

# Articles

## Steel Against Intimation: The Motive for Metaphor of Wallace Stevens, Esq.

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Reality is a cliché from which we escape by metaphor.  
—Stevens, “Adagia”

Trace the gold sun about the whitened sky  
Without evasion by a single metaphor.  
Look at it in its essential barrenness  
And say this, this is the centre that I seek.  
—Stevens, “Credences of Summer”

A few years ago I was in charge of deciding when students could receive credit at my law school for “law-related” outside courses. Once when I somewhat uneasily approved a petition for credit in a course on Latin poetry, a colleague reinforced my doubts by suggesting that according to my ruling, no subject could possibly *fail* to win approval. Recent developments in legal scholarship have recalled the episode, and prompted

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these belated reflections on the “law-relatedness” of poetry, here the poetry of a lawyer. I am still not of one mind on the subject.

In his recent book defending law against literary incursions, Richard Posner criticizes Robin West for using Kafka’s stories to make a legal point. Even if Kafka was trained and worked as a lawyer, that does not mean that his writings addressed legal issues, Judge Posner says; after all, “Wallace Stevens was also a lawyer . . . but no one supposes that Stevens’s . . . poetry is about law.”<sup>1</sup> Actually, with the recent rise of the very law-literature movement that troubles Judge Posner, some lawyers do now seem to suppose that Stevens’s poetry is “about law,” in the sense that it might properly influence legal theorists, if not judges and lawyers. For just one example, in a recent defense of the law’s specialized professional language, Mark Yudof, Dean of the University of Texas Law School, quotes extensively from Stevens, who he says was “not only a poet but also a lawyer.”<sup>2</sup> Conversely, some literary commentators seem to suppose that Stevens’s legal training or work as a lawyer bears on his poetry; thus a valuable recent critical work begins with the observation that the poet Stevens often argues “with the rigor of a good lawyer.”<sup>3</sup>

How could this difficult lyric and meditative poet possibly speak to lawyers as lawyers, or speak as a lawyer in his poetry? The standard law-and-literature manifestos suggest some possible though very general approaches to making the connection between law and poetry. James Boyd White urges us to assimilate “the judicial opinion” to “the poem,” and to substitute a “poetic” for a “theoretical” form of writing and reading in our legal education and practice.<sup>4</sup> But it takes great effort—Judge Posner would say wasted effort—to make this law-literature claim plausibly concrete. The judge proposes instead that, with certain exceptions, “[t]he literary should be a sphere apart” from the legal.<sup>5</sup>

Judge Posner’s denial of any connection between Stevens’s poetry and

1. R. Posner, *Law and Literature: A Misunderstood Relation* 179 (1988). On Kafka as legal authority, see *id.* at 176-205, responding to West, *Authority, Autonomy, and Choice: The Role of Consent in the Moral and Political Visions of Franz Kafka and Richard Posner*, 99 *Harv. L. Rev.* 384 (1986).

2. Yudof, “*Tea at the Palaz of Hoon*”: *The Human Voice in Legal Rules*, 66 *Tex. L. Rev.* 589, 592, 593 (1988). The article is a response to Getman, *Voices*, 66 *Tex. L. Rev.* 57 (1988). An early 1989 Lexis check showed 19 citations to Stevens in the law review database, which goes back to 1982; for what it is worth, he is tied for the lead in citations among modern poets with Auden, slightly ahead of Eliot and Frost.

3. E. Cook, *Poetry, Word-Play, and Word-War in Wallace Stevens* 3 (1988).

4. J.B. White, *The Judicial Opinion and the Poem: Ways of Reasoning, Ways of Life*, in *Heraclides’ Bow* 107, 123, 129 (1985); *cf.* White, *Law and Literature: No Manifesto*, 39 *Mercer L. Rev.* 739 (1988). White offers an exercise in poetry-reading as part of a legal education in his law and literature textbook, *The Legal Imagination* 761-806 (1973).

5. R. Posner, *supra* note 1, at 302. For Posner’s proviso to his “world apart” view, see *id.* at 303-09, where he argues that lawyers can indeed develop certain craft virtues by reading literature. Professor White responds, in a strongly critical review, that Posner’s proviso is “a very small mouse from a very big mountain,” and White renews his case for a much more extensive assimilation of the two realms. See White, *What Can a Lawyer Learn from Literature?*, 102 *Harv. L. Rev.* 2014, 2032 (1989) (book review).

his work as a lawyer is one illustration of his proposed wall of separation between law and literature. Much in Stevens's life and work proclaims the disjunction of the two realms. After sketching the evidence for this, I will consider one Stevens poem, "The Motive for Metaphor," which has actually been cited in support of a skeptical critique of some of the claims of the law-literature movement. The poem does distance law from poetry, on one plausible reading, but of course if this reading is used to convince lawyers to keep poetry out of the legal canon, it gives rise to a paradox. This lawyer's closer look puts the paradox in the poem—an ambiguously jurisprudential poem that both separates and joins law and poetry, power and metaphor.

## I

Stevens was trained as a lawyer, but he could not make a living in private practice, and soon went to work as a surety bond claims adjuster at an insurance company. He was a great success at that line of work, ending up as vice-president in charge of surety and fidelity claims for the Hartford Accident and Indemnity Company. Much of his work there did require him to decide legal questions, but the aspect of it perhaps most valuable to his company involved pure business judgment. Stevens was not a member of the bar, and his colleagues agreed he would not have succeeded as a private attorney. His work, ambiguous between that of a house counsel and of a claims adjuster, was not the practice of law as conventionally understood.<sup>6</sup>

Further, Stevens's poetry has nothing explicitly to do with law. He never used overtly legal themes and settings in his poems, as Kafka, for example, did in his stories. Nor do the poems seem to teach the equitable virtue of fellow feeling, as some law-literature advocates argue literary works are especially good at doing.<sup>7</sup> He once wrote: "Life is an affair of people not of places. But for me life is an affair of places and that is the trouble."<sup>8</sup> And indeed his poetry portrayed a largely "unpeopled" world of vividly experienced places, ideas, and objects: an imaginative world constructed from reading, writing, and long solitary walks.<sup>9</sup> Isolated and

6. See P. Brazeau, *Parts of a World* 37, 67, 77 (1983) (business judgment); *id.* at 30 (unsuited for law practice); Stevens, *Letters to Wilson Taylor*, in *Wallace Stevens: A Celebration* 80-81 (F. Doggett and R. Buttler ed. 1980) (not member of the bar).

7. See J.B. White, *Heracles' Bow*, *supra* note 4, at 90-91; West, *Economic Man and Literary Woman: One Contrast*, 39 *Mercer L. Rev.* 867 (1988); cf. Shelley, *A Defence of Poetry*, in *Selected Poetry and Prose of Shelley* 448 (H. Bloom ed. 1968) ("The great secret of morals is love; or a going out of our own nature. . . . A man, to be greatly good, must imagine intensely and comprehensively. . . . Poetry enlarges the circumference of the imagination by replenishing it with thoughts of ever new delight . . . [and thus] strengthens the faculty which is the organ of the moral nature of man, in the same manner as exercise strengthens a limb.")

8. Stevens, *Adagia*, in *Opus Posthumous* 185 (2d ed. 1989) [hereinafter OP].

9. "He disposes the world in categories, thus:/The peopled and the unpeopled. In both, he is/Alone." Stevens, *Esthetique du Mal*, in *The Collected Poems of Wallace Stevens* 323 (1954) [herein-

largely apolitical, he took for his chief subjects poetry itself and his own thought-processes, and for his imagery the phenomena of nature. We may become more sentient, but it is not clear how we become warmer or more sympathetic, by reading the poems of Wallace Stevens.

