her famous poem about 'Poetry' itself, which went through at least four different versions over her lifetime.⁵⁴ All of them begin, 'I, too, dislike it.' The much longer 1919 version reprinted in Moore's notes to the *Collected Poems* goes on to console poetry-lovers that real interest in poetry is shown by demanding both 'the genuine' and 'the raw material of poetry', as she herself would incorporate clippings and remarks from unpoetic sources. But in the last, three-line version of 'Poetry', all the famous ideas of poets being 'literalists of the imagination' creating 'imaginary gardens with real toads in them' have gone, as if her own best work, too, has become only raw material still to be used – and the clause 'there are things that are important beyond all this fiddle' has disappeared, as if the poet has realised that the line itself is fiddling. We are meant to see that the shorter form of 'Poetry' is itself a form found, that poetry is continually discovered from within something else rather than purely invented, and what might have looked like an arranged light rhyme between 'in' and 'genuine' turns out *not* to be predestined by the original scheme, and now seems all the more fortuitous. For all their dazzle and their firm opinions, Moore's poems are rarely final: their effects are discovered in the process of their making, rather than created, and like the ideal settings of 'People's Surroundings', 'we see the exterior and the fundamental structure' at once. Such reciprocal, ongoing mergers between accident and design, intentions and situation are Moore's way to find what 'His Shield' calls 'the power of relinquishing / what one would keep; that is freedom'.

Wallace Stevens

Democratically minded experiments with orders that emerge from 'inside' what they apparently frame are also at the core of Wallace Stevens's work.

Like Moore, his poetry can seem utterly impenetrable, and he resisted requests for paraphrase with a grimace. But Stevens was equally forthright about what he wanted the reader to get from reading it: a little experience of perfection, heaven, or God, in an age of general unbelief. ‘The major poetic idea in the world is and always has been the idea of God’ he declared late in life, and poetry’s manner of being shared that divine perfection:

Our first proposition, that the style of a poem and the poem itself are one was a definition of perfection in poetry. In the presence of the gods, or of their images, we are in the presence of perfection in created beings . . . the style of the gods and the gods themselves are one.⁵⁵

Stevens, however, was also certain that ‘one of the visible movements of the modern imagination is that movement away from the idea of God’, and unlike Moore, he shared this modern lack of faith.⁵⁶ One of his first major poems, ‘Sunday Morning’, rewrites Keats’s ‘Ode on a Grecian Urn’ and its longing for an art of fixed eternity, by claiming that ‘death is the mother of beauty’; that time and change create poetic value, and so finitude must also be part of anything we could call heaven. Passing by the ‘grave of Jesus, where he lay’, and implying that is where Jesus remained, the poem’s final stanza cuts up the six days of creation in Genesis into the contrary montage of our modern, sceptical state, whose freedom from order is inseparable from solitary confinement:

We live in an old chaos of the sun,
Or old dependency of day and night,
Or island solitude, unsponsored, free,
Of that wide water, inescapable.

To believe that poetry is about the idea of God and yet not to believe in an actual divine order – ‘all gods are created in the image of their creators’ – makes it sound like Stevens has set himself a hopeless task.⁵⁷ But Stevens’s whole *oeuvre* is made out of following the twists of this problem: how to create a freely necessary unity or ‘supreme fiction’, borrowed from nowhere else, which we know we have created, but in which we can also believe. ‘If one no longer believes in God (as truth), it is not possible merely to disbelieve’, he thought; ‘it becomes necessary to believe in something else’, while knowing that ‘one’s final belief must be in a fiction.’⁵⁸

Stevens’s sense that we must believe in our ‘supreme fiction’ in the way we used to believe in God implies more than just intellectual assent. Believing *in* such a unity must imply that the believer’s own being is included in it, and yet the believer must remain aware that his or her beliefs are fallible. This dynamic of belonging within while remaining outside is a problem for any faith in a

pluralist society like America, and it is equally a problem for democratic culture. How can we really commit to one inclusive order or ideal while remaining sceptical enough to want to reform it? Throughout Stevens's work, however, the problem comes in two slightly different guises: a philosophical debate about whether reality or imagination has priority, and a political one about how art relates to social order. But Stevens always ends up saying that poetry, like the 'idea of God', is one of the 'powerful integrations of the imagination' in which we can sense how these inside–outside oppositions are being reconciled, in which unity can be imagined and felt without being held on to and so lost.⁵⁹ A late lecture adapts St Paul's idea of the cosmic Christ, by whom 'were all things created, that are in heaven, and that are in earth, visible and invisible', and by whom God would 'reconcile all things unto himself' (Colossians 1:16, 20) for poetry's 'mystical aesthetic':

