

The “Cure of the Ground”:  
Place in the Poetry of Wallace Stevens and Robert Bringhurst

by

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B.Sc., University of Saskatchewan, 2001

M.A., Trinity Western University, 2011

A Dissertation Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of  
DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY  
In the Department of English

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### Abstract

This study analyzes the Canadian poet, typographer, and translator Robert Bringhurst's (b. 1946) extensive engagement with the poetry, poetics and metaphysical concerns of the American modernist poet Wallace Stevens (1879-1955). It asserts that Bringhurst's poetry responds to Stevens' poetry and poetics to a degree that has not previously been recognized. Although Bringhurst's mature poetry—his works from the mid-1970s and after—departs from the obvious imitation of the elder poet's writing that is present in his early poems, it continues to engage some of Stevens' central concerns, namely the fertility of the liminal moment and/or space and a meditative contemplation of the physical world that frequently challenges anthropocentric narcissism. The dissertation proposes that Bringhurst shares Stevens' desire to inscribe an authentic encounter between person and place. The first chapters establish the literary basis for the comparison of the poets' works. The following chapters show how both poets draw on the symbology and metaphors of the Christian concept of the Sacrament in order to describe poetically the nature of the personally renewing experience of place. They examine poems from throughout Stevens' career, including those that express a more determinedly materialistic vision, and the pervasive use of sacramental terminology in Bringhurst's polyphonic poetry; such language is integral to Bringhurst's efforts to describe a transformative experience of encounter with the physical world. The final chapters contend that Stevens' and Bringhurst's divergent visions of the ethical responsibility of poetry are shaped by their differing perspectives on the relation between the poem and the sacramental experience inscribed within it. The dissertation makes original contributions to the study of the poetry of both Bringhurst and Stevens. It demonstrates the significance of the inheritances of the Protestant religious tradition to both poets' bodies of work, and it casts Bringhurst as a profoundly Stevensian author. A study of

poetic influence, it attests to the vitality of Stevens and Bringhurst as ecologically oriented writers concerned with the meaning of place in North America.

## Table of Contents

Supervisory Committee – ii	
Abstract – iii	
Table of Contents – v	
List of Abbreviations – vi	
Acknowledgements – vii	
Dedication – viii	
Chapter One – Introduction – 1	
I. Sunday Mornings – 1	
II. Stevens and Bringhurst in Critical Context – 9	
III. Stevens and Bringhurst on the Margins – 22	
IV. Chapter Outlines – 51	
Chapter Two: “Together in different directions”: Stevens’ and Bringhurst’s Uncommon Kinship – 57	
I. Early Imitations – 58	
II. Bringhurst’s Connecticut Uncle – 70	
III. Stevens’ Themes and Bringhurst’s Variations – 89	
Chapter Three: “He knelt in the cathedral with the rest”– Stevens’ Sacramentalism –102	
I. Stevens in the Empty Hall of Orthodoxy – 110	
II. Beyond Naturalism: Reviving the Inheritance of Sacramentalism – 116	
III. The Nadir of Belief – 125	
IV. Sacramentalism in Stevens’ Later Poetry – 131	
V. Poetry as Sacramental Language – 139	
Chapter Four – “Time and space close over us, toad”: Poetry, Participation, and Ontology – 146	
I. Bringhurst and the Christian Tradition – 149	
II. Polyphonic Poetry and Ontology – 156	
III. Poetry and Sacramental Attention – 161	
Chapter Five – “The planet of which they were part”: Sacramental Poetry and Poetic Responsibility – 176	
I. The Ethics of Stevens’ Sacramentalism – 181	
II. Bringhurst’s Backward Glance – 200	
Chapter Six – “In Remembrance Of”: Bringhurst’s Polyphonics and the Colonial Past – 208	
I. The Work of Mourning and the Enactment of “Scriptural Sepulchre” in “New World Suite N°3” – 211	
II. Mourning and Remembering: Bringhurst’s “Ursa Minor” – 225	
III. The Ethics of Mourning – 235	
Conclusion – 240	
Works Cited – 257	

### List of Abbreviations

*CPP* – Stevens, Wallace. *Wallace Stevens: Collected Poetry and Prose*. Ed. Frank Kermode and Joan Richardson. New York: Library of America, 1997.

*LWS* – Stevens, Wallace. *Letters of Wallace Stevens*. Ed. Holly Stevens. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1967.

*NA* – Stevens, Wallace. *The Necessary Angel: Essays on Reality and the Imagination*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1951.

*OP* – Stevens, Wallace. *Opus Posthumous: Poems, Plays, Prose*. Ed. Milton J. Bates. New York: Random House, 1989.

*SP* – Bringhurst, Robert. *Selected Poems*. Kentville, NS: Gaspereau Press, 2009.

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## **Dedication**

For one of my first teachers

Len Alm (1919-1995)

And on a day we meet to walk the line  
And set the wall between us once again  
—Robert Frost, “Mending Wall”

## Chapter One

### Introduction

Their chant shall be a chant of paradise,  
 Out of their blood, returning to the sky;  
 And in their chant shall enter, voice by voice,  
 The windy lake wherein their lord delights,  
 The trees, like serafin, and echoing hills,  
 That choir among themselves long afterward.  
 They shall know well the heavenly fellowship  
 Of men that perish and of summer morn  
 --Wallace Stevens "Sunday Morning" (1915)

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To know means to hold no opinions: to know  
 meaning thinks, thinking means.  
 The mind is the place not already taken.  
 The mind is not-yet-gathered beads of water  
 in the teeth of certain leaves—  
*Saxifraga punctata*, close by the stream  
 under the ridge leading south to Mount Hozameen,  
 for example—and the changing answers of the moon.

...

The loved is what stays  
 in the mind; that is, it has meaning,  
 and meaning keeps going.  
 —Robert Bringhurst "Sunday Morning" (1986)

### I. Sunday Mornings

Robert Bringhurst (b. 1946) published his poem "Sunday Morning" in the Summer-Fall issue of *The Paris Review* in 1986, almost thirty years after Wallace Stevens' death in 1955 and nearly seventy years after Stevens' famous poem of the same name appeared in Harriet Monroe's

*Poetry* magazine in 1915 (*Poetry* 81-83). Bringhurst's "Sunday Morning" prompted two essays several years after it was published. These essays, one written by Bringhurst and the other by the critic and scholar Laurie Ricou, took the form of fictional interviews between the two authors. In the dialogue about the poem as Bringhurst imagines it, a fictional Ricou is found posing the question, "Why the title 'Sunday Morning'? Is this an allusion to a poem of the same name by Wallace Stevens? to the CBC radio program? to Christian worship?" (Bringhurst and Ricou 89). In response to these imagined questions, Bringhurst writes the following, rather chary, reply: "If those allusions seem significant to you, I'm willing to take the blame. In my opinion, the most important source of the name is simple fact. It was Sunday morning when I saw the pelican" (89-90). While Bringhurst is "willing to take the blame" if the critic finds potential allusions to Stevens' poem significant, that is not the same as acknowledging that his "Sunday Morning" does refer to Stevens' poem, if indeed it does.

The possible relationship between Bringhurst's and Stevens' poems also plays an important part of Ricou's "dialogue." Ricou's portion of the imagined interview maintains the ambivalence of Bringhurst's. In a noteworthy imaginative portrayal, the fictional Bringhurst in Ricou's essay looks to Ricou himself to clarify the nature of the relationship between the two poems, asking Ricou to tell him if Stevens is relevant to his own poem. Ricou's response suggests the critic is barely more certain than his fictional Bringhurst—yes, the two poems are related, in a way, because of their "rabbinical . . . explicat[ion of] a central core of thought," but they are also related through their difference, so that Stevens provides, perhaps, a point of comparison for Bringhurst's poem, "mostly . . . I think" (95). At the end of this pair of imagined interviews, the connection between the two "Sunday Mornings"—and the possible connection

between Bringhurst and Stevens—remains a nagging question, an uncertainty aloft on the conversation’s updrafts.

At the heart of this ambiguity are questions that go unasked in either half of this whole. The first question: “Must every ‘Sunday Morning’ automatically refer to Stevens’ poem?” Certainly, Stevens’ poem has held critics’ attention for over a century. Even Stevens’ most severe critics begrudgingly admitted its power and importance. Yvor Winters, for example, who criticized Stevens for writing poetry of “willful semiobscurity” and “labourious foolishness” (23), nevertheless admired the poem’s “homiletic diction,” writing that “*Sunday Morning* is probably the greatest American poem of the twentieth century and is certainly one of the greatest contemplative poems in English” (13). But is it possible for poets living after Stevens to write a poem and entitle it “Sunday Morning” without readers automatically searching within that new “Sunday Morning” for reference to Stevens’ poem or to his poetry or poetics in general? Surely, the answer must be yes. Each week, Sunday mornings pass that are not defined by Stevens’ famous “Complacencies of the peignoir, and late / Coffee and oranges in a sunny chair” (*CPP* 53). Other “Sunday Mornings” must be possible, irrespective of Stevens’ poem’s afterlife. Bringhurst’s “Sunday Morning” could indeed be a product of a particular experience, the fact of a Sunday morning sighting of a pelican.

Nevertheless, there is a second question that goes unasked: “Why, despite the differences that exist between Bringhurst’s “Sunday Morning” and Stevens’ “Sunday Morning,” does the critic—even, at points, the poet—seem unable to leave the question of Stevens’ influence behind? Despite proposing that the title of Bringhurst’s poem sends critics searching in the wrong direction, Ricou himself cannot seem to stop pursuing that course of inquiry. One reason for his persistent return to Stevens may be that the differences between the two poems are less

important than the similarities that do, in fact, exist. For example, although Stevens' "Sunday Morning" is clearly distinguished from Bringhurst's "Sunday Morning" by its overt concern with the inheritance of the Christian tradition, both poems still consider death, the nature of the afterlife and the human individual's place in the physical world.