Nor did Stevens connect law and literature as enterprises both at core rhetorical and discursive;<sup>10</sup> rather he insisted on a sharp separation between the prosaic, utilitarian and coercive world of law, and the shadowy imaged and imagined world of poetry. He emphatically distinguished between expository prose and poetry, speaking with displeasure of "the inability of a good many writers of prose to do their job: that is to say, to write prose." The essayist he was criticizing, Roger Caillois,

doesn't write prose; he writes poetry that looks like prose. When it comes to thinking a thing out and to stating it simply, he seems invariably to evade direct thinking by lapsing into a metaphor or a parable and, in this way, he proves things, not by expressing reasons but by intimations to be derived from analogies.<sup>11</sup>

And Stevens as lawyer implemented the ideal of prosaic transparency with a rigor that won him renown in his working circle. His legal writing was direct and unadorned. "When it came to business, he didn't mince words."<sup>12</sup> The style of his instruction letters to field attorneys handling cases for his company was "clear, and concise";<sup>13</sup> they got "right down to the nub of the matter," and "were always sharp and to the point."<sup>14</sup>

The transparency Stevens achieved in legal writing was no part of his poetry, where "moonlight/Fubbed the girandoles," where "disaffected flagellants . . . smacked their muzzy bellies," where "silentious porpoises . . . dabbled in waves that were mustachios." This is the poet who sang of "futura's fuddle-fiddling lumps," enjoyed "ithy oonts and long-haired/Plomets," and commanded: "Chieftan Iffucan of Azcan in caftan/Of tan with henna hackles, halt!"<sup>15</sup>

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after CP]. (Copyright 1954 by Wallace Stevens. This and subsequent excerpts from Steven's poetry reprinted by permission of Alfred A. Knopf, Inc.)

10. For this strand of law-literature, stressing the linguistic and rhetorical nature of law, see White, *supra* note 5, at 2020-24.

11. Letters of Wallace Stevens 494 (H. Stevens ed. 1966) [hereinafter Letters].

12. P. Brazeau, *supra* note 6, at 62 (Harry Williams).

13. *Id.* at 44.

14. *Id.* at 14 (Robert De Vore). On the straightforward and concise character of Stevens's legal letters, see also 28 (Clifford Burdge), 56 (Herbert Schoen), 89 (Margaret Powers), 96 (Elliot Goldstein). Unfortunately, Stevens's legal correspondence has not been preserved, but we can get a sense of his expository style from an article he wrote for an insurance journal describing the work of the surety lawyer, and from those among his published personal letters that come closest to being legal advice or argument; they are indeed, as reported, direct, analytical, and attractively unadorned in style. See, e.g., Letters, *supra* note 11, at 477 (letter to Henry Church about his will); 516-17 (letter discussing the treason charge against Ezra Pound); Stevens, *Surety and Fidelity Claims*, in OP, *supra* note 8, at 237-39.

15. CP, *supra* note 9, at 10, 59, 27, 260, 349, 75.

Stevens's work colleagues were amazed when they tried to read his poetry. Thus Charles O'Dowd: "His letters were as clear and precise as his poetry was obtuse—at least, obtuse to me."<sup>16</sup> And to Clifford Burdge, the gap was so great that Stevens seemed to him "a kind of sane schizophrenic"; Stevens had "two compartments in his mind, poetry and law," from the latter of which emerged "beautifully lucid legal writing" while from the other came what seemed incomprehensible verse.<sup>17</sup>

Stevens scarcely mentioned law in his poetry or his lectures on poetics. A rare exception was the discussion in his lecture "Imagination as Value" of Pascal's claim that "the chancellor is grave and clothed with ornaments, for his position is unreal. . . . Judges, physicians, etc., appeal only to the imagination."<sup>18</sup> Stevens did not accept this account of the rhetorical and imaginative basis of legal authority; he would not enlist among those who treat law primarily as language, ritual, and drama. "Pascal knew perfectly well that the chancellor had force behind him."<sup>19</sup> It was force that made him a chancellor rather than a preacher or a poet.

This is the only hint we have of Stevens's jurisprudence. As befits his separation of the imaginative world of poetry from the daytime world of law, he seemed to proclaim himself a scientific legal positivist, finding law's essence in neither the substance nor the packaging of its claims but in its deployment of coercive power. His stern legal theory thus fit with his spare legal style, appropriate in one who wrote that "the style of men and men themselves are one."<sup>20</sup>

## II

If one were to extract a black-letter teaching from this brief sketch of Stevens's practice and preachment on the connection of law to literature, it might well be Judge Posner's: the two spheres are worlds apart. Once I heard a Stevens poem crystallize this doctrinal point. But then, after his fashion, Stevens left it turning toward its own qualification.

This was at a symposium on "Law and the Humanities,"<sup>21</sup> where James Boyd White spoke eloquently in favor of treating law study as one of the humanities rather than as a would-be social science, and law practice as skillful reading and writing rather than as social engineering. Responding to Professor White, Margaret Jane Radin declined the choice thus posed between a scientific and a humanistic model of law, and proposed a third, pragmatist, alternative. The pragmatist sees law as practice,

16. P. Brazeau, *supra* note 12, at 40.

17. *Id.* at 28. Stevens's lectures and essays on poetry are written in prose that is sinuous, evasive, deliberately allusive, in short, obscure. It violates every stricture of his own criticism of Roger Caillois.

18. B. Pascal, *Thoughts* No. 307 (n.d.).

19. Stevens, *Imagination as Value*, in *The Necessary Angel* 134 (1951) [hereinafter NA].

20. Stevens, *Two or Three Ideas*, in *OP*, *supra* note 8, at 257.

21. At the annual meeting of the Association of American Law Schools in New Orleans, January 1989.

institutionalized action in problematic situations; this brings to bear the perspectival oscillation characteristic of the pragmatist middle way. On the one hand, Radin said, legal judgment is indeed linguistically and culturally rooted—it takes place, guided by rule or precept, within a shaping tradition and context that requires interpretation. But at the same time, legal judgment looks forward to results, aiming at social ends outside itself. The exclusively textual and hermeneutic emphasis of law-and-literature scholarship and theory tends, so she suggested, to divert attention from the crude and often violent non-verbal consequences of legal decision.

That was when Wallace Stevens intervened, as Professor Radin concluded her talk by reading his poem “The Motive for Metaphor.” In that context, the poem contrasts a nuanced literary world of metaphor described in its first three stanzas, a place of rustling leaves, half-colors and melting clouds, with a harsh literal reality described in the last two, a “fatal, dominant” world of “primary noon,” where “steel” overbears “intimation.” The “motive for metaphor” of the title, identified at the transition between the poem’s two parts, is the humanist’s “shrinking” from this noontime realm of prisons and money, pain and greed, into the more sheltered domain of texts, tropes and dialogue. The civilized view of law as cultured conversation thus unduly neglects the “hard sound” of steel against intimation, force against eloquence, a sharp blade against the soft flesh of the human bodies that, more than words, should be the lawyer’s first concern. Here is the poem:

You like it under the trees in autumn,  
Because everything is half dead.  
The wind moves like a cripple among the leaves  
And repeats words without meaning.

In the same way, you were happy in spring,  
With the half colors of quarter-things,  
The slightly brighter sky, the melting clouds,  
The single bird, the obscure moon—

The obscure moon lighting an obscure world  
Of things that would never be quite expressed,  
Where you yourself were never quite yourself  
And did not want nor have to be,

Desiring the exhilarations of changes:  
The motive for metaphor, shrinking from  
The weight of primary noon,  
The A B C of being,

The ruddy temper, the hammer

Of red and blue, the hard sound—  
 Steel against intimation—the sharp flash,  
 The vital, arrogant, fatal, dominant X.<sup>22</sup>

On further re-reading, I found the poem increasingly enigmatic, as suits the ending: X. Still more reading, with help from commentators, helped reduce, without entirely dissipating, the mystery. I remain convinced that Stevens's poem can be read to make Professor Radin's point, though now it seems to say more as well—to connect law and poetry, after first separating them.