A way of saying and of establishing that all things, whether below or above appearance, are one and that it is only through reality, in which they are reflected, or, it may be, joined together, that we can reach them . . . [As Klee wrote] 'what artist would not establish himself there where the organic center of all movement in time and space – which he calls the mind or heart of creation – determines every function.' Conceding that this sounds a bit like sacerdotal jargon, that is not too much to allow to those that have helped to create a new reality, a modern reality, since what has been created is nothing less.⁶⁰

To see what this unity of being might mean, take the heaven evoked in the late poem 'Solitaire Under the Oaks':

In the oblivion of cards
One exists among pure principles.

Neither the cards nor the trees nor the air
Persist as facts. This is an escape

To principium, to meditation.
One knows at last what to think about

And thinks about it without consciousness,
Under the oak trees, completely released.

Facts do not persist in this earthly paradise, because simply thinking of things as 'facts' implies an objective perspective contrasted to a 'subjective' one, and Stevens wants there to be no such split of self and world. So the person playing cards thinks 'without consciousness', as if such thinking were a way of being at one with the world, yet is still 'completely released', rather than being a

blank transcription of the world's processes. It is a poem which spans the oppositions of active and passive, subject and object, unconsciousness and self-consciousness ('knowing what to think'). It is also playing this out with the person reading it, for saying 'this is an escape' (rather than 'it is an escape') assumes that you are present in imagining the scene being evoked, and, like the solitary player, are thinking about the poem in one way while your absorption in it means you are also not conscious of doing that thinking. Any unity of 'we' and 'all things', or appearance and reality, or heaven and earth, could not be something simple described to anyone outside it. Through the imagination, 'the world is no longer an extraneous object, full of other extraneous objects, but an image', 'a force, not a presence'.⁶¹ Nor can that presence be fixed in any given time; it is a process which happens anew in the reading of the poem, in which 'the partaker partakes of that which changes him'.⁶² If you are reading it over and over but cannot tell yourself what it is 'about', in short, you are doing what it is about: knowing what to think, but thinking it without consciousness. 'The poem must resist the intelligence / Almost successfully' ('Man Carrying Thing').

Incorporating the reader's process of interpretation as part of what the poem is talking about makes Stevens's poetry alarmingly abstract. It does not usually describe an object, or tell you about the inner lives of characters, or even make statements about the way things are through metaphor, because they would allow you a secure vista on a scene from which you are safely excluded, and which then could not be believed in. Far more often, what starts as description turns out to be a series of shifting metaphors where the observer and the observed switch places:

The mind is the great poem of winter, the man,
Who, to find what will suffice,
Destroys romantic tenements
Of rose and ice

In the land of war. ('Man and Bottle')

On first reading, it sounds like the 'great poem of winter' is a metaphor for what the mind does in wartime, tearing down its romantic tenements in a mental bombing campaign or slum-clearance programme. But it could be that 'winter, the man' is actually the subject and the mind is simply a poetic outworking of the warlike destruction winter generally wreaks, or that the poem itself is really the subject and the wintry, warlike mind is its best illustration. As the poem goes on, Stevens expands on what 'it' is ('a light at the centre of many lights', 'a manner of thinking, a mode / Of destroying') but all the while we

are never sure if 'it' *really* is the mind, a personified winter, or the poem itself. These simultaneous possibilities mean readers are also constantly constructing possible meanings and having to tear them down, as a process of getting the mind into any state which will let the poem say itself, without being able to give it a definite grounding in one, as if that were real and the rest were description or analogy. Like a 'tenement', any mental foundation you give it is leasehold rather than a permanent possession, a series of temporary findings of what will suffice. If it sounds strange to claim that the poem exists in the process of undoing the meanings you assign it, then it is only what Stevens himself implied when he wrote that 'poetry is essentially romantic, only the romantic of poetry must be something constantly new and, therefore, just the opposite of what is spoken of as the romantic'.⁶³ Rather than locating a basic scenario to be described by a second-order metaphor, Stevens's poetry lies in the movements of your mind constantly finding and refinding its footing, like a gymnast leaping through a series of obstacles, her movements becoming a dance in the process. If poetry is to be a real integration, the mind's own reading of it must be included, and yet if poetry is not to be an unwelcome imposition, your own mind must also be in the process of watching itself doing just that.