Perhaps the second question that Bringhurst's fictional Ricou asks—"Is this an allusion to the poem of the same name by Wallace Stevens?"—misdirects the reader, narrowing the field to only one of Stevens' poems when broadening it might have proved more fruitful. Indeed, though there are elements of the mature poet present in this early piece (Vendler, *Extended* 55), "Sunday Morning" is not typical of Stevens' poetry,<sup>1</sup> increasing the likelihood that the critic, following the sign of the nominal "red herring," will focus too intently on Stevens' "Sunday Morning" to the exclusion of other possible points of connection. Might it not be that Bringhurst's "Sunday Morning" continues in the vein of the Stevens that emerges after this early poem? Indeed, if Bringhurst's "Sunday Morning" does not overtly allude to Stevens' poem, this may be so because that particular poem among Stevens' body of work is not the poem at issue. Consider

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<sup>1</sup> In contrast to the poetry that follows "Sunday Morning" in Stevens' body of work, this early poem is "in its atmospherics and its ideas, . . . a conventional poem, very much of its intellectual period: a late-nineteenth century set piece on behalf of the religion of art that happened to be written in New York in 1914 and published in 1915 in Monroe's *Poetry*" (Lentricchia *Ariel* 148). Ricou asserts that Bringhurst's "Sunday Morning" also "seems *untypical* of [his] poems" in that "it's not so explicitly erudite, not so overtly allusive, as "Some Ciphers" or "Hachadura"" (Bringhurst and Ricou 94). However, these two poems which Ricou identifies as more "typical" of Bringhurst's poetry each demonstrate Bringhurst's great debt to Stevens' poetry and poetics, as chapter two of this study will demonstrate.

instead the similarities between Bringhurst's "Sunday Morning" and one of Stevens' late poems—"This Solitude of Cataracts" (1950), which includes these lines:

There seemed to be an apostrophe that was not spoken.

There was so much that was real that was not real at all.

He wanted to feel the same way over and over.

He wanted the river to go on flowing the same way,

To keep on flowing. He wanted to walk beside it,

Under the buttonwoods, beneath a moon nailed fast.

He wanted his heart to stop beating and his mind to rest

In a permanent realization, without any wild ducks

Or mountains that were not mountains, just to know how it would be,

Just to know how it would feel, released from destruction (*CPP* 366)

In "This Solitude of Cataracts," as in Bringhurst's "Sunday Morning," the constituents of the physical world are the focus of contemplation: river, tree, bird, mountain, sky, moon, and mind, making an imperfect sestina of desire. Stevens' "Monadnocks," a mountain in New Hampshire, becomes Bringhurst's "Mount Hozameen," a mountain in north-western Washington State, visible from the Fraser Valley in British Columbia. The wild ducks, buttonwood trees, a lake, and a river "flowing / Through many places, as if it stood still in one" (366) that are present in

Stevens' poem become, in Bringhurst's, a great white pelican, *Saxifraga punctata*, the bay, Great Slave Lake, and "the stream / under the ridge leading south" (*SP* 168-9). In both poems, meditation on these physical features leads to the consideration of similar questions. For example, the man in Stevens' poem longs "[j]ust to know how it would feel, released from destruction, / To be a bronze man breathing under archaic lapis" (*CPP* 366). These lines express a desire for the comforting promise of immortality that was assured in longstanding but now seemingly defunct cosmographies, present by allusion to the old blue heavens—called "archaic lapis" in the poem. The poem contrasts the comfort offered by these cosmographies with a bleak and mechanistic universe in which humanity watches the movement of the planets through their dark orbits, the "planetary pass-pass" (366) which also measures out the limits of human life. Bringhurst's poem addresses this longing for immortality too, but responds to the longing with a vision for a new kind of cosmography. It asserts that a recognition of the persistence of meaning and mind is itself a release from destruction. It is indeed possible "to know how it would feel" because "the loved is what stays / in the mind; that is, it has meaning, / and meaning keeps going" (*SP* 169). In other words, it is not entirely subject to the mortality that is a part of the passing of time in Stevens' poem. There is no need for "archaic lapis," because meaning, in Bringhurst's poem, endures in the mind.

The similarities between these poems and their concerns shows that, although Bringhurst's "Sunday Morning" may not refer strictly to Stevens' "Sunday Morning," it does gesture toward an apprenticeship to and engagement with Stevens' poetry and poetics as a whole. Indeed, Bringhurst's poem carries on a conversation with Stevens' poetry—even using the older poet's tone and diction—continuing a running commentary on the quiet contemplation of the natural world and the nature of being that Stevens began decades before Bringhurst. Here,

we see Bringhurst at work on the poetry and poetics of Stevens. In an act Bringhurst has indicated is integral to poetry, he is seen “reworking the gifts and givens” of the older artist, endeavouring “to sing thought back into being, to personify it, state it, locate it, to clear the haze” (*Pieces* 113). The poetics of Bringhurst’s “Sunday Morning” insist that, yes, the poem does most certainly draw from, refer to and bear the marks of Stevens’ poetry and poetics. In the face of these references and allusions, intentional poetic homage is unnecessary.

“Sunday Morning” is only one poem among many in Bringhurst’s body of work that testifies to Stevens’ influence on his poetics, revealing that an affinity, even a kinship, exists between the two poets’ writing. Setting aside questions of authorial intent, Bringhurst’s “Sunday Morning” is one of many that functions as a trace preserving the evidence of the younger poet’s profound and extensive engagement with Stevens’ poetry and poetics. Here, Bringhurst’s poetry becomes the mark of a rendezvous, speaking of connection in spite of the authorial indecision or ambivalence present in Bringhurst’s comments on the subject. Indeed, Bringhurst’s own comments regarding another artist and one of his important mentors, the Haida sculptor Bill Reid, offer a means of understanding his guarded responses to questions of poetic influence. In one interview where he was asked to describe the meaning of a sculpture, Reid dissimulated when he was asked about the meaning of his work by saying, “This is a mask, representing nothing. It’s purely decorative” (qtd. *Tree* 280). Bringhurst described Reid’s response:

That’s one of the cagiest pieces of non-explanation I’ve ever encountered. At the same time, it’s an artist doing just what artists are supposed to do and very often don’t: putting the meaning into the work instead of putting it into the catalogue. Putting it into the work and then deliberately suggesting that it isn’t even there, because then you’ll have to see it for yourself or not see anything at all. It’s also

an example of Bill's sense of humor in full bloom. I can see him eyeballing the room as he said that, looking to see how many of his listeners were caught in his self-deprecating ruse (*Tree* 280)

Arguably, Bringhurst's engagement with Stevens' poetry is one of the multiple "meanings" that he has put into his work, a debt and a dialogue that is visible even if Bringhurst himself does not put it into the "catalogue" of explication.

This dissertation argues that Bringhurst's poetry demonstrates an ongoing dialogue with Stevens' poetry and poetics. Indeed, Bringhurst's early poetry borrows extensively from and directly responds to Stevens' poetry and poetics. Though Bringhurst's mature poetry finds—to borrow Stevens' language—"[a] place to go in his own direction" (*CPP* 435), it nevertheless demonstrates the ongoing influence of Stevens' poetry and takes up some of the older poet's core concerns. Both poets share in a meditative contemplation of the physical world that is coupled with a coolness of tone and address—"remote, enigmatic, indecipherable, even inhuman" (Vendler, "Hunting" n.p.). Most significantly, Bringhurst shares Stevens' concern with seeking to poetically inscribe an encounter between person and place. The two poets share a perspective of wonder at the physical world that challenges anthropocentric narcissism. In their mutual attempts to capture the ineffable nature of this experience, both poets draw on the symbology and metaphors relating to the Christian concept of the Sacrament. They employ this suite of sacramental language as a means of gesturing toward the personally-renewing and even spiritual nature of this experience. Believing poetry is a literary trace of that personal encounter, Bringhurst and Stevens each attribute to poetry a quasi-redemptive power to effect change in its readers, though differences in the way they conceive of this relationship leads to disagreement in the degree of authority they each attribute to poetic utterance.

My study adds to the understanding of two poets who have each made extraordinary contributions to the cultural lives of their respective countries.<sup>2</sup> By attending to the influence of Stevens' poetics on Bringham's literary formation, this study contributes to the growing field of critical study of Bringham's poetics. It also argues there are particular resonances between the two poets and their bodies of work which led Bringham to choose Stevens as a continual point of engagement, even in his mature poetry. Their mutual concern with the inheritances of Protestant Christianity and their devotion to the physical, non-human world as the place of personal transformation demonstrate Stevens' and Bringham's joint participation in a long tradition of North American nature writing wherein authors ascribe a regenerative power to the encounter with place. Appositioning their poetry leads to the fruitful examination of each poet's chief concerns and a greater understanding of each poet's place within their literary contexts.