The poem begins in paradox; "You like it under the trees in autumn,/ Because everything is half dead," to which I (identifying, tentatively, with the poem's addressee) respond by wondering why I should like anything so moribund in content and flat in tone. The next two lines, with their lame wind and meaningless words, give no answer, but the second stanza begins: "In the same way, you were happy in spring"—in the same way, that is, as I "like it" in autumn. What way is that? The appealing spring phenomena next presented offer the clue; light, clouds, bird, moon, were all "*half* colors of *quarter*-things," just as everything in autumn is "*half* dead." It is then fractionation, incompleteness, lack of integer-ity or wholeness, that I like, and this is confirmed as I move on to the third stanza, where I am said to be happy with

The obscure moon lighting an obscure world  
 Of things that would never be quite expressed,  
 Where you yourself were never quite yourself  
 And did not want nor have to be,

Desiring the exhilarations of changes:  
 The motive for metaphor. . . .

In my youthful spring, then, I was glad to be "never quite myself"; and this permeable ego-boundary allowed me the excitement of growth and change. Incompletion is receptive to change; desire for change is then the motive for metaphor. Metaphor itself, finally, is the trope of motion and change; it "carries over" some standard meaning into an unexpected context, transforming our view of the object it treats.

Metaphor is also the paradigmatic figure of speech, and as such may create a riddle or an obscurity, particularly when contrasted with the supposed clarity of literal language. And indeed the poem insists on obscurity as another common feature shared by spring and autumn. The spring moon is, we are told twice, "obscure," and lights an "obscure world" of "things that would never be quite expressed." This linking of obscure

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22. CP, *supra* note 9, at 288.

light to verbal obscurity reminds us that the crippled autumn wind of the first stanza itself obscurely "repeats words without meaning."

The theme of obscurity helps us read the beginning of stanza four:

The motive for metaphor, shrinking from  
The weight of primary noon,  
The A B C of being,

I am drawn to metaphor and poetry, that is, not only for its exhilarations, but out of a need to retreat from clear light and literal A B Cs back into a world of poetic indirection.

That indirection was attractive in spring, with its moonlit world and youthful moods and feelings so hard to put into words. But the poem's verb tenses place spring irretrievably in the past; autumn is the present. And now in autumn, indirection (or "intimation") is, recalling the first stanza, no more than "words without meaning." Autumn's wind does not inspire, stirring to Shelleyan life the fallen leaves of dead thought; rather it creates Dantesque obscurity, meaninglessness, "under the trees." These trees form a dark forest or *selva oscura* into which I, an aging narrator, have wandered.

Looking back, the spring-to-autumn degeneration applies to the theme of change as well; in the spring, change pointed toward summer, the prime of life, but now in the half-death of autumn, change is toward winter. In this context, the "exhilarations of changes" are less attractive: they represent at best an easeful sinking down as the woods fill up with snow; at worst some desperate, undignified, and ultimately fatal ennui-driven middle-aged "Allons!" in pursuit of novelty for novelty's sake.<sup>23</sup> The shadow of death makes the dark forest threatening and savage, a *selva selvaggia*.

After this, the noontime world of the last two stanzas seems, if somewhat overwhelming, still in its sunlit clarity more attractive than the sinister shadows. But as I read the lines more carefully, my expectations are progressively undermined.

The motive for metaphor, shrinking from  
The weight of primary noon,  
The A B C of being,

The ruddy temper, the hammer

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23. As with Baudelaire's consumer-travelers "who leave for leaving's sake . . . and, not knowing why, keep muttering 'away!'" until finally "any abyss will do," drugs, Hell itself, in the quest for new sensations. Baudelaire, *Travelers (Les Voyages)*, in *Les Fleurs du Mal* 152, 157 (R. Howard trans. 1982) ("les vrais voyageurs sont ceux-là seuls qui partent/Pour partir. . . . Et, sans savoir pourquoi, disent toujours: Allons!"; "Nous voulons, tant ce feu nous brûle le cerveau,/Plonger au fond du gouffre, Enfer ou Ciel, qu'importe?/Au fond de l'Inconnu pour trouver du nouveau!" *id.* at 330, 335).

Of red and blue, the hard sound—  
 Steel against intimation—the sharp flash,  
 The vital, arrogant, fatal, dominant X.

By contrast with the metaphor, change, and obscurity of the moonlit autumn-spring world, I expect to find literality, stability, and clarity. And indeed the first images comply; “primary noon” suggests the clear, and “A B C of being” the literal. Yet noon is said to have “weight,” an obvious metaphor, and as I go on the use of metaphor becomes more conspicuous—a hammer, steel, a hard sound, a flash—culminating in X, that “ultimate metaphor, never quite itself and always ready to assume another identity.”<sup>24</sup> Now, looking back, I see that the contrast I expected is actually present in reverse; the opening two lines of the poem (“You like it under the trees in autumn/Because everything is half dead”) are unusually flat and literal for Stevens, and after the figure of wind as muttering cripple in the next couplet, the portrayal of spring in stanzas two and three is itself plain and relatively unfigurative.

There is more confusion to come. The concluding series of imagistic phrases in apposition require me to infer the common entity or quality they jointly denote, but the induction is by no means easy: ruddy temper, hammer of red and blue, sharp flash, steel against intimation, hard sound. (“What do these items have in common?”) Where we might hope for clarification, the poem concludes in ultimate obscurity, as the series is summarized: “the . . . X.” Nor do the elided adjectives resolve anything; life (“vital”) seems to cancel death (“fatal”), leaving an algebraic variable that I indeed experience as both “arrogant” and “dominant” in its sphinx-like challenge: solve for X. Instead of clarity, obscurity; instead of literality, metaphor; and finally, instead of stability, permanence, or completion, the concluding images—the glow, the sparks, the flash, the “hard sound,” even “noon” itself—all evoke the transitory.<sup>25</sup>

But despite its turn toward mystery, the poem is no Rorschach blot. The closing series of images, for example, while obscure, is far from random. Four of the images—the ruddy temper (of heated metal), the hammer with its red and blue sparks (from an anvil), the hard sound, the flash—suggest a forge, a blacksmith’s shop, as the place of primary noon. “Steel against intimation,” inserted parenthetically, is more enigmatic, but at least it is not obviously inconsistent with this reading.

24. D. Walker, *The Transparent Lyric: Reading and Meaning in the Poetry of Stevens and Williams* 80 (1984).

25. This is no doubt one reason why the poem’s metaphoric frame changes from “Life is a Year” (autumn, spring) to “Life is a Day” (primary noon); the latter frame represents reality as a brief moment, noon, rather than a full season, summer. The shift also sustains the addressee’s sense of choice: in the original (year-long) time frame, fall is the present and thus there can be no going back to summer; but even in fall, the reader can still choose the day frame’s noon-reality over twilight-imagination.