The poem encourages this movement of construction and dissolution when it repeats itself towards the end:

It is not the snow that is the quill, the page.
The poem lashes more fiercely than the wind,
As the mind, to find what will suffice, destroys
Romantic tenements of rose and ice.

It is still uncertain whether the snow is a metaphor or real, and whether 'the page' is made of paper or from *Good King Wenceslas*. But if you are wondering why the supposedly unromantic poet still writes with a 'quill' here, it is possibly because this stanza is a confection of repeated syllables, and 'quill' is there to pick up 'will', as 'wind' becomes 'mind' and 'find', 'is' reappears in 'ferce', 'suffice' and 'ice', and 'destroys' anticipates 'Romantic', 'ice' and 'rose' all at once. Stevens is full of passages like this, where the deepest philosophical speculation about the nature of being or consciousness suddenly foregrounds its constituent sound-clusters, as if to show how utterly dependent all the reader's imaginative constructions about what the words *mean* are on the arbitrary sounds that are making the words: the poetry reader must realise that 'above everything else, poetry is words; and that words, above everything else, are, in poetry, sounds'.⁶⁴ 'The Latest Freed Man' is an unusually direct evocation of the dream of unified being. It tells of a man 'tired of the old descriptions of the world' who finds freedom in allowing sunlight, or

oak-leaves, or himself to be 'being without description', without the self-conscious division of mind, language and body:

It was everything being more real, himself
 At the centre of reality, seeing it.
 It was everything bulging and blazing and big in itself,
 The blue of a rug, the portrait of Vidal,
Qui fait fi des jolieses banales, the chairs.

Yet just as you are wondering what Stevens's art-dealer friend Vidal signifies, or why the rug is particularly 'in itself', the images conjured up by these last lines dissolve into their pixels – the consonantal combinations of 'b', 'g' and 'l' ('bulging', 'blazing', 'blue', 'banales'), the inner 'i' rhymes of 'big', 'Vidal', 'Qui', 'fi', 'jolieses', the '-al' rhymes ('Vidal', 'banales') – and with them go some of the philosophically abstract words of the earlier lines: 'being', 'real', 'reality'. It is as if the poem is promising a revelation of 'being without description' and simultaneously pointing to what a word's being 'in itself' is when separated from its describing function. Keeping the sounds audible ensures that 'the style of the poem and the poem are one', and refuses to license any paraphrasable content (or meaning) detached from its 'form', with all the splits of mind and body or parts and whole that that implies.

If 'all gods are created in the image of their creators', though, the poem's perfections will also be in the image of their creator, and the idea that heaven or unity of being means playing *solitaire* or writing wintry poems is telling. During his lifetime, Stevens gained a reputation as a human iceberg: bulky, cold and intimidatingly remote, with nine-tenths of himself buried to view. After an early failed attempt at living by journalism or the law, he became an insurance executive and a very successful corporate executive. Earning about nine times a doctor's salary during the Depression, money enabled him to buy a large house, to furnish it with his collections of exotic curios, books, records and paintings (including the portrait of Vidal), and to write exactly the kind of poetry he wanted without having to care whether anyone bought it or not. But few people were ever invited into his home, and those who were spoke of the brittle and frozen atmosphere between the poet and his wife. They had courted for a long time while Stevens got himself financially secure, but the letters and poems betray how much he thought her rather like a beautiful doll, an idealistic trap she came to resent. Although careful forbearance helped them stay together, their frequent differences lend a rather bitter tinge to Stevens's later statement that for 'the style of the poem and the poem itself to be one there must be a mating and a marriage, not an arid love-song'.⁶⁵ It hints at how much Stevens's poetic heaven was a compensation for the inadequacies of the