## **II. Stevens and Bringham in Critical Context**

Stevens' body of work has produced a rich and very diverse field of critical study. In this arena, Stevens "has served as an exemplary model for almost every mode and theory of literary criticism from the 1930s to the present, even when these theories were sharply contradictory and mutually exclusionary" (Riddell *Clairvoyant* xiii). In such a critical milieu, "to venture an alternative perspective on his poetry is to set oneself up, as it were, as a giant killer amid the 'clash of titans,' a David braving the powers of the Goliath that is Harold Bloom or J. Hillis

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<sup>2</sup> Stevens' contribution to American poetry was recognized with the Bollingen Prize for Poetry in 1950, National Book Awards for *The Auroras of Autumn* in 1951 and *The Collected Poems of Wallace Stevens* in 1955, and the Pulitzer Prize for Poetry in 1955. Bringham was named an Officer of the Order of Canada in 2013, an honour that recognizes his achievement as a poet, typographer, and translator as well as his contribution to Canadian culture and letters in fields beyond literary and cultural criticism.

Miller or Helen Vendler” (Jenkins 1). Such is not my intention. Indeed, my own study is indebted to many critics, including those mentioned above as well as numerous others like Joseph Carroll, Janet McCann, Adelaide Kirby Morris, and many others whose names appear in the following pages. However, while I am in debt to the insights of many scholars, my concentration on examining the extent and import of a suite of sacramental symbology and metaphor in Stevens’ poetry and poetics does test some of the commonly accepted perceptions of Stevens’ poetics.

First of all, while recognizing that a humanistic ethos of self-reliance and the critique of theistic religion is present in Stevens’ poetry and prose throughout its career, the findings of this study also assert that Stevens’ poetry also suggests an ongoing desire for transcendence. The opinion that Stevens rejects the supernatural in favor of secular or naturalistic views of humanity has been prevalent in critical studies of his poetry for decades. Certainly, there is evidence in Stevens’ poetry and prose that he did, at least at one point of his life, hold humanist beliefs. His comments on his poem “A Fading of the Sun” (1936), for instance, champion a belief that “instead of crying for help to God or to one of the gods, we should look to ourselves for help. The exaltation of human nature should take the place of its abasement” (*LWS* 295). Responding to this strain in Stevens’ poetry, Roy Harvey Pearce’s study, entitled *The Continuity of American Poetry* (1961), emphasizes a Stevens whose poetry is defined by “confident, rationalist, individualism” (55). For Pearce, Stevens’ poetry carries on the legacy of early American Puritan inwardness, but in its contemporary humanistic, rationalistic, and egocentric state (*Continuity* 427-8). According to Pearce, Stevens’ poetry perpetuates the “‘romantic’ drive to testify that one can really know only one’s own power” (41). Similarly, Harold Bloom argues that Stevens is a “belated” romantic amongst “romantic visionaries” like Emerson and Whitman (*Climate* 25).

Bloom's Stevens is "a Romantic humanist . . . by temperament, but a reductive ironist in his anxieties" (*Anxiety* 135). For these critics, Stevens shares the Romantic belief in the "all-embracing, all-conquering power" of poetry as "the highest mode of human expression and a short cut to the absolute" (Behler 35), but his belief is complicated by his doubt in his vocabulary's ability to finally express his experience of reality (Depp 79). Likewise, Hugh Kenner claims Stevens is "in the Wordsworth line, a Nature poet, confronting an emptied Nature, but a Nature without Presences, no longer speaking" (Kenner 75). A. W. Litz concurs: "Stevens' final *mundo* is neither eccentric nor private. It is built upon the central reality of our age, the death of the gods and of the great coordinating mythologies, and in their place it offers the austere satisfactions of a 'self' dependent on the pure poetry of the physical world, a 'self' whose terrifying lack of belief is turned into a source of freedom" (vi). According to this point of view, Stevens' secular humanism results in an elevation of aesthetics above cultural engagement, in a celebration of a kind of "'pure poetry' with its emphasis on self-referentiality and artifice" (Sanders 136).

The theme of skepticism about religious creeds in Stevens' poetry has contributed to the critical assumption that humanism—defined as that which celebrates human potential, creative power, and mastery over self and world above all else (Sheehan 6)—is compatible with his viewpoints. Certainly, Stevens wrote a number of anti-pietistic poems like "Sunday Morning" or "A High-Toned Old Christian Woman" (1922) which elaborate a theme of the disappearance of God, the irrelevance of contemporary religious belief—particularly Christianity—and the fictional nature of all objects of belief. This theme re-appears at points throughout Stevens' body of work. However, his anti-piety does not necessarily imply an embrace of humanism. Though some of Stevens' writing celebrates certain humanist ideals, such as a rejection of theistic

religion and the celebration of self-reliance, other portions of his poetry and prose suggest that he found the philosophical system ultimately unsatisfactory. For example, in a letter to Barbara Church written in 1953, Stevens relates his response to reading *The Note-Books of Matthew Arnold*, a poet who, like Stevens did at times, expressed the desire to “substitute literature for ethics or religion” (Shumaker 386). Stevens tells Church that he quickly lost interest in the book, explaining his boredom with the work by saying, “it may be that I don’t belong to that church anymore, or that I don’t care for conversation with that particular set of gods; nor, perhaps, with any” (*LWS* 780). Like religious belief, humanism seems to have proved inadequate to Stevens’ desires. Stevens was “unhappy with the secular limitations of Humanism, committed as he is to imagining a world beyond ourselves” (Surette 230). Stevens’ writing suggests that this sense of “beyond” includes an awareness of the physical world, the significance of which is not defined by its ability to be “appropriated by and incorporated into the human world” (Sheehan 7). Stevens expresses an antihumanism in “The Course of the Particular” (1951), wherein the crying of leaves “is not a cry of divine attention, / Nor the smoke-drift of puffed-out heroes, nor human cry. / It is the cry of leaves that do not transcend themselves” (*CPP* 460). In this poem, Stevens resists the “invitation to pathetic fallacy” that might accompany the use of the word “cry” to describe the action of the leaves (Lensing 146), simply affirming being instead.

Nor does Stevens’ anti-piety indicate a final skepticism towards notions of the transcendent. Indeed, Stevens’ writing also suggests that his desire to cultivate awareness of “a world beyond ourselves” includes an awareness of the possible transcendent. In an early review of Stevens’ poetry, Marianne Moore had identified in it a “mystical property,” writing that it “gives ultimately the effect of the mind disturbed by the intangible” (qtd. in Surette 21). However, as criticism of Stevens’ writing continued to expand, the mystical, sometimes even

religious, critical analysis of themes present alongside the anti-pietistic and skeptical in Stevens' body of work have not always attracted attention. Some of the critics who have taken note of Stevens' interest in the possible transcendent have responded rather dismissively, as did Pearce, who attributed Stevens' allusions to the transcendent to "a kind of disease . . . [of] a wanting to have God's mind" (*Historicism* 269). Stevens' skepticism and critique of religion coexist in his poetry with a concurrent will to belief that was accompanied by an openness to the spiritual and the mystical. Beginning in the late 1980s, however, great critical notice was given to Stevens' tendency to make "positive statement[s] of belief" (Surette 200), particularly in the volumes following *Harmonium* (1923). In response to this observation, a number of critics have re-examined the transcendent strains in Stevens' poetry and found strong resonances between Stevens and non-materialist traditions. In *Wallace Stevens' Supreme Fiction: A New Romanticism* (1987), for example, Joseph Carroll situates Stevens in the line of the nineteenth-century British and American Romantics like Wordsworth, Shelley, Keats, Emerson and Whitman, arguing that Stevens seeks fulfillment in a "poetic vision of the supreme spirit creating space and time and manifesting itself in each creative act of human consciousness" (8). Carroll's study challenges the early arguments of Bloom and Pearce, who argued that Stevens' poetry celebrates the self in the same fashion as a predecessor like Whitman. Instead, Carroll maintains that Stevens' poetry "proclaims the necessity of a metaphysical vision in which the highest principle of intellectual and aesthetic order transcends the claims and assertions of a renegade egoism" (114). For Carroll, "Stevens, like Keats, can never escape for long from the preoccupations of the sole self, but the highest mythic symbols of their visionary poetry represent principles that transcend the urges and appetites of personality" (116). The transcendent as described in Stevens' poetry is experienced in the natural world, yet distinct from

it as well. The transcendent calls to Stevens through the natural world; it is, as Stevens describes it in “To an Old Philosopher in Rome” (1954) something “beyond the eye, / Not of its sphere, and yet not far beyond” (*CPP* 432).

Following Carroll’s reaffirmation of the centrality of the transcendent to Stevens’ poetry, a number of other critics have also re-examined this motif in the context of his early Protestant upbringing. Adelaide Kirby Morris, Janet Fisher and Janet McCann have demonstrated that Stevens’ borrowings from and engagement with the Christian tradition clearly influence the development of his poetics. They have argued convincingly that, although Stevens may have turned aside from the Protestantism of his upbringing, he does not fully abandon a belief in the sacred. These critics have called into question the critical belief that Stevens is ultimately a materialist, arguing that this notion has influenced the manner in which his borrowings from Protestant orthodoxy have been interpreted. More specifically, Morris argues that Stevens’ poetry, while protesting “the last thing in the world that [he] should want to do would be to formulate a system” (*LWS* 864), nevertheless works relentlessly “to incorporate theology into poetry, to transfer the experience of the mystic to the poet, and to apply to poetry the promise of Jesus—‘ye shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free’ (John 8:32)” (Morris 85). She argues that “as the Supreme Fiction overthrew the Supreme Being, it assumed many of the *accoutrements* of traditional religion” (4). She locates in Stevens’ writing a “poetic trinity” whose three parts replace the Christian God with the imagination, Christ with the imagination incarnate in a poet-hero, and the Holy Ghost with “the active though diffused presence of imagination in human life” (5). For Morris, Stevens’ enterprise is to return to the “first idea” (*CPP* 331) in faith as in poetry, to find that “the church cleansed of centuries of accumulated dogma and ritual returns to the chapel of breath: the active, creating, fluid force which once

informed it” (Morris 86). This new faith is differentiated from “the masculine myths we used to make”; instead, it is a mystical, non-rational “transparency through which the swallow weaves, / Without any form or any sense of form” (*CPP* 439-40).