The practical work-place imagery lends some support to the law-related reading of the poem, returning us, if we allow ourselves a little biographical context, to Stevens's own daytime workplace, where lawyer-insurers hammered out their blunt repairs to the commercial world's mishaps. The association of law with steel and a hammer then might be seen to anticipate Stevens's point that "the chancellor has force behind him"—and steely force, more than the metaphors and rituals of legitimacy, is what gives the chancellor his authority. The "weight of primary noon" further suggests the law's pitiless scrutiny,<sup>26</sup> and the "A B C of being" suggests the plain, unpoetic, and literal language in which the world's real business is conducted, by men who, in Justice Holmes's phrase, "think things, not words."<sup>27</sup>

These connotations, though available to make this a "jurisprudential poem" in a lawyer's eyes, are by no means compelled. One Stevens critic, Eleanor Cook, sees the forge as a poet's workplace, and the demand of primary noon as the writer's exhilarating yet frightening task of hammering inchoate thoughts and images into definite words.<sup>28</sup> Another, the magisterial Helen Vendler, sees the forging poet as one who in maturity has accepted the Platonic imperative to weld the particulars of experience into a firm and fixed unity; in contrast is the youthful perspectivist who, rich in varied insights, has no solid identity or point of view.<sup>29</sup> On these readings, the poet Stevens is contrasting two phases of his poetic process, rather than the poet-lawyer Stevens contrasting the two major activities of his life.<sup>30</sup>

Patricia Parker, a third reader of the poem, comes closer than Cook or Vendler to seeing the jurisprudential poem; she reads the metaphoric "shrinking" as the romantic poet's ambivalent flight toward the forest glade or the ivory tower, and away from "the noonday sun of a Mammon world of industry, stenolanguage, and fixed identities," a place dominated

26. The noon sun as a metaphoric vehicle for law was no doubt familiar to Stevens from one of the celebrated images of modern poetry, Valéry's "noontime the just," armed and unpitying. "Midi le juste y compose de feux/La mer, la mer, toujours recommencée! . . . Je te soutiens, admirable justice/De la lumière aux armes sans pitié!" Valéry, *La Cimetière Marin*, in Paul Valéry: An Anthology 268-71 (J. Lawler ed. 1977) (slightly modifying David Paul's translation, "Noontime the just compounds with fires/The sea, the sea, perpetually renewed! . . . I can withstand you, admirable justice/Of light itself, with your pitiless blades!").

27. Holmes, *Law in Science—Science in Law*, in *Collected Legal Papers* 238 (1920). Compare Browning's line "The very A. B. C. of fact" in his law-poem, *The Ring and the Book* (i, 708).

28. E. Cook, *supra* note 3, at 182-84.

29. H. Vendler, *Words Chosen out of Desire* 23-26 (1986). The perspectivist is the Stevens who in 1938 wrote: "There are many truths/But they are not parts of a truth." Stevens, *On the Road Home*, in CP, *supra* note 9, at 203; the Platonist is the Stevens who in 1940 wrote: "The prologues are over. It is a question, now,/Of final belief . . . It is time to choose." Stevens, *Asides on the Oboe*, in *id.* at 250.

30. They also focus on a fear of poetic sterility that is certainly in the poem—this is one aspect of the *selva oscura* theme. The wind, traditional figure for poetic inspiration, now speaks only meaningless words. And the passage from moonlight to sunlight has the same connotation—compare Yeats's lament for the lost "dark leopards of the moon," when at fifty he was forced to "endure the timid sun." Yeats, *Lines Written in Dejection*, in *Collected Poems of W. B. Yeats* 143 (1958).

by "the hard certainties, and resolute end-directedness, of Men of Power."<sup>31</sup> Parker mentions as context in support of this reading Stevens's pervasive theme of metaphor (and poetry itself) as a morally ambivalent "evasion" or escape from reality, a theme that offered special difficulties for him in the wartime year 1942, when he wrote the poem.<sup>32</sup> Let me now look a bit further into this context, before turning to the poem's central riddle—the paradoxical metaphoricity, instability, and obscurity with which this supposed place of fixity, maturity and reality is portrayed.

From the 1930's onward, Stevens's letters, and to a lesser degree his poems and lectures, were filled with his yearning for a poetry that speaks to the central concerns of a wider audience. He reported feeling "isolated" and "on the edge" as a poet, and yearned to move in his writing toward the "central," the "normal," to "share the common life," all of which he associated with "reality."<sup>33</sup> In the letter I have just been quoting, written in 1940, he summed up one aspect of what he meant by the central or normal in a way that showed his own great distance from it:

I see that there is a center. For instance a photograph of a lot of fat men and women in the woods, drinking beer and singing Hi-li Hi-lo convinces me that there is a normal that I ought to try to achieve.<sup>34</sup>

In 1946, Stevens again stated this theme in the strongest terms: "For myself, the inaccessible jewel is the normal and all of life, in poetry, is the difficult pursuit of just that."<sup>35</sup> In 1949, he again noted his desire to write poems of "normal life, insight into the commonplace, reconciliation with every-day reality." He was "happy" when he could write such poems, but, he added wistfully, "it is not possible to get away from one's own nature";<sup>36</sup> as he had said a year earlier, a poet's "sense of the world dictates his subjects to him," over that sense he has "little control, and possi-

31. Parker, *The Motive For Metaphor: Stevens and Derrida*, 7 Wallace Stevens J. 81 (1983). (Parker, a Spenser scholar, is recalling that Mammon, the Money God, appears as a blacksmith-devil in *The Faerie Queene*, II, vii.)

32. In a letter of December 8, 1942, Stevens reports having sent *The Motive for Metaphor* to the magazine *Chimera*, where it was published in 1943. Letters, *supra* note 11, at 430.

33. Letters, *supra* note 11, at 352.

34. *Id.* He took up the challenge in the charmingly self-deprecating *A Lot of People Bathing in a Stream*, in CP, *supra* note 9, at 371. The poet goes for an outing "in the company of the sun/Good-fortuner of the grotesque," and swims, naked, amid "addicts/To blotches, angular anonymids" as they "bathed . . . and dangled down." Once the rite de passage ("passing a boundary") of this slumming expedition was over "How good it was at home again at night" in familiar rooms "which do not ever seem to change."

35. Letters, *supra* note 11, at 521.

36. *Id.* at 642-43. For other letters expressing Stevens's urge to achieve the "normal" or "central," see *id.* at 711, 740, 760; for comments by Stevens on his own obscurity, some defensive in character, see *id.* at 403, 710, 873; for discussions of the "normality" issue in his lectures, see *Effects of Analogy*, in NA, *supra* note 19, at 115-16; *Imagination as Value*, in *id.* at 153-56. At the end of his life, in one of his last poems, *As You Leave the Room*, in OP, *supra* note 8, at 117-18, Stevens was still fighting the fear that he had been a marginal "skeleton" or "disbeliever in reality," and alluded to a number of his efforts at red-blooded poetry.

bly none." Thus (in a striking echo of "The Motive for Metaphor") "[a] poet writes of twilight because he shrinks from noonday."<sup>37</sup>

Stevens's sense of his own "shrinking" nature particularly troubled him in 1942. In a lecture given that year, he spoke of the poet as destined to "help people live their lives." Yet (he quoted Shakespeare's question) "How with this rage can beauty hold a plea?" His since much-quoted answer, given only amidst much qualification, was that poetry served "self-preservation" by supplying "a violence within that protects us from the violence without." In the wartime year 1942, there could be little doubt what "rage" and what "violence without" Stevens was referring to; but his almost self-parodic undermining of his affirmation of poetic "nobility" suggests his extreme doubt at his own capacity to supply the central poetry he thought necessary.<sup>38</sup>

Earlier that year he had published "Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction," and to that most unmartial and untopical masterpiece he had appended a curious Coda that, in its very awkwardness, expressed this same sense of marginality. At his insistence, some of its lines were even printed on the book jacket.<sup>39</sup> The Coda proclaims the interdependence of the soldier's actual war and the poet's own never-ending "war between the mind/And sky." The two wars are said to be "one . . . a plural, a right and left, a pair./Two parallels that meet," if only in "a book in a barrack, a letter from Malay." The soldier, whose war will end though the poet's continues, is said to be "poor without the poet's lines." Indeed the closing tercet celebrates "[h]ow simply" with the aid of the poet's ministrations "the fictive hero becomes the real" and