real, rather than an actual reconciliation. 'Poetry is a purging of the world's poverty and change and evil and death' runs one of his *Adagia*; 'it is a present perfecting, a satisfaction in the irremediable poverty of life'.⁶⁶ While poetry is a perfecting, not a perfection – a perfection in the process of being made – it is the ambivalent nuances of that last phrase which have proved a central question about Stevens. Did he think his perfecting a satisfaction *despite* life's poverty, or a satisfaction in learning how to be disappointed? Is his poetic heaven made by ignoring the real poverty around the poet, as some Marxist critics were to charge, and whose snowy perfection is only an aesthetic withdrawal from real suffering? Or is life's misery so much the permanent background to his poems that he wanted their pleasure to depend on no circumstances but the mind itself?

The poem which first brought these questions to the fore is the astonishingly prescient 'The Snow Man'. Its single sentence winds down the five stanzas with so many temporizing descriptive clauses that the basic statement ('One must have a mind of winter . . . not to think / Of any misery in the sound of the wind') is almost forgotten in the effort to hold all the rest in suspension. That suspension of activity between the subject 'one' and object 'mind' is, of course, what the poem is describing and making happen at the same time, as its repetitions ('the sound', 'the same', 'the listener, who listens', 'nothing') suggest a mind becoming frozen by the winter it is describing, numbly coming back to the same words in the absence of any variation in the scene. In a shift that would become characteristic of Stevens's poetic, the description of something ('snow') turns out to be a description of the contours of the mind doing the describing, leaving the reader unsure of what is subject and what is object, her own mind suspended in the way the poem is talking about. The listener at the end of the poem, 'nothing himself', 'beholds / Nothing that is not there and the nothing that is', which means equally seeing winter's way of reducing everything to the barest of facts, and seeing his own absence, becoming the coldly empty 'mind of winter', which simply is the scene it sees. And yet the poem is predicated on this impossibility, of course: if you really could empty your mind into pure winter, you wouldn't notice pine trees 'crusted' with snow or junipers 'shagged' with ice, because these descriptions rely on transferring human associations from food or carpets onto blank nature, just as much as does thinking that the wind sounds miserable. In short, this is a poem which talks about reducing the mind to passivity, like Andy Warhol's camera, and yet knows that to imagine such emptiness relies on a notion of what presence, warmth or life is. 'The absence of the imagination had / Itself to be imagined', as 'The Plain Sense of Things' would put it later.

Behind this poem's idea of 'mind' and 'winter' is an older debate about the relationship between 'reality' and 'imagination' which busied Stevens and his commentators for a long time, and gave him the reputation of a loftily philosophical poet. Could we know objective reality (or the bare facts), without some measure of imagination, or was the imagination in fact essential to our grasp of 'fact', which would mean it could never be 'fact' in the usual sense of something independent of the person knowing it? Stevens himself made statements on either side of the question, but the critical consensus is now fairly well established that he believed, like Kant, that both depended on each other – that our understanding of reality's independence from our perception itself involved an act of imagination, without this meaning that reality was simply a sub-department of the imagination. The 'blessed rage for order' of the song in 'The Idea of Order at Key West' makes the sea part of itself *and* makes us imagine its wildness, independent of all order:

She sang beyond the genius of the sea.
The water never formed to mind or voice,
Like a body wholly body, fluttering
Its empty sleeves; and yet its mimic motion
Made constant cry, caused constantly a cry,
That was not ours although we understood,
Inhuman, of the veritable ocean.

It is carefully impossible to tell whether the 'constant cry' is the sea's unmeaning noise, or humans interpreting the sea's emptiness as a 'cry' (cf. 'The Course of a Particular'). Does the repetition of 'constant' and 'cry' transcribe the sea's own 'mimic motion', or is it just the poem's speaker turning the phrase over in his mind? Does 'inhuman' describe the sea's voice, or the 'we' who understand it by losing ourselves in the 'veritable ocean'? Or are we just imagining this, like the 'mind of winter' in 'The Snow Man', our self-consciousness still present in the need to assure ourselves this is the 'veritable' ocean? The mixed metaphor of full body and empty sleeves shows a mind struggling to find categories for something without an 'inner' opposed to an 'outer', as if all its ways of thinking depended on models of human consciousness or soul. Yet however egocentric it seems to make reality part of our imagination's song, the poem also shows we have no choice, for our attempts to imagine its indifference are just as self-centred. The 'meaningless plungings of water and the wind' are also 'theatrical distances' and 'bronze shadows' (bronze is a Stevens metonym for heroic monuments) because we cannot but see nature's 'reality' without mentally shedding a tear for ourselves, tragically orphaned in an uncaring universe. 'The world about us would be desolate except for the world within