While similarly emphasizing the importance of Stevens’ childhood religious formation, Fisher questions Morris’s reading of Stevens’ “supreme fiction.” She claims that “[t]here is unquestionably something in Stevens that sees a connection between theological mysticism and aestheticism” (13), but she argues that ontological desire is the pursuit of Stevens’ poetry—the pursuit of the experience of reality, the search for the nature of being. Fisher writes, “The fluid interchange among monastic, philosophic and aesthetic pursuits is set forth in the first section of ‘Notes [Toward a Supreme Fiction]’” (13). She further asserts that Stevens’ poetry strives to unite these three modes of perception, producing an “enjambment of blood-world and pure idea” (14). Similarly, McCann argues that, for Stevens, “the nostalgia for lost truths and the desire for a replacement metaphysic are the motive for the entire work, from *Harmonium* onward” (2). Regardless of the differences in their final assessments, these critics have affirmed that Stevens’ call on the Christian lexicon and symbolism represents more than a strictly rhetorical purpose.

My reading of Stevens’ poetry and poetics builds on these studies. My analysis suggests that, even as Stevens’ poetry presents, questions and dismisses the orthodox Christian theology of the transcendent divine—as well as a number of contemporary alternatives to that belief, including the Romantic vision of his poetic predecessors—he does not entirely dismiss all Protestant notions of the sacred, drawing on central Protestant doctrinal beliefs in order to systematize the renewed faith that is described, however tentatively, in his “supreme fiction.” Specifically, my study notes Stevens’ extensive use of Protestant metaphors and symbols regarding the sacraments and sacramental. Adapting the doctrinal system of the Presbyterian

denomination in which he was raised, Stevens' poetry records his belief that the physical world can be experienced sacramentally as "some finite reality, some concrete, material sign, which is believed to be a vehicle bearing a special capacity to focalize what is Radically Significant and to convey "an inward and spiritual grace" (Scott 50). This theme is one which Bringhurst himself takes up and revises for use in his poetry.

In contrast to the wide-ranging commentary treating Stevens' poetry and poetics, Bringhurst's work has not yet been the subject of extensive critical study. The brevity of the list of peer-reviewed criticism about Bringhurst's poetry reveals the extent of this dearth (Wood 16-17).<sup>3</sup> Prior to the publication of the first collection of critical essays about Bringhurst's writing entitled *Listening for the Heartbeat of Being: The Arts of Robert Bringhurst*, only six peer-reviewed articles treating any of Bringhurst's work existed. While Bringhurst has been invited with surprising frequency to lecture within university settings, he has had a "[lover's quarrel] with the university" (UFV) and with the literary and critical apparatus attached to the academy which may have contributed to this scarcity of critical analysis of Bringhurst's work. Bringhurst

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<sup>3</sup> The list of publications, excepting reviews, which treat Bringhurst's poetry prior to 2015 follows: John Whatley's "Readings of Nothing: Robert Bringhurst's Hachadura" was the first critical article to treat Bringhurst's poetry. Calvin Luther Martin discusses Bringhurst's work in one chapter of his book *In the Spirit of the Earth: Rethinking Time and History*. Sean Kane addresses Bringhurst's writing as an example of the persistence of myth in his book *Wisdom of the Mythtellers*. Jan Zwicky analyzes Bringhurst's poetics in her chapter on his pre-Socratic poems in *Poetry and Knowing: Speculative Essays and Interviews*. A publication entitled *Memoria e sogno: quale Canada domani?* (1996)—a collection from the 1994 International Symposium of Canadian Studies in Italy—includes a chapter in English by Elsa Linguanti entitled "'A tune beyond us, yet ourselves': Memory and Robert Bringhurst's Poetry." Other authors have addressed Bringhurst's translations from the Haida.

has been critical of the contemporary system of education (*Tree* 28), which he argues is “too full of postmodernist theory” to recognize its own failings and embrace the universal learning which was the university’s original goal (“Point-Counterpoint” 172). In a manner which hearkens back to Ezra Pound’s condemnation of the imbrication of early twentieth-century literature with a corrupt economic system (Lentricchia, *Quartet* 49), Bringhurst has described the university as “a strobe-lit global shopping mall” that has turned away from its original vocation of serving “food” to pursue the poison of profit above truth and understanding (*Tree* 61). Instead of a world “where doing and being are one and the same because continuous learning unites them,” contemporary mismanaged universities destroy vocations (48-9). He has also been vocal in some of his prose about the university’s need to embrace Indigenous learning practices in order to escape the “large-scale artificial realities” (20) upon which it is currently constructed. Consequently, though he was briefly employed to teach creative writing at the University of British Columbia in 1975 and 1979, he has not sought to position himself within any university.<sup>4</sup>

Further conflict between Bringhurst and the academy arose after Bringhurst’s translations from the Haida were published in *A Story as Sharp as a Knife: The Classical Haida Mythtellers and Their World* (1999). Individuals in some academic quarters accused Bringhurst of cultural appropriation and “allegedly improper, disrespectful attitudes and actions” (Bradley, “Remembering” 896, 898). He was also criticized for his lack of academic credentials as a linguist (Wood 16). Bringhurst vigorously defended himself against these charges, asserting that

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<sup>4</sup> From 1998-2011, Bringhurst held the title of adjunct professor in the Frost Centre for Native Studies and Canadian Studies at Trent University, but carried out no duties for the centre and was not paid. Similarly, from 2000-2013, he was adjunct professor in the Centre for Studies in Publishing at Simon Fraser University, but, again, he performed no duties for the centre and was not paid (“Biographical Material”).

“[s]tories are central to the life of every people. On the other hand, no people or community or nation, and especially no political authority, can have exclusive rights to interpret its own history” (“Genetics” R3). He further stated, “I’ve translated and interpreted Haida texts without asking anyone’s permission, and at times without any consultation. If doing so is a crime, then with all due respect, I promise to reoffend as often as possible” (Rigaud 11). Though Bringhurst’s work was also praised by some reviewers, Haida and non-Haida alike (Atwood 188-93; Sangaa 224-6), some scholarly neglect of Bringhurst’s prose and poetry may be attributable to the controversy surrounding his translations.

While Bringhurst does not seem to share the opinion once expressed by Stevens that “critics are perhaps the most important part of one’s audience” (*OP* 310), it is clearly time for scholars and critics to correct the pattern of disregard for Bringhurst’s writing. Certainly, Bringhurst’s work has gained notice outside of the academy. He was named an Officer of the Order of Canada in 2013 for his achievement as a poet, typographer, and translator and his writing has garnered him both national and international awards and recognition and has been commended around the globe in respected literary publications. Most recently, Bringhurst’s word has been acclaimed with a review in *The Times Literary Supplement* of *Listening for the Heartbeat of Being*, edited by Dickinson and Wood. With a wealth of poetry, prose, and translations representing nearly five decades of literary work, critics now have the benefit of beginning with the big picture. The development and evolution of Bringhurst’s thought and poetics are on display in his dozens of publications. What remains for the critic is to sit back and begin to listen to them sing as they attempt to “carr[y] whatever there is / around and over the edge of time” (Bringhurst “Stopping By” 146).

In addition to the various studies which have specifically examined Stevens' and Bringham's poetry, this study has also been informed by ecocritical studies which have examined the meaning and consequence of environmental literature. Ecocriticism has been concerned with the study of the relationship between human literature and the physical environment (Garrard 2). It focuses particularly on literature which attempts to represent the physical world as it marks the intersections between person and place. The human experience of place is neither Stevens' nor Bringham's sole concern. Indeed, critical emphasis on Stevens' supposed "abstraction" has also meant that Stevens' participation in a kind of nature writing interrogating the individual's experience of place has not been recognized (Voros 2). Still, the manners in which each author treats the subject of place are critical to understanding their respective work. Consequently, this study gains from ecocritical studies of North American literature. My study of Bringham's and Stevens' writing follows the general trend among those writing about the subject by defining place as any site that has been invested with significance or meaning by its inhabitants. A place so-defined will include "elements of nature (elemental forces), social relations (class, gender and so on), and meaning (the mind, ideas, symbols)" (Agnew 28). The concept of time is one of these experience-shaping meanings, "bring[ing] a fourth dimension to the contemplation of landscapes by exposing . . . history" (Buell 69) of those places. Sensibility to time's unfolding in geographical locations is prevalent in both Stevens' and Bringham's work. It is observable in Stevens' exploration of his family tree in poems such as "The Irish Cliffs of Moher" (1954) or "Dutch Graves in Buck County" (1947) or Bringham's excavation of Canada's violent and disremembered past in poems such as "Tzuhalem's Mountain: A Sonata in Three Movements" (1982) or his polyphonic "New World Suite N°3" (1993). Drawing on ecocritical principles in their widest definition—"the study of the

relationship of the human and the non-human” (Garrard 5)—this study explores the two poets’ attempts to transcribe in their poetry the transformative significance of their embodied experience of place.