How gladly with proper words the soldier dies,  
If he must, or lives on the bread of faithful speech.<sup>40</sup>

Whatever note this struck in 1942, today it sounds false and pretentious, even offensively so, unworthy of the great poem to which it is appended. Stevens is neither a Kiplingesque barrackroom bard nor a Whitmanian wound-dresser; his language is very far from "the bread of faithful speech."<sup>41</sup> The "parallels" he finds between his metaphoric "war" with the blank page and the soldier's bloody war are forced—at best. He does not come close to surmounting the barriers raised by Wilfred Owen and other 20th century war poets against home-front verse

37. Stevens, *Effects of Analogy*, in NA, *supra* note 19, at 122.

38. The subject matter of poetic "nobility" was "evasive and inaccessible"; it sought "disguise"; if disclosed indiscreetly it provoked "shame" and "horror"; looked at plainly it seemed "false and dead and ugly," to the "sensitive poet, conscious of negations." Stevens, *The Noble Rider and the Sound of Words*, in NA, *supra* note 19, at 34-35.

39. Letters, *supra* note 11, at 408.

40. CP, *supra* note 9, at 407-08.

41. Compare the more sophisticated treatment in "Notes," II, ix, where Stevens portrays himself as fluctuating between "the poet's gibberish" and "the gibberish of the vulgate." *Id.* at 396-97.

that supplies proper words for soldiers to die by.<sup>42</sup> The whole performance betrays Stevens's strain at being his kind of poet in 1942.<sup>43</sup>

Another poem of that year, "Oak Leaves With Hands," reinforces the sense that Stevens was connecting metaphor on the one hand, and poetic marginality, obscurity, and "abnormality" on the other. Flora, Lady Lowzen, née MacMort, from "ancestral hells," is a chameleon metaphorist "[f]or whom what is was other things"; she is "evasive" (favorite epithet) and "metamorphorid," a coinage suggesting morbid metaphoric metamorphosis, in her case from a leafy-handed twelve-legged (rooted) oak tree into multi-armed Kali, goddess of death.<sup>44</sup> She lures us with the "chromatic" attractions of dying leaves, a poet whose "colors" (traditional term for tropes) help her magically enliven past and future with "the movement of few words."<sup>45</sup> This metaphoric magic was bitter for Stevens, in the mood (as he later put it) to turn from "evasion by . . . metaphor" toward "the centre that I seek."<sup>46</sup> As a final point of auto-critique, "Oak Leaves" is opaque even by Stevens's standards, a self-parody of obscurity, a conscious display of "abnormality," of shrinking from noonday toward twilight's shadows.

This context (the "legislative history" for the work of our unacknowledged legislator) partly supports, while partly undercutting, the reading of "Motive" as a jurisprudential poem. On the one hand, Stevens associates the autumn-spring land of metaphor with the obscurity and marginality of his poetry, and noonday with the "centrality" and "normality" of the real world of action, power, and public common life. His own real daytime world was the world of law and insurance, one he identified with the clear businesslike prose of his own professional writing. Law was steel rather than intimation; "the chancellor has force behind him" on which his authority rests more than it does on the robes and verbal flummery that surround him.

On the other hand, Stevens's main conscious reference for the noontime sunlit forge of reality in 1942 was probably the war effort rather than his workaday world of law and business. The two were perhaps connected in his mind; Hartford surety bonds covered defense contracts during the

42. Cf. J. Merrill, *Late Settings* 26 (1985) ("'How gladly with proper words,' said Wallace Stevens, 'The soldier dies.' Or kills.")

43. Frank Lentricchia captures Stevens's problem when he writes: "How much more responsible (and guilty) can you get than, on the one hand, to write the rarefied lyric that Stevens writes, and, on the other, to assert that poets help people to live their lives." F. Lentricchia, *Ariel and the Police* 214 (1988).

44. *Oak Leaves Are Hands*, in CP, *supra* note 9, at 272. For the identification of Flora with Kali via "Hydaspia," an Indian city, see H. Vendler, *On Extended Wings* 149 (1969).

45. Her "chromatic" metaphoric transformations remind us of the druggy Baudelairian pursuit, *see supra* note 23, of novelty for its own sake. Stevens makes the drug link by way of a conspicuous echo of Coleridge's narcotic-inspired *Kubla Khan*.

46. *Credences of Summer*, in CP, *supra* note 9, at 373.

war.<sup>47</sup> But the main war effort to which Stevens seems to have felt so unhappily marginal was the writing of “central” poetry that might inspire or console his fellow citizens. He seems to have wished that he could strike poetic sparks of “red [white] and blue” with his poet’s hammer.<sup>48</sup> Perhaps he thought how many more volumes of Robert Frost than of Wallace Stevens would likely be found in the barracks.<sup>49</sup> A few years later he would note in a letter that Ireland had sent a battleship to bring the body of Yeats home as a national hero; he knew there would never be similar obsequies for him.<sup>50</sup>

But even if Stevens himself thought only of war and the “normal” or “central” poetry that deals with wartime reality as the social reference of the noon-time world portrayed in “Motive,” he still would have invited us to read the poem as “law-related”—if the reading fit.<sup>51</sup> At the same time he would also, however reluctantly for so reticent a man, have invited our attention to the human context that is the shadowy spirit to the carnal letter of every text.<sup>52</sup> Here that context intimates, without clearly showing forth, law as one of the poem’s possible contexts of reference.

What now are we to make of the poem’s central paradox, its turn in the final stanzas toward metaphor, the transitory, the obscure, where we were led to expect the literal, stable and clear? Habitual Stevens readers can

47. P. Brazeau, *supra* note 6, at 21 (defense contract bond). Stevens, perhaps not incidentally, avoided the central role in corporate policy he could have had during this time, presumably to keep as much time free as possible for poetry writing. *Id.* at 61.

48. In a better mood, Stevens contrasted his insouciant poetic “clickety-clack,” unsuited to martial anthems, with the “more decorous pom-pom-pom that people expect.” Letters, *supra* note 11, at 485. Patricia Parker hears a suggestion of Hephaistos, the lame blacksmith of the gods, behind both the “cripple” of stanza one of “Motive” and the forge of stanzas four and five. See Parker, *supra* note 31, at 85. Hephaistos used his “ponderous hammer” as both a munitions maker and an artist, famously combining the functions in the shield he made for Achilles, its border displaying the basic poetic symbols of earth, sky, sea, sun, moon and stars, and its panels portraying life’s centralities: marriages, festivals, farming, war—and a lawsuit. *Iliad*, XVIII, 468-614.

49. Cf. what Stevens said of Frost in 1954: “Frost is greatly admired by many people. I do not know his work well enough to be either impressed or unimpressed. . . . His work is full (or is said to be full) of humanity.” Letters, *supra* note 11, at 825. The claim not to know Frost’s poetry is at least doubtful. See P. Brazeau, *supra* note 6, at 104. The wistful sneer “full of humanity” speaks volumes to anyone who has read Stevens’s laments for his “unattainable jewel, the normal.”

50. Letters, *supra* note 11, at 617-18. His own funeral was in fact sparsely attended and dreary. See P. Brazeau, *supra* note 6, at 296-97. Part of Stevens’s difference was that he was American; he noted in the same letter that the funeral in France of Paul Valéry (a poet at least as “abnormal” as Stevens) had been “a great affair.” In the same letter, Stevens spoke of the legend that had grown up around Rilke. If we had not been reassured by T.S. Eliot that there is no competition among poets, we might almost think Stevens was reviewing the *tombeaux* of his chief competitors.