us', Stevens once remarked, but it is equally true that the world about us is desolate *because* of the world within us.⁶⁷ This is the philosophical version of the fiction in which we have to believe: the sea is an independent reality whose independence, at the same time, is defined by the categories of our imagination and its emotions.

The inescapability of fiction, however, is not only a philosophical question about how we know objects, but a political question about the responsibility of art. Stevens had been experimenting with imaginary orders from the beginning: the extravagant whimsy, exotic vocabulary and nursery-rhyme sound-play of *Harmonium* (1924) foregrounds its conspicuous lack of interest in daily speech or social reflection. Unlike Williams's wheelbarrow or Frost's conversations, Stevens was interested not in importing the social existence of things into his poems, but in the process of making poetic images from them. At the time, he admitted, 'I liked the idea of images and images alone, or images and the music of verse together', and *Harmonium's* critics thought this self-contained world a return to the contradictions of art for art's sake and the 1890s, which talked about pure art, but ended up cultivating the market it supposedly scorned.⁶⁸ *The Dial* thought that his poems were a 'well-fed and well-booted dandyism of contentment', a self-conscious selection of rare words which actually approached composition like his mail-order shopping for luxury goods.⁶⁹ When *Ideas of Order* appeared in 1936, however, a Marxist critic called Stanley Burnshaw thought he detected a change:

Ideas of Order is the record of a man who, having suddenly lost his footing, now suddenly scrambles to stand up and keep his balance. . . . Acutely conscious members of a class menaced by the clashes between capital and labor, these writers are in the throes of a struggle for philosophical adjustment.⁷⁰

Although Burnshaw was much more appreciative than earlier reviewers ('his poems have . . . deep importance for us') Stevens was surprisingly stung by his suggestion that the imaginative world of his poems could be explained in terms of their author's middle-class anxieties about strikes and the rise of working-class power:

It is simply a question of whether poetry is a thing in itself, or whether it is not. I think it is. I don't think it is if it is detached from reality, but it has a free choice, or should have. There is no obligation that it shall attach itself to political reality, social or sociological reality, etc.⁷¹

This gives a political edge to the philosophical speculations about the interrelation of imagination and reality of *The Necessary Angel*, because asserting

that our perception of reality is dependent on the imagination is also a way to resist Burnshaw's belief that class and economics are the real, unmetaphorical and unimaginative drivers of poetry. If everything, even money, requires imagination or faith to make it so, then there is no limit to art's role. In direct reply to Burnshaw, Stevens wrote an uncharacteristically urgent but characteristically knotty section of *Owl's Clover* called 'Mr Burnshaw and the Statue'. Through an ever-changing series of metaphors, it describes how one must 'live incessantly in change', whether it is 'chaos and archaic change' of nature or the 'abysmal migration' of men in revolution. Appearing to concede the necessity of social change, this actually takes the sting out of the demand for poets to commit themselves to a revolutionary cause, for if change is permanent and what art is always doing anyway, then revolution itself is quite normal. What is needed instead is public art whose being in-itself, even in destruction, reflects the democratic hope of the public truly being their best selves, or, in Stevens's parlance, 'marble men / Serenely selves, transfigured by the selves / From which they came'.⁷² Difficult, modernist poetry is thus socially responsible, because the self-being which our imagination finds in true art is a clarifying of our best hopes for ourselves.

Stevens was not happy with the poem – it strains to blend its two basic metaphors about art, ones based on the changes of weather and climate, and ones based on the permanence of statues – but it was the first to outline the themes he went on to tackle more successfully in *The Man with the Blue Guitar* and 'Notes toward a Supreme Fiction', both extended answers to Burnshaw's question about the public role of poetry. Society and Mr Burnshaw demand 'a tune beyond us, yet ourselves . . . a tune upon the blue guitar / Of things exactly as they are'. Thirty-two sections later, the poem replies:

You as you are? You are yourself.
The blue guitar surprises you.