To accomplish this goal, this study also draws and expands on the work of numerous ecocritics in order to contextualize both Stevens and Bringham as members of a tradition in American and Canadian writing that assumes there is a possibility of an epiphanic<sup>5</sup> experience for the individual in the extra-cultural,<sup>6</sup> ‘wild’ place. In this tradition, the wild place is the pure, “landscape of authenticity” (Garrard 71) that stands in contrast to areas that have been settled by groups of people. The wild place confronts the attentive individual with a “more-than-material ‘strangeness’” (Gatta 4). The study of Stevens’ and Bringham’s literary acts of place-making has important ramifications for the continuing effort to understand representations of nature in post-romantic North American writing. In particular, this study furthers the work of critics who have examined the presuppositions about the connection between wilderness and spiritual wholeness that are present in some traditions in North American literature. In *The Machine in the Garden* (1964), Leo Marx provided an early examination of the “redemptive journey away from society in the direction of nature” (Marx 69) in American literature, interrogating the manner in

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<sup>5</sup> The epiphany of the individual in the wild is a type of revelation of the “whole mystery of our existence” (Scott 49) that gains a numinous or spiritual value by virtue of its profound or all-encompassing scope.

<sup>6</sup> In Stevens’ and Bringham’s writing, the culture which prevents or limits the individual’s authentic encounter with the non-human physical world is specifically identified as ‘Western’ culture in its nineteenth- and twentieth-century form. For Stevens, Christianity and its prevalent influence on American thinking is seen as particularly culpable for this state of affairs. In addition to the teleological, monotheistic religions, Bringham also includes the capitalist economic system in the list of cultural systems which cause alienation. Bringham is also quick to identify and criticize the close relationship that has existed between the Christian religion and capitalist economic systems.

which the “virgin landscape” was redefined as a source of “spiritual therapy” (Marx 236). Later, Annette Kolodny and Perry Miller showed how this tradition in American literature began with the first settler culture’s adaptation of elements of both the Greek pastoral tradition and their Protestant Christianity to their experience of the ‘New World’ of North America. The first Puritan settlers desired to “read” the land for signs of divine grace and to find it in a new Eden (Kolodny, *Lay* 21). This desire which was later re-oriented to include a working relationship of agrarianism between individual and place (26), laying the foundation for a “pastoral paradox” whereby “man might, indeed, win mastery over the landscape, but only at the cost of emotional and psychological separation from it” (27, 28). John Elder expands on this notion, showing how twentieth-century poetry has continued to trace a “cycle of escape and return” between nature and society (24), while also exploring the “living tradition beyond that of Christian Europe” (30) or turning to a Thoreauvian Romanticism and / or ecological biology to create a new foundation for an experience of a connection with nature. Writers engaging this tradition emphasize a biocentric kinship between the human and non-human (McClintock 3-4).

The study of Stevens’ and Bringham’s literary acts of place-making has important ramifications for the continuing effort to understand representations of nature in North American writing. First of all, it demonstrates that both of these authors are inheritors of elements of a long and complex pastoral tradition, showing how their poetics demonstrate their ongoing negotiation with elements of a tradition that emphasizes the regenerating effect of personal experience in the wild. Secondly, it contextualizes their responses to nature with their mutual struggle to come to terms with the still-looming dualism of Protestant Christianity. In responding to this multifaceted inheritance, both Bringham and Stevens use the assumption of the possibility of profound, personal encounter between human and place as a means of offering a critique of Protestant

Christianity, as well as a means of proposing a new manner of becoming supposedly authentic inhabitants of the North American space. In doing so, both authors make the physical, non-human world a focal point for a devotion that has religious overtones through its incorporation of sacramental language.

### **III. Stevens and Bringham on the margins**

In addition to offering a reading of Stevens and Bringham in the context of North American nature writing, this study is also a reading of Stevens' influence on Bringham's writing. The similarities in the nature and concerns of these two poets' bodies of work makes a powerful case for their apposition, but to characterize the nature of Stevens' and Bringham's poetic relationship is not easy. The two did not meet and, consequently, their relationship exists only on the pages of their poetry. Many metaphors might be used to describe these literary interconnections, many of which—family-resemblance, kinship, influence, apprenticeship, homage—have already been used in this introduction. Indeed, the connotations of each possible metaphor open up diverse imaginative possibilities. For example, to call Bringham Stevens' "apprentice" might imply that the relationship between the two is one of novice and master. This metaphor connotes the learning of a trade or craft in the service of another, where mastery is earned through labour. Similarly, notions of poetic homage—the incorporation of the characteristic style or content of another artist as a means of tribute (*OED*)—call on the word's historical associations with feudal law. To render homage was a male tenant's public acknowledgement of loyalty to a particular king or lord, a declaration which implied obligations of payment and/or service. Neither service nor payment is a necessary part of poetic homage, but the concept of the public acknowledgement of another's power or authority in some aspect of

poetics certainly applies to Bringhurst's poetic homage to Stevens, even if these moments are also occasionally playful or even ironic.

Conversely, using metaphors of "family resemblance" or "kinship" to characterize the connection between the two poets discards notions of service or pledged loyalty, emphasizing instead the poets' similar poetic character or qualities and suggesting a relationship of descent. Within this metaphorical schema, Bringhurst might be seen to stand as a potential inheritor of a particular heritage or birthright; here, the older poet's attainments or achievements might be assumed to pass rightfully to the younger. Adding further complexity to the task of characterizing this relationship are those moments where Bringhurst himself has commented on it. When, for example, Bringhurst's speaker calls Stevens his "uncle" in "Hachadura," he implies a familial relationship, but this is a familial connection also characterized by a degree of distance. Lines of inheritance do not generally pass from uncle to nephew,<sup>7</sup> yet the relationship nevertheless suggests the existence of a consanguinity that implies possible similarity of character and qualities—of family resemblance, in other words.

The etymology of the word "influence" itself pushes to extremes this notion of the inevitability of shared family traits that is inherent in metaphors of family resemblance. The word comes from the Latin *inflūere*, to flow in, and was once used to refer to an "emanation from the stars," an "ethereal fluid acting upon the character and destiny of men" (*OED*). Individuals were believed to be powerless to resist the almost magical or even occult nature of this disposition-shaping emanation. The word's etymological associations with flowing

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<sup>7</sup> In light of Bringhurst's extensive study of Haida culture, it is interesting to note that nephews do inherit from uncles in the traditional patterns of inheritance amongst the Haida of the Pacific Northwest (*Story* 410-11).

movement also connote the flowing nature of water, rivers in particular. Given Stevens' and Bringhurst's frequent use of riverine and oceanic metaphors, the aquatic notes inherent in the word influence may be a particularly appropriate means of describing their relationship.

Generally speaking, the nuances attached to these many metaphors point to the opportunities and challenges inherent in describing a poetic relationship such as this one. Each one of these multiple metaphors, with their shifting shades and connotations, informs and enriches this study of poetic relationship. However, by their very nature as metaphors, which "make a claim for sameness that is clearly, according to common linguistic sense, false" (McKay, *Vis* 68), each also assumes its own limitations. Perhaps the full suite is required to begin to describe the richness of this relationship.

Massimo Bacigalupo, one of the key individuals responsible for translating Stevens' poetry into Italian, stated "[s]tudies of influence can be tedious, unless they throw some light on the original writer" (227). While his assertion about the relative interest of studies of influence is debatable, it does highlight the importance of affirming that the theme of influence in this present study is more than a simple study of Stevens' influence on Bringhurst's poetry and poetics. Obviously, a dialogue in the conventional sense the word between two poets is not possible. Stevens died in Connecticut while Bringhurst was still only nine years old and living in Calgary, Alberta (Dickinson 21). Certainly, the world of Bringhurst's boyhood in Utah, Montana and Alberta was outside the realm of Stevens' existence in suburban Connecticut. However, despite the differences of age, geography, and culture existing between these two, this study does assert that there is insight to be gained by thinking of their poetry as in "dialogue." Individual poems as well as general themes within Stevens' poetry are illuminated when they are read in the context of Bringhurst's poetry. Reading Stevens alongside Bringhurst draws attention to Stevens'

references to the material, the concrete, and the particular that all serve to anchor his “moments of visionary prophecy” (Longenbach, *Plain* 265) and aesthetic rhapsody within the ordinary and the everyday, which Stevens calls “the dreadful sundry of this world” (*CPP* 38). For example, reading “This Solitude of Cataracts” together with Bringham’s “Sunday Morning,” with Bringham’s very specific “systems of references,” (Bringham and Ricou 95), draws attention to the “systems of references” that are also submerged below the surface of Stevens’ language. The buttonwood trees in Stevens’ poem become not only, as some assert, a reference to Milton’s platan in Eden, but a reference to the American plane tree, the colloquial name for the American sycamore (Cook, *Reader’s* 264). The monadnock is revealed to be potentially more than the general name for a geological formation of an isolated mountain, becoming instead a reference to a particular Mount Monadnock, a specific and locatable mountain in New Hampshire. In other words, reading Stevens’ poetry alongside Bringham’s highlights Stevens’ concern with the particularity of the places in his poetry, with the concrete intricacies and fine points of the experience of being *in situ*. This pairing, then, counteracts the tendency to think of Stevens’ as a poet of abstraction whose poetry is grounded only in language itself.