51. The interpreter, Stevens wrote, is obliged “to base his remarks on what he has before him. It is not a question of what an author meant to say but of what he has said. In the case of a competent critic the author may well have a great deal to find out about himself and his work.” Letters, *supra* note 11, at 346. See the very strong statement to the same effect, *id.* at 390; see also *id.* at 793 (“I believe in pure *explication de texte* . . . my principal form of piety.”)

52. “[A] poem is like a man walking on the banks of a river, whose shadow is reflected in the water. If you explain a poem you are likely to do it either in terms of the man or in terms of the shadow, but you have to explain it in terms of the whole. When I said recently that a poem was what was on a page, it seems to me now that I was wrong because that is explaining [solely] in terms of the man.” *Id.* at 354.

anticipate the answer; this reflexive, self-questioning poet's "reality-imagination complex" is always just that, a complex intertwining, never a neat schema. A Stevens poem that starts by equating metaphor with the obscure-transitory-unreal and the literal with the clear-stable-real is unlikely to end up simply charting out these binary oppositions in all their classic symmetry.

Stevens entitled the book in which "Motive" appeared *Transport to Summer*, a title whose word-play suggests the point behind the poem's reversal.<sup>53</sup> Summer in Stevens, like noon, represents sunlit reality; metaphor is the figure of movement, carrying across, transport (you can ride a literal *metaphora*, the public bus, in Athens today). The volume contains a number of poems about metaphor, a topic of abiding interest to Stevens. As well as being a suspicious critic of this "evasive and metamorphoric" trope, he also joined in the Romantic celebration of what Shelley called poetry's "vitally metaphoric" power to reveal the further reality behind the bright obvious surfaces revealed by daylight and portrayed in literal prose.<sup>54</sup>

The sunlit visible is not the whole of reality, so the romantic tradition insists; there is an unseen world missed by those who attend only to the clear and distinct, relying solely on vision and transparent prose. The early Wittgenstein, precursor of the Vienna Circle, wrote that "the mystical" could not be clearly expressed, and that in its presence the only proper response was silence. But his later and better account holds that language is not a stock of labels matched to discrete things and their relations, but a complex of practices, survival-oriented game-like communicative conventions, a bag of tricks from which no one should expect a logical structure mapping perfectly to reality, sentence to fact, one to one. Since language can only intimate more or less well, the speaker who waits until speech can mirror reality will never speak at all.

It is the poets above all whose business is to dirty the pristine silence legislated by the early Wittgenstein, evoking those aspects of reality that are least susceptible to representation in transparent prose—the nothing that is there, for example, when the cat is not in its accustomed place on the mat. This evocation of a reality beyond literal expression need involve no mystical assumptions, none of what Stevens called the "minor wish-fulfillments"<sup>55</sup> of supernaturalism. For common sense untroubled by logical positivism, the inadequacy of language to natural reality is an obvious fact. Who can accurately describe the taste of a raisin, much less love or grief, or any of the feelings, great and small, that fill the stream of con-

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53. The following discussion is particularly indebted to both E. Cook, *supra* note 3, at 171-88, and Parker, *supra* note 31.

54. Shelley, *supra* note 7, at 418; Stevens, *Three Academic Pieces*, in NA, *supra* note 19, at 81-82.

55. Stevens, *Imagination as Value*, in NA, *supra* note 19, at 139.

sciousness—or, as noted by Bergson and William James, two of Stevens's masters, who can find adequate plain words for the strange flickering movement of that stream itself?

Legal theory makes room for the ineffable through the ever-debatable concept of equity, where intuitive judgment is said to correct for the errors created when a code's plain language grid is imposed on the organic complexity of human reality. And even natural science, which starts with clear and distinct ideas and the evidence of the senses, moves beyond the ordinary world of tables and chairs to construct an unseen realm of 17th century primary qualities and forces, or 20th century particles, waves, curved continua, codes—all hidden realities constructed by a process of hypothesis-framing and checking where words slip and slide and “nothing solid is its solid self.”<sup>56</sup> Stevens united the insolidity of both the inner life and the world of modern physics in the ending to his longest meditation on imagination-reality:

It is not in the premise that reality  
Is a solid. It may be a shade that traverses  
A dust, a force that traverses a shade.<sup>57</sup>

Stevens often uses hearing and sound, especially inarticulate sound, to figure the aspects of reality and modes of access to them that most resist prose representation; with this trope, he turns from the sunlight into the shaded woods to avoid visual distraction, to open his ears to small sounds and hidden voices. The poet makes “the visible a little hard to see,” not in order to hide reality, but to bring to hearing the very real but invisible “second part of life,” the “syllables that rise/From the floor, rising in speech we do not speak.”<sup>58</sup> Other times the opposition is between high-pitched chatter and deeper wordless sound; in either case the Heideggerian injunction is to hear sounds from the side of being that escapes our distracted everyday attention.<sup>59</sup>

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56. Stevens, *Description Without Place*, in CP, *supra* note 9, at 345. From “plain words” science beats retreat to increasingly difficult mathematics, the X—or to metaphor, for whose place in science see S.J. Gould, *Time's Arrow, Time's Cycle* (1987).

57. Stevens, *An Ordinary Evening in New Haven* (xxxii), in CP, *supra* note 9, at 489. Stevens's allusion to physics is clarified by his quotation from Joad: “Every body, every quality of a body resolves itself into an enormous number of vibrations, movements, changes . . . How, then, does the world come to appear to us as a collection of solid, static objects extended in space? Because of the intellect, which presents us with a false view of it.” Stevens, *Noble Rider*, in NA, *supra* note 19, at 30.

58. Stevens, *Creations of Sound*, in CP, *supra* note 9, at 310-11. Cf. Stevens, *Credences of Summer* (iv), in CP, *supra* note 9, at 374, containing one of Stevens's favorite passages from his own work: “There the distant fails the clairvoyant eye/And the secondary senses of the ear/Swarm, not with secondary sounds, but choirs . . . Pure rhetoric of a language without words.” See also the interplay of (clear) vision with (mysterious) rain-sound in Stevens, *Ordinary Evening* (xiii-xv), in CP, *supra* note 9, at 474-76; and the reference to the poet as “speaker/Of a speech only a little of the tongue,” Stevens, *Notes* (II, ix), in CP, *supra* note 9, at 397.

59. “Keep quiet in the heart, O wild bitch. O mind/Gone wild . . . Be still. . . Hear what he

Thus poetic obscurity can actually serve reality; and the oft-quoted first sentence of "Man Carrying Thing" (also from *Transport to Summer*) speaks not for an aesthetic of mystification but rather on behalf of a kind of realism:

The poem must resist the intelligence  
Almost successfully. Illustration:

A brune figure in winter evening resists  
Identity. The thing he carries resists

The most necessitous sense. Accept them, then,  
As secondary (parts not quite perceived

Of the obvious whole, uncertain particles  
Of the certain solid, the primary free from doubt,

Things floating like the first hundred flakes of snow  
Out of a storm we must endure all night,

Out of a storm of secondary things),  
A horror of thoughts that suddenly are real.