The leftist demand for realist art conceals the fact that the imagination is already at work, because no art is needed for people to be themselves – unless our very sense of the world and our place in it always involves an act of imagination, in which case it will be art in which our best, most united fictions happen. And since that unity has to involve the reader, it is art which also gives us the best practice in how we can go about believing in the fiction of a social order. Consequently, the three sections of 'Notes' – 'It Must Be Abstract', 'It Must Change' and 'It Must Give Pleasure' – are simultaneously definitions of what poetry must be, and what any kind of social order must be. Poetry must be abstract, because no particular content or person can claim to embody the social order in himself or herself. It must change, because any order is a fiction

which must allow itself to be recast; and it must give pleasure, because the social order must satisfy the people who live in it.

In other words, Stevens's very abstraction from specific commitments or social situations in his poetry was itself a political response to an era which had rejected religion only to make gods out of communist leaders or nationalist heroes, and brought about total world war from such misplaced faith. The artificiality or dandyism of Stevens's early poetry becomes his lesson in maintaining necessary fictions, how we can believe in any kind of leader-hero who 'is his nation, / In him made one', and yet 'in that saying / Destroy all references', all claims to identify the hero with anyone particular ('Examination of the Hero'). Charles Altieri puts it well:

He turned increasingly to interpreting his desires for certain kinds of interpretation. He saw that any particular rendering of specific images of heroism, any concrete projections he might offer, were pervaded by ideology and distorted by the very needs that called them forth. But if one could capture the structure producing the need, and if one could find positive energies in one's resistance to concrete images, one might construct an idea of the hero around which various social groups might rally.⁷³

This is probably Stevens's best defence against the criticism that his complex, self-referential poetry is constructed as a safe haven from any contamination by the turmoil of the 1930s and 1940s. It would indeed be a great help for any modern democracy if people could examine whether their dreams of the nation or the leader are based on fantasies which force politicians to lie in order to get elected. Yet it has to be said that there is a slightly sadder interpretation of the parallel between the democratic, pluralist imagination and Stevens's account of a poem. 'Of Modern Poetry' describes how modern poetry has no prepared stage for itself – no set forms, no formula, no approved setting:

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, at the sound
Of which, an invisible audience listens,
Not to the play, but to itself, expressed
In an emotion as of two people, as of two
Emotions becoming one.

It is carefully unclear in whose world these emotions happen, whether the 'it' hearing is the real audience's ear or the actor-poet's mind imagining the audience all along. 'The poem of the act of the mind', 'Of Modern Poetry' concludes verblessly, and the play between the 'doing' and 'pretending' senses of 'act' here could mean that the poem is what happens in the poet's process of acting, or in the reader's imaginary version of it. The optimistic reading is that Stevens had learned from his 1930s critics that modern poetry depends on a dynamic relation with its audience and circumstance. The less optimistic reading is that the truly modern poem has either already incorporated that audience, or that its audience simply hears whatever it wants. If our common sense of reality has to be imagined, then poetry can be a good way to sense the processes of fiction-making at work in all our organisations. But if there is no definable break between the poet's imagination and all our social constructions, then solo creation also counts as politics, though it may bypass others entirely. Perhaps this is why so many of Stevens's late poems enjoy the melancholy, everydayness of the suburbs, those places of imagined perfection and daily loneliness, where one is always imagining and being imagined by one's neighbours. Stevens's understanding of the dizzying demands of faith that belonging to a plural society makes of its members has sound democratic credentials. But his modernist vision of how the poem might enact such a unity embeds the potential for mutual isolation into its own framework – as, indeed, does America itself.

Recommended Further Reading

Charles Altieri, *The Art of Twentieth-Century American Poetry: Modernism and After* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2009).

David Frail, *The Early Politics and Poetics of William Carlos Williams* (Ann Arbor, MI: UMI Research Press, 1987).

Frank Lentricchia, *Modernist Quartet* (Cambridge University Press, 1994).

Cristanne Miller, *Marianne Moore: Questions of Authority* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995).

Wallace Stevens: The Poetics of Modernism, ed. by Albert Gelpi (Cambridge University Press, 1985).