Secondly, Bringham’s attention to the transcendent in his poetry helps highlight a similar concern in Stevens’, suggesting that it may be for this reason that Bringham returns to Stevens’ poetry and poetics. Reading Stevens’ and Bringham’s poetry together calls attention to their mutual participation in a revised twentieth-century and twenty-first century North American Romanticism, wherein each assert that “self and nature, imagination and reality—epistemologically, subject and object—stand in interdependent and coherent relation” (Lentricchia, *Gaiety* 8). But, a stereoscopic view of the two poets’ poetry and poetics also calls attention to the two poets’ negotiation of their mutual religious inheritances and the different

manners in which they navigate the legacy of North American Protestant Christianity. This symbology complicates the Romantic understanding of the relationship between self and nature. The metaphor and symbols of the sacrament insist on communion between self and other, yes, but a communion which maintains notions of difference and separation. More specifically, the interest in the numinous and the sacramental that the poet's juxtaposition reveals contradicts the assertion, made in some critical quarters, that Stevens' poetry asserts the total "interdependence and interpenetration of self and 'external' reality" (Lentricchia, *Gaiety* 13). It insists that the Protestant theology and values of Stevens' childhood continue to inform his poetry and his view of the world. Controverting the opinion that "the poetry which Stevens wanted was to be grounded in a humanism so powerful that even God would be under its sway" (Pearce, *Continuity* 381), my study argues that Stevens' Protestant upbringing continued to shape his poetics and his revision of the Romantic transcendental of his poetic forebears. Furthermore, an examination of Bringhurst's employment of sacramental metaphor also contends for a more nuanced response to Bringhurst's often vitriolic critiques of the Protestant religious tradition in North America. Bringhurst's revised Sacramentalism has helped to shape his response to the Indigenous cultures of the Pacific Northwest, undergirding his politically-charged call to establish new relationships of respect with Indigenous culture that acknowledge the injustices of the colonial past and work to remember Indigenous culture ("Stopping By" 146). In short, this study demonstrates that, in addition to charting Stevens' influence on Bringhurst's poetics, to study their poetics together sharpens the understanding of the writing of each poet.

While the affinities existing between the poetry and poetics of Stevens and Bringhurst are intriguing in their own right, there are biographical similarities between Stevens and Bringhurst as well which suggest some possible reasons why Bringhurst might be drawn towards Stevens as

a poetic dialogue partner. Most significant is each poet's positional on the literal and figurative margins. First, Stevens' professional life and relative financial success distanced him from other Modernist authors of his generation. Influential poets like Ezra Pound decried the economic system of Europe and North America, arguing that "aesthetic and economic production were insidiously related" and must therefore be utterly rejected (Lentricchia, *Quartet* 53). But, in contrast to his contemporaries' celebration of "the craft of nonremunerative writing pursued by those who cannot afford to pursue the craft of nonremunerative writing" (48), Stevens pursued financial security, excelling within that same financial system that Pound and Eliot identified as the death knell to authentic poetry (251). Stevens began working for the Hartford Accident and Indemnity Company in 1916 and became the Vice President of the company in 1934, a position he held until his death (Cook, *Reader's* 21). Stevens' career choices brought him financial success and earned him the reputation as "the most outstanding surety-claims man in the business" (Brazeau 77) or "the dean of surety-claims men in the whole country" (67). Stevens defended his decision to pursue financial success, writing, "I really gave up writing poetry because, much as I loved it, there were too many other things I wanted not to make an effort to have them. . . I didn't like the idea of being bedeviled all the time about money and I didn't for a moment like the idea of poverty, so I went to work like anybody else and kept at it for a good many years" (*LWS* 32). Nevertheless, the physical comfort within which Stevens and his family lived differentiated Stevens from some others among his Modernist peers like Pound or Eliot, both of whom faced frequent financial difficulties (Longenbach, *Stone Cottage* 29; Lentricchia, *Quartet* 250).<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> As a young man living in New York, Stevens also experienced financial need (*CPP* 960). This early experience of poverty may have contributed to his determination to avoid it in later life.

Secondly, whereas other poets among the principal American Modernists, including Pound and Eliot, either made their homes in Europe or, like William Carlos Williams, travelled there periodically, Stevens remained for most of his life in the United States. He did travel frequently and extensively within that country while working first as a lawyer and then during the earlier years of his tenure with Hartford Accident and Indemnity Company. However, this travel was mostly for business purposes and, except for several brief business trips to Canada, almost entirely within the United States. Stevens' international travels were limited to one month spent hunting in the Canadian Rocky Mountains in 1903 (*LWS* 64-67), brief trips to Cuba in 1923 and 1934, and a two-week cruise with his wife from New York to California by way of Havana and the Panama Canal in 1923 (241). Stevens' restricted international travel set him apart from other modernist writers like Ezra Pound, H.D., Henry James, Gertrude Stein or Ernest Hemingway, all of whom participated in the "espousal of 'International Modernism'" (Morrison 15), an ideal that was expressed succinctly as the "surrender" to the "mind of Europe" promoted by Eliot (*Sacred Wood* 29, 30). Instead of pursuing an actual experience of Europe through travel, Stevens' experience of international modernism was limited to his correspondence and his collections of exotic items from a variety of countries. He acquired paintings from France and jewellery from Ceylon and Japan which made the abstract exotic concrete in his living room in Hartford (*LWS* 323-4, 559-60) but these places would remain "paper valleys and far countries, [peopled by] paper men and paper women" (80), the means by which he created an imaginary world beyond his narrow sphere (Eeckhout and Ragg 3).

In addition to eschewing the internationalism which was one hallmark of the poetry and prose of his contemporaries, Stevens' suburbanism also marginalized him from the *avant-garde* aesthetic movements and artistic enclaves situated in America's biggest metropolitan centre in

New York. Stevens was not always quartered in the suburbs, however. During the years that he lived in that city after becoming a lawyer, Stevens renewed his acquaintance with Walter and Louise Arensberg, avant-garde art collectors and hosts of a New York salon that brought together writers, visual artists and patrons in a salon that flourished between 1915 and 1925. Stevens had come to know Walter Arensberg at Cambridge and the two men stayed in contact after both moved to New York (*LWS* 820-1), occasionally lunching together (92). Stevens was included by the Arensbergs in the gatherings the couple hosted and was introduced to the key players of the New York avant-garde aesthetic movement there (Voyce 630). These gatherings were characterized by “carnavalesque interactions” of “subversive sexuality and cosmopolitanism” (629, 635). The interactions at the Arensberg’s salon produced numerous publications, including *The Blind Man*—the art and Dada journal edited by Marcel Duchamp and Mina Loy (628, 640)—as well as *Others*, a magazine edited by the writer and editor Alfred Kreymborg and financed by the Arensbergs. Stevens’ involvement with this group was important in bringing about the publication of some of his early work. *Others* published Stevens’ “Six Significant Landscapes” in 1916 and “Le Monocle de Mon Oncle” in 1918 (*LWS* 184*n*, 215*n*). However, his association with this group did not last. After a falling out with Arensberg (850) and his subsequent departure to Hartford in May 1916, Stevens quickly fell out of these circles of avant-garde artists and writers, mentioning former friends like the artist Marcel Duchamp only rarely (228). Stevens’ artistic tastes also tended toward representational painting rather than the newer forms of Modernist art (Costello, “Head” 41) and his home in Hartford seemed to “symbolically [resist] ‘professional modernism’” (Ragg 157).

By the time he was middle-aged, Stevens could sound positively bourgeois in his references to the self-proclaimed artistic elite and their hangers-on. Stevens wrote to Harriet

Monroe after Gertrude Stein's *Four Saints in Three Acts*—which Stevens described as “an elaborate bit of perversity in every respect” though “agreeable musically”—was staged in Hartford in 1934. He says, “[t]here were, however, numerous asses of the first water in the audience. New York sent a train load of people of this sort to Hartford: people who walked around with cigarette holders a foot long, and so on. After all, if there is any place under the sun that needs debunking, it is the place where people of this sort come and go” (*LWS* 267). Stevens' own appearance was as conservative as his taste in painting and his dismissal of fashionable culture. In another letter, Stevens expressed a horror that Lew New, the man who was responsible at Alcestis Press for designing and printing *Ideas of Order*, might call on Stevens at his office “*in shorts*” (283). J. Hillis Miller, who attended a reading at Harvard given by Stevens and William Carlos Williams in the 1950s, remembers Stevens thus: “Though I suppose Stevens was not really wearing high-button shoes and a celluloid collar, he might as well have been. He looked like an overweight insurance executive, which he was” (“Connecticut” 23). Stevens resisted appearing in public to read his poetry, writing in one refusal, “I am not a troubadour and I think the public reading of poetry is something particularly ghastly” (*CPP* 967),<sup>9</sup> so it may be less than fair to pan his self-presentation in an environment in which he was uncomfortable. Still, contrast Miller's description with the description of Ezra Pound at a dinner in 1914: “To Blunt's left stands a relaxed Pound—hands in pocket with wide-collared shirt overflowing his jacket collar, loosely tied tie. Everyone else is wearing a well-cut suit” (Nadel 20). Stevens' prim statements highlight his conservatism and the distance Stevens created between himself and the

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<sup>9</sup> Stevens also refused an invitation from Robert Penn Warren to record for the Library of Congress archive. Stevens cited as excuse his opinion that “he does not read well” (*CPP* 967).

liberal, avant-garde culture in the 1920s and 1930s, with their risqué attitudes towards dress and social mores (Voyce 634).