We must endure our thoughts all night, until  
The bright obvious stands motionless in cold.<sup>60</sup>

In this poem, at dusk, with snow starting to fall, an indistinct "brune figure," with an indistinct burden, appears outside. The figure with its object resists "the most necessitous sense," sight, and thus resists "identity"—it is not quite itself. Like a difficult poem or an opaque metaphor carrying a less than obvious meaning, this obscure figure is a "secondary" reality apart from the visible, the "primary free from doubt." Speculating on what it may be (a burglar? a homeless person needing shelter? a dead poet returned from Hades?<sup>61</sup>) brings a horrifying storm of suddenly real

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says, "The dauntless master, as he starts the human tale." Stevens, *Puella Parvula*, in CP, *supra* note 9, at 456. Frank Kermode explores the parallels between late Stevens and Heidegger (whom Stevens never read) in a revealing essay. Kermode, *Dwelling Poetically in Connecticut*, in Wallace Stevens, *supra* note 6, at 256-73.

60. Stevens, *Man Carrying Thing*, in CP, *supra* note 9, at 350-51. "It is necessary to propose an enigma to the mind. The mind always proposes a solution." Stevens, *Adagia*, in OP, *supra* note 8, at 168.

61. This last, evoking Harold Bloom's figure of *apophrades* (return from the dead), seems an especially likely candidate for the "man carrying thing." Stevens applies to his visually obscure figure the obscure adjective "brune." Stevens's beloved OED tells us that this is an Old English word for "burning"; it is also the French word for "brown," root of "brunette." The latter sense (and the former more faintly) evoke Dante's Brunetto of *Inferno*, xv, a dead poetic master burnt brown by hellfire—"in the brown baked features/The eyes of a familiar compound ghost/Both intimate and unidentifiable," as Eliot rewrites it in "Little Gidding." Eliot's compound Brunetto seems to have blended Mallarmé and Yeats. See R. Bush, T.S. Eliot 228-237 (1984). But all strong poets have dead masters, who threaten to keep them in the shade. Eleanor Cook notes but does not pursue the

thoughts that last until morning when the "bright obvious stands motionless in cold." The once dark but now illumined figure may be harmless and banal (a snowman with a broom?), or it may be a stark vision of a previously evaded reality ("motionless" suggests death) congealed out of the storm of night thoughts.<sup>62</sup> But whether they were distortions or revelations of the physical world, the fears and fantasies evoked through night's long parenthesis were psychic realities, drawn out from that inner place, special to the Romantic poet, "where darkness makes abode, and all the host/Of shadowy things work endless changes."<sup>63</sup>

In "The Motive for Metaphor," similarly, the "shrinking" from primary noon may be aimed not at escape from the mysterious reality represented by the final X, but rather at revealing the less visible aspects of that reality, the "obscure world of things that could never be quite expressed." (Again the lawyer thinks of equity, and its invitation to replace deduction with judgment drawn from tacit knowledge.) Most of what is "vital, arrogant, fatal, dominant" in life remains unmastered by systematic reason, not because it is supernatural, but simply because "Much less is known than not,/More far than near," as Philip Larkin says.<sup>64</sup> Normally we have to proceed in problematic situations guided only by loose analogical extensions of beliefs more firmly held and sometimes more firmly based—which is to say by metaphor. Occasionally a fresh metaphor may give us a new hypothesis to try where routine fails. We fear the obscurity "under the trees" of "words without meaning," but no amount of sunlight can eliminate the dark "second part of life."

Metaphor may shrink from noontime sunlight toward reality as well as away from it, then, and the curious syntax of the long concluding sentence of "The Motive for Metaphor" allows the poem to offer both possibilities at once. The final reality-designating phrases, starting with "The A B C of being," seem at first to be in apposition to "primary noon," in which case the motive for metaphor is to shrink from all of them, right down through X. But as Patricia Parker has noted, sense and syntax also allow reading these phrases in apposition to "the motive for metaphor"—we would then read the passage: "the motive for metaphor, shrinking from the [distracting] weight of primary noon, [is to uncover] the A B C of being, the ruddy temper, the . . . X."<sup>65</sup> This antithetical reading accounts for certain of the paradoxical aspects already noted in the concluding

"Brunetto" connection, and adds that "brune" is also a French noun meaning "dusk" or "twilight"—making it, all in all, one of the dictionary-addicted Stevens's hardest-working words. See E. Cook, *supra* note 3, at 185.

62. Helen Vendler pointed out to me that the "bright obvious" might be internal, a frightening realization derived from the night's meditation, rather than the physical source of the twilight vision, seen to be harmless in the morning light. I read the poem as undecided between these alternatives.

63. Wordsworth, *The Prelude* (v, 598-99).

64. Larkin, *Far Out*, in *Collected Poems of Philip Larkin* 120 (1988).

65. See Parker, *supra* note 31, at 84-86.

lines—the strikingly metaphoric character of its images, their increasing obscurity, and the transitory character of their midday moments, glows, sparks, sounds, and flashes.<sup>66</sup>

The secondary obscure reading intertwines with the bright obvious one, a chiaroscuro lesson in the ambiguity of the motive(s) for metaphor. And two coexisting antithetical readings inevitably suggest the possibility of a third, a synthesis—here perhaps an ascent above the literal-metaphoric opposition via the Nietzschean insight that literal speech is made from dead and dying metaphors.<sup>67</sup> The products of the poet's workplace are not always fleeting figures of speech; sometimes the metaphors forged there detach from their original poetic context, hardening into idioms and finally into ordinary literal expressions, the blunt tools of everyday communication.<sup>68</sup>

The poem's ultimate ambiguity can be read back into its jurisprudential interpretation. Professor Radin used "The Motive for Metaphor" to insist on the dangers of lawyers locating their subject too much in literature's obscure world of rustling leaves and melting clouds, too little in the harsh forge of noonday heat and violence. The secondary reading, the other side that Stevens brings us to hear after resisting our intelligence almost successfully, warns of an opposite jurisprudential danger.

The culturally oriented legal theorist notes, against the legal positivist stress on law as simply regularized coercion, that coercion must be justified and legitimated by precept before it can be effective law; force cannot rule large populations without the support of ideology. And central to law's ideology is its claim to operate impersonally, by exact and impartial reason, ideally expressed in transparent prose. Repeated critical exposure of the formalist myth that legal rules follow inexorably from its structure of concepts has failed to undermine law's central concepts themselves—contract, property, injury, obligation, rule. Like the Freudian repressed, these concepts return to operate on legal judgment, not as the elements of axioms, but as powerful *metaphors*. As metaphors they do not dictate judgment, but influence it partly by their very power of intimation,

66. In Stevens's only comment on "The Motive for Metaphor" he referred to it as "an illustration . . . that the essence of change is that it gives pleasure: that it exhilarates." Letters, *supra* note 11, at 430. He often said the poet must stay open to the flux of experience and unfinished, hence never quite himself. Even in the last year of his life he wrote that "once one is strongly defined, no other definition is ever possible, in spite of daily change." *Id.* at 880. To this effect, see *id.* at 289, 333, 570 (praising his friend Henry Church as "always a potential figure"), 680, 710 ("I have no wish to arrive at a conclusion"), 827, 839 (expressing gloom at the definitive act of collecting his poems). In *The Creations of Sound*, in CP, *supra* note 9, at 310, he criticizes a composite rival poet, X, as "a man too exactly himself." Frank Lentricchia seems to me to miss this positive and Emersonian side to Stevens's restlessness; he sees it only as Baudelairian ennui, and ascribes it, Lukacs-like, to the dissatisfactions of life under capitalism. See F. Lentricchia, *supra* note 43, at 196-216.

67. Parker notes this as well. Parker, *supra* note 31, at 86-87. I further consider the relation between Stevens's "dialectic" and "dialogic" treatments of antitheses in another chapter of my larger study.

68. David Luban suggested this. See also O. Barfield, *Poetic Diction* 111-44 (2d ed. 1952).

their evocation of equitable judgment, drawing on the feelings and tacit associations that constitute the "second part of life," the part of reality most resistant to straightforward representation in plain prose.