Finally, and perhaps most important, in addition to remaining in the United States during a time when modernism was being defined as international and, particularly, trans-Atlantic, Stevens' poetic, philosophical and personal distance from Eliot and Pound—Modernism's "most important theoretical spokesmen" (Keller 3)—further marginalized him from other Modernist poets during the early years of his career. Though certainly not unappreciated, Stevens, along with other poets like Williams and Moore, remained "by and large outside the mainstream" (5). Stevens' worth as a poet was recognized, but, since his early work was only loosely associated with the literary experiment of Imagism—that theory which so firmly defined modernist poetry in the second decade of the twentieth century (Nelson 71)—his reputation was not secure. Early poems like "Earthy Anecdote" (1923) or "Domination of Black" (1923) did show Stevens' participation in Imagism's "flight from the didactic" (148). These poems suggest Stevens experimented with the "image as equation for a state of consciousness" (Bates 149). However, Stevens was also critical of the movement, writing "Not all objects are equal. The vice of Imagism was that it did not recognize this" (*OP* 161). Stevens' modernist poetics differed from both Eliot's and Pound's poetics and philosophy of poetry. His reputation for seemingly philosophical and abstract poetry distinguished his poetics from Eliot's and Pound's early celebrations of concreteness, delight in the image, emphasis on fragmentation and collage, as well as their irony and world-weariness (Keller 3, 190). Consequently, Stevens was not always accorded a central place in the literary and artistic circles centred on the early proponents of Imagism—Pound, Eliot, and H.D. In 1923, the influential critic and Columbia College professor

Mark Van Doren wrote, “Mr. Stevens will never be much read. But some day there will be a monograph on him” (qtd. in Doyle 40).

The critical response to Pound and Eliot was markedly different than the response to Stevens. Indeed, Pound’s reputation rose in the first decades of the twentieth-century as a result of his critical essays and his incisive critique of what he argued was the essentially effeminate lyrical practice of nineteenth-century poetics, though his reputation certainly plummeted as he became known as an apologist for fascism (Nelson 81). Despite his questionable politics, Pound’s poetry retained an audience—indeed, these “few, fit readers” may have been what he desired (Lentricchia, *Quartet* 76). While Pound’s reputation and influence waxed and waned, Eliot’s certainly seemed secure. Beginning with the publication of his *The Waste Land* and enduring until the late 1940s, Eliot’s poetry enjoyed an audience and enthusiastic critical reception beyond that of Stevens’ poetry. Stevens’ *Harmonium* was published only nine months after the Eliot’s *The Waste Land* was published in December, 1922. *Harmonium* attracted considerably less critical applause or even critical notice than *The Waste Land* (LWS 241). Indeed, it was, by some accounts, a failure. His relegation to the margins was exacerbated as Eliot came to dominate North American literary circles and critical practice in the years following the end of World War II (Breslin 13). The “subject, diction, tone, and allusion” of Eliot’s poetry made it an attractive candidate for the New Criticism which he and Pound had helped create (Lentricchia, *Quartet* 88). With the volumes that followed *Harmonium*, “[charges of obscurity and dispassion did] much to retard Stevens’ . . . reputation” (Jenkins 4).

Some of the personal and professional distance that existed between Stevens and both Eliot and Pound seems to have been deliberately cultivated by all parties involved. There is little evidence that Stevens held any great interest in either Eliot’s or Pound’s poetry. Near the end of

his life, Stevens wrote, “[I] have purposefully held off from reading highly mannered people like Eliot and Pound so that I should not absorb anything, even unconsciously” (*LWS* 813). In one letter, Stevens commented “I don’t know [Eliot] at all and have had no correspondence whatever with him . . . After all, Eliot and I are dead opposites and I have been doing about everything that he would not be likely to do” (677). Indeed, there is no evidence in either poet’s papers of any correspondence. Stevens referred to Pound as “an eccentric person” (516) and, when refusing to write a critical review of Pound’s work, called Pound “persnickety as all hell,” someone who “does not like to be molested even by thoughts or looks” (565). Stevens’ diffident tendencies concerning his poetry distinguished him from Pound’s “megalomania” and his corresponding efforts to “fix power within the movements [he] founded” (*Voyce* 636). Pound was resistant to the influence of female editors like Harriet Monroe and complained that she and other female editors—along with female authors—had “hijacked the literary scene in New York” (628). Stevens, on the other hand, cultivated a decades-long friendship and correspondence with Monroe, allowing her to rearrange according to her own taste the stanzas of his “Sunday Morning” for publication in *Poetry* in 1915 (*Schulze* 50) and deferring to her in other editorial matters over the years (*LWS* 194-5, 202, 216, 299).

Though not overtly disparaging of Stevens’ poetry, neither Eliot nor Pound made efforts to promote him as they promoted other poets, which suggests that being the “dead opposite” of powerful cultural and literary forces may have had consequences for Stevens’ reception. Certainly, Eliot’s and Pound’s formidable critical voices contributed to deciding which poets were “in” or not. Pound resisted engaging with Stevens’ poetry like Stevens resisted Pound’s. When Williams asked Pound to comment on his obituary for Stevens in 1955, Pound responded, “. . . as to yr/ pal/ Wally S/ . . . it wd/ be highly improper for me to have opinions of yr/ opinion

of a bloke I haven't read and DOUBT like all hell that yu will be able to PURR-suade me to venture on with such a hellUVA lot I don't know and WANT to find out" (qtd. Perloff "Whose Era?" 486).

If Pound's "imagism itself was a canonization strategy, designed to give a coherent focus to the otherwise disparate work of poets ranging from Pound, H.D., and Aldington to D.H. Lawrence and James Joyce" (Miller "Connecticut" 22), then Stevens' poetry was not included in Pound's canon. With Imagism's dominance, Pound also gained a degree of control over which poets were published and promoted in magazines like *The Little Review*, of which he became the foreign editor in 1917 (23). Pound championed the work of contemporaries like Joyce, H.D., Moore, and Eliot by promoting them in this magazine, claiming, for example that Eliot's *The Waste Land* "fulfilled the modern experiment since 1900" (qtd. in Surette 144)—though Pound's conclusion was virtually assured by his own heavy-handed editing of Eliot's work that contributed to the poem's fragmentary nature (Bloom, *Eliot* 41). Eliot also used reviews to establish poets within the Modernist canon. The traces of Eliot's own editorial work on Marianne Moore's *Selected Poems* (1934) are quite evident, beginning with the placement of his introduction directly after the title page and even before the table of contents, "reminding [readers] that this is his edition" (Paul 171). Compare this with the placement of his introduction after the table of contents in *The Literary Essays of Ezra Pound* (1965). Eliot also reviewed Moore's *Selected Poems*, praising Moore in his review for her descriptive attention to detail that avoids romantic meditation. However, while it "valorizes" Moore's writing, Eliot's review also tends to categorize her poetry as minor poetry; it is poetry for an ideal reader of poetry who appreciates difficulty (Paul 170; Surette 27), the "fit audience though few" (Pearce, *Continuity* 285). Certainly, in the language of early modernist criticism, this may have been a compliment.

However, the same rhetoric that consigns Moore's poetry to a niche readership also serves to call into question its importance.

Furthermore, Eliot moved slowly in his capacity of publisher at Faber and Faber to publish Stevens' work (Jenkins 5), delaying the fulfillment of Stevens' desire to achieve a readership in Britain (Ford 180). Stevens attributed part of the delay in publishing his works in England to a difference between American and British taste, writing to Alfred Knopf in 1946 that "Taste in the two countries is quite different" (qtd. Jenkins 2). Certainly, early British reviewers of Stevens' poetry were not particularly positive. In his review of Stevens' 1954 *Collected Poems*, Donald Davie, for example, echoed Yvor Winters' unfavorable assessment of the "rapid and tragic decay of the poet's style" after the heights of Stevens' "Sunday Morning" in *Harmonium*. Davie referred to Stevens as "a naïve philosopher in verse, homespun, garrulous and strenuously hopeful" (qtd. in Doyle 426). He adds: "one development that Winters did not foresee: the poetry could [after *Harmonium*] live on its own fat, gnaw its own vitals, conduct a running commentary on itself" (428). Nevertheless, Eliot might have used some of his influence to make Stevens' reputation in England if he had chosen to do so. In his review of Stevens' *Selected Poems*, which was finally published by Faber & Faber in England in 1953, Eliot writes of Stevens, "[n]ow his reputation is beginning to speak to the people who don't know" (qtd. Jenkins 5). While seeming to affirm Stevens' poetic prowess, Eliot's statement glosses over the fact that it was in Eliot's purview during his many years in the position of editor at Faber & Faber to make Stevens known to "the people who don't know"; he could have accomplished this by publishing any of the numerous volumes of Stevens' poetry available. Whether for this apparent slight or others, Stevens seems to have disapproved of Eliot's influence. In a letter that willingly acknowledges Eliot is "a man of a dynamic mind and, in [the field of poetry],

something of a scholar and very much of an original force,” Stevens also clarifies for his correspondent that he sees Eliot as “a negative rather than a positive force” (*LWS* 378).

Keller has argued that Stevens’ distance from Eliot and the New Critics has made his poetics “useful” to younger poets like Merrill and Ashbery (2). One could add a number of other poets to that list; certainly, Bringham belongs there. These poets sought a release from the model of poetry that was established by Pound and Eliot and then maintained by Eliot and his admiring academic critics for more than 20 years (6). Stevens’ resistance to any ultimately definitive statement of poetic truth or method and his “self-conscious[ness] about [poetry’s] own rhetoricity” (Gilcrest 106) might be one reason that his poetics is appealing to other poets. Stevens’ “suspicion that nature’s many texts are written by ourselves on the blank page or a palimpsest” (92) distinguished him from Pound and Eliot, whose work is characterized by a sense of “final, certain knowledge of history and culture” (91). It may be, then, that the very differences that made Stevens’ poetics difficult to situate within the dominant strains of poetic modernism as it was established in the 1920s secured his position as a viable alternative to that tradition. Still, living on the margins of the literary world for much of his life, it was not until near the end of his life that Stevens was recognized as a major literary figure (*LWS* 555).

Like Stevens, Bringham has also occupied a marginal position in Canadian and North American letters. Bringham’s marginality has also been both literal and figurative, intentional and unintentional. First, where Stevens’ marginality was that of the suburban New England householder when the literary avant-garde movement was urban and Eurocentric, Bringham’s marginality has been of a deliberately chosen geographical nature, expressed in Bringham’s continual drift to the westward edges of North America. In 1973, Bringham left the United States where he had been attending university—first in Boston and then Indiana—and moved to

British Columbia where he completed a Master of Fine Arts in creative writing at the University of British Columbia. Already at the continent's edge at UBC, Bringhurst began spending increasing amounts of time in the coastal mountains of British Columbia Northwest of Vancouver, setting up a studio in an abandoned logging town (Dickinson 30). With his friend and mentor, the Haida sculptor Bill Reid, Bringhurst also travelled around the isolated archipelago of islands known now as Haida Gwaii in Northwest British Columbia in 1984, where the two men explored the coastline of the islands in a collapsible kayak (33). Though Bringhurst would travel frequently and extensively around the globe after these initial encounters with the Pacific Northwest, the region seems to have permanently captured his imagination. Bringhurst established a residence on Bowen Island, a coastal island near West Vancouver where he lived for nearly a decade, before moving to a farm south of Nanaimo on Vancouver Island in 2002 ("Fast Drumming Ground" 120; "Biographical Material. 2013"). Leaving Vancouver Island in 2003, Bringhurst finally moved to Quadra Island, where he has resided since. Living first in mainland coastal British Columbia, then Bowen Island, Vancouver Island, and finally Quadra Island, Bringhurst has moved progressively farther from the metropole and its influence.

None of these islands—Bowen, Vancouver, and Quadra—are, technically speaking, particularly remote or sparsely populated compared to others among British Columbia's numerous islands, but it does take a good deal of time to travel to them from the province's main metropolitan centre in Vancouver.<sup>10</sup> Bringhurst's residence on these islands can be seen as

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<sup>10</sup> Bowen Island is a short ferry ride from Horseshoe Bay, just north of Vancouver. Quadra Island is relatively close to Vancouver Island—accessible from the much larger Vancouver Island via a ten minute ferry ride from the small community of Campbell River, but reaching Campbell River from Vancouver involves a ninety minute drive from Nanaimo after a one hour and forty minute ferry trip from Vancouver.

a deliberate physical expression of the poet's desire to seek a place that is "spiritually distinct" from colonial culture in its contemporary embodiment on the mainland. It is noteworthy to mark that, on the dust jacket for Bringhurst's 2006 collection *The Tree of Meaning*, Bringhurst describes Quadra Island as "off the British Columbia coast" (*Tree* np). The rhetoric of this description leaves Quadra Island's identity somewhat ambiguous. To be geopolitically accurate, one might say Quadra Island is a part of British Columbia and "off the . . . coast" of mainland British Columbia. Choosing to describe Quadra Island in this way suggests that there exists, at least in Bringhurst's opinion, a geopolitical distance between the island and the Canadian political reality and heritage of the mainland. By choosing to live on the margins of this culture, Bringhurst represents in geographical terms his 1986 self-identification as "a creature of the edges instead of the collapsing centre" (*Pieces* 103). This westward migration is one way in which Bringhurst has physically expressed his commitment to deliberately "marginalize" himself from the colonial culture. Bringhurst has described this colonial culture and its collapsing centre as "a world in which liberty and prosperity are hollow, and one in which justice is severed from both its origins and its ends" (*Pieces* 103). In this environment, places of edges and boundaries, like Quadra Island, become a place to "[learn] to speak across and against it" from "some other dimension of the physical space [he] inhabits" (*Pieces* 102). At the margins, the inhabitant can escape the "constant artificial sound and light" of cities in order to "read the original book," the world itself (*Tree* 132-3). From this point, the individual who "has been alienated from [the] ecology of consciousness, as all moderns are" might be able to "figure out how to rejoin it" (Dickinson 41).

In his rejection of western culture and his deliberate self-marginalization, Bringhurst indicates his role in a genealogical line of descent in West Coast ecopoetry which begins with

Robinson Jeffers and continues through Gary Snyder.<sup>11</sup> Jeffers, Snyder and Bringhurst demonstrate similar concern for environment, culture, and history. Jeffers has had a significant influence on nature writing, particularly among West Coast writers (Elder 2). He was a pioneer in his focus on the ethical demands made by one's awareness of environmental abuse by the power of industrialism. His poetry responds to California's "tide of new settlement and its powerful technology for clearing timber, blasting roads, irrigating deserts, and otherwise transforming the face of the land" (9). In an interview in 1992, Snyder identifies Jeffers as a pioneer in writing about the Pacific coast of the United States: "The mapping of the Far West, or of the Pacific Slope, is not all that old. One could say it pretty much begins with Robinson Jeffers, who is an inspiration and, to a small extent, an irritant to us all" (qtd. in Murphy, "Problem" 94). Jeffers' Inhumanism<sup>12</sup> is the primary inspiration and irritant to which Snyder refers. Both Snyder's and Bringhurst's poetry and poetic philosophy demonstrate the influence of Jeffers' radical resistance to anthropocentrism and his wonder at the "transhuman magnificence" of the physical world (Oelschlaeger 248). The three poets cohere around their concern for the impact of industrialized civilization. Each expresses these concerns by decrying

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<sup>11</sup> This topic has been treated extensively by critics Kopecký and Ricou.

<sup>12</sup> Oelschlaeger succinctly defines Jeffers' Inhumanism: "Viewed in toto, Jeffers' poetry embraces three principles. First, 1) the inhumanist brackets the intense and unreflective anthropocentric bias of Modernism by recognizing 'transhuman magnificence.' But 2) in acknowledging transhuman magnificence, the inhumanist is neither antihuman nor inhumane but celebrates the possibility of a sane human beingness that has cured 'the fever of self-involvement, and contemplate[s] the living God.' Accordingly, inhumanism represents an alternative worldview that rejects the profane 20th-century world while affirming the sacrality of existence. Finally, 3) in comprehending the beauty of things, the inhumanist discovers the transitory nature of all things, including humankind and its works: the cosmic process is the reality, and the human species is inextricably bound with that process" (248).

the alienation from place caused by the “Judeo-Christian tradition, industrial capitalism, and . . . greed, arrogance, and ignorance” (McClintock 112). Moreover, the poetry of each expresses “heightened awareness of the natural world” (Hunt 8). In an interview, Snyder described this experience as “a very moving, profound perception a few times that everything was alive . . . and that on one level there is no hierarchy of qualities in life – that the life of a stone or a weed is as completely beautiful and authentic, wise and valuable as the life of, say, an Einstein” (*Real Work* 17). These moments are the progenitors of paradigmatic transformations, shaping the relationship of the poet to his respective locality.

Jeffers, Snyder and Bringhurst also share in occasionally expressing “hostility toward Western civilization,” taking on an air of “alienated authority” (Elder 1) with which they pass judgment on human culture. In each of these poets, these traits can be a harbinger of misanthropy, denoting alienation from humankind and a preference for the non-human over the human. For example, Bringhurst writes, “I find sustenance now for that archaic sense of integrity more among naturalists than among poets, more in broken country than in social order, more with marmots and great blue herons than with human beings” (“Breathing” 14). On the other hand, each of the three poets’ moments of judgment are balanced by their articulation of a sense of their responsibility not to abandon human society, expressed by speaking as the “solitary voice . . . [calling] upon the community to renew itself” (Elder 1). The possibility of such renewal is inherent in “moments of intense, redemptive consciousness” (*Selected* 9) where the poet is brought face to face with the state of things as they are.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> In “Point Joe,” Jeffers writes, “[p]ermanent things are what is needful in a poem, things temporally / Of great dimension, things continually renewed or always present” (*Wild* 31). Jeffers’ poem gestures toward his belief in a

In addition to bearing the mark of Jeffers' influence, Bringhurst has also been specifically influenced by Snyder, whom he refers to as one of his elders or teachers (*Pieces* 102). Bringhurst has followed Snyder in his concern for the impact of industrialized civilization on contemporary culture, but he also shares Snyder's interest in non-Western cultures. In contrast to Jeffers' opinions, Snyder's poetry and prose assume it is possible to re-direct Westernized countries away from the dictates of a commodity-based culture, assuming Euramerican culture will learn from other cultures, particularly the traditions of Indigenous and traditional Buddhist cultures. Snyder's background and interests, as well as his undergraduate education in anthropology (McClintock 121), lead him in to celebrate the persistence of cultures that he believes are viable alternatives to western civilization. The signs, as Snyder reads them, enable him to believe in the possibility of cultural change and a renewal of healthy patterns of being as individuals and communities adopt "resurfacing . . . basic cultural practices" (Wriglesworth 44). Snyder posits the possibility of a return to a non-dualistic foundational human culture emphasizing interrelatedness and connection, turning to existing non-Western Indigenous cultures as examples of that worldview. Snyder's efforts to teach his readers demonstrate his enduring optimism and his belief in the possibility of change (Murphy, "Problem" 95).

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foundational permanence in the material world, a permanence of which the constant flux and violence of change are an expression. Snyder's belief in the interconnection of all things and the constant "'recycling' and 'composting' of experience and knowledge" (McClintock 125) is an idea similar to Jeffers' notion of permanence. For Snyder, change and succession constantly occur in nature and