The motive for metaphor, in its legal version, is thus not the *evasion* of the law's hard realities, but rather the *revelation* of two of the most basic of those realities: the incompleteness of law's language to encompass the world it would regulate (law's equitable dimension) and the inescapable link between language and feeling in establishing the hold over opinion that distinguishes law from brute physical coercion (law's ideological dimension).

Hobbes said that in government clubs are trumps, while Hume said with equal certainty that opinion rules the world. Locke contrasted honest plain prose with deceptive figurative speech, while Nietzsche treated literal language as a crust of dead metaphor that masks reality. "The Motive for Metaphor," at least as read by this lawyer, asserts each side of both oppositions, and then to everyone says "this is not all; hear the other side." In so doing, it does not simply engage in a self-cancelling assertion of P and not-P. Like most practical principles, Hobbes's and Hume's political maxims, and Locke's and Nietzsche's theories of language, are not sharp-edged algorithms but heuristic guides, each modified by an implicit "sometimes."

What does the lawyer gain by learning this from poetic intimation rather than prose statement? Here is one possible answer, to be tested by the reader's experience with "The Motive for Metaphor." The exercise of working through to both sides of the poem's antitheses, with the intelligence resisted and the feelings involved at each step, may better simulate, hence better teach, the exercise of legal judgment in a live dispute than could following any set of arguments in analytical prose. (This may be so even if one of the lessons the lawyer is to learn is restraint of emotional response.)

The exercise is useful if only because it is hard to hold antitheses in thought at the same time; the tendency is to treat Hobbes's and Hume's maxims, or Locke's and Nietzsche's, as logical contraries, and so to expel one of each from the mind, with bad practical results for a working theory of law-politics or of language. This is especially so for lawyers, tempted as we always are by the dream of a transparent and complete legal code.

Against this temptation, it may be especially corrective to wrestle with the poem's antitheses and then to find that after the struggle has gone as far as it practically can, there remains the sense—which should likewise always hover over the reduction of a living dispute to a case at law—that not everything has been said, that representation in every respect has been partial and incomplete. Something of the same point can be made in favor of the standard pedagogic use of cases in law; they use prose narrative (the facts of the case) rather than verse as the rhetorical means for induc-

ing identification and suggesting incompleteness, and hence simulating the context of actual argument and judgment. The case becomes primary; the rule is an instrument for deciding a case. By contrast, a rule-centered pedagogy treats the law as complete, the case as simply the application of pre-existing norms.

There are these two differences between the genres of case and poem. First, the facts of a case skillfully stated flow easily, "naturally"; poetry requires extra concentration in reading, and can thereby intensify and fuse both emotional and intellectual response. Second, a story well-told can sound like "the whole truth," though of course it never is.<sup>69</sup> Poetry reminds the reader more forcefully that the bright obvious is not everything; that something, which may be the most important thing, always remains obscure even to the clearest speech and vision; that a principle, a "moral of the story," must be read dialectically, as carrying its own implicit qualification.

Consider in this light, at last, the most opaque of the metaphors in Stevens's poem: "steel against intimation." The phrase appears parenthetically among the four figures that suggest the blacksmith's forge: after "the ruddy temper" and "the hammer of red and blue," between "the hard sound" and "the sharp flash." The steel seems at home in the forge—but what, in a smithy, corresponds to "intimation"?

It is presumably the absence of any obvious answer that leads Helen Vendler to find in "steel against intimation" an executioner's blade against flesh, so that she then calls the succeeding sharp flash "surgical."<sup>70</sup> I have an interest in that reading myself; law and order at high noon fits the initial legal interpretation of the poem that I gathered from Margaret Jane Radin. While this leaves the phrase incongruous with its surrounding forge images, it is set off from them by dashes; perhaps Stevens meant to set the forge as a whole (metonymically "steel") against the whole obscure autumn-spring realm of the first three stanzas. But once "steel" is seen as the forge's hammer and anvil, the strongly spatial and active preposition "against" virtually insists on some physical correlate for "intimation," something for the blacksmith to strike with his steel hammer—yet nothing from the first part of the poem serves the purpose. Possibly Stevens meant to arouse and simply frustrate our expectations here, leaving us uneasily caught in the poem's central *chiasmus* or crossing motif: reality is metaphorically intimated, while intimation is literally named.

Still, the expectation is strong enough (in me, at any rate) that I find myself going on to generate two possible concrete referents for "intimation" within the metaphoric forge. One is the heat-softened iron against

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69. "Narrative always says less than it knows, but it often makes known more than it says." G. Genette, *Narrative Discourse: An Essay in Method* 198 (1980).

70. H. Vendler, *supra* note 29, at 23-24.

which the smith's steel hammer strikes; this interpretation maintains the uniformity of the imagery, and allows reading "steel against intimation" in close apposition to its predecessor phrase "the hard sound." Its weakness is that superheated metal does not seem quite right as a sensory correlate for "intimation."<sup>71</sup>

The other alternative is to drop the hard-headed assumption that when steel comes against intimation, the steel must dominate. Imagine the steel not as the blacksmith's hammer, but as the metal to be worked;<sup>72</sup> now the intimation is the fire. This summons a second legal image alongside Helen Vendler's: next to the executioner's blade cutting through flesh, we have the intimating and metaphorizing mind heating and softening the steel of an impersonal rule of law, so that at the moment of judgment the jurist can reshape it for the task at hand. "Steel against intimation" then juxtaposes two sides of law: on the one hand, its sharp rigidity that maintains order and dominance, sometimes fatally; on the other, its equitable malleability to human imagination that maintains its vitality, while always tempting its servants to arrogant self-assertion. These images then enact the two relations between poetry and law that the poem as a whole leaves in uneasy coexistence: in the first, they form separate spheres; in the second, intertwining webs.

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71. Patricia Parker suggests that Stevens may be echoing Browning's *The Ring and the Book*, a poem framed by the metaphor of the poet as goldsmith, infusing the pure gold of fact with the alloy of imagination and shaping it into an art work, a ring. See Parker, *supra* note 31, at 86. The suggestion is attractive for my purposes. As mentioned above (*supra* note 27), Browning in *The Ring and the Book* even speaks of "the very A. B. C. of fact," i, 708, and the facts he works with are taken from the record of a legal dispute. Indeed his *Rashomon*-like verse-novel, which dramatizes the process of judgment in the face of rhetorically generated uncertainty, is perhaps the supreme "law poem," and his Pope Innocent is one of the great literary portrayals of the judge. Browning's philosophic-aesthetic concerns and convictions ("Is fiction which makes fact alive, fact too?" i, 705; "Art may do a thing/ Obliquely, do the thing shall breed the thought," xii, 855-6) are likewise close to Stevens's, as Parker notes. But finally the ruddy temper, hard sound, and sharp flash of Stevens's blacksmith seem too violent to bear much comparison to the cool and delicate tapping and filing of Browning's goldsmith.

72. Barbara Babcock pointed out this possibility to me. Did blacksmiths traditionally use fire, hammer, and anvil to work *steel* as well as ordinary iron? Yes—at least fancy Hephaistos-descended swordmaking blacksmiths did. (I don't know about their horseshoeing village cousins.) See H. Wilkinson, *Engines of War* 211-215 (1841); *Swords*, 22 *Encyclopaedia Britannica* 803 (9th ed. 1895). Steel-smithing (the heating, shaping, rapid cooling, then tempering by reheating, of carbon-hardened iron) goes back at least to Homeric Greece; see the gruesome simile describing Odysseus' blinding of the Cyclops, *Odyssey*, ix, 391-93, discussed in H. Wilkinson, *supra* at 195-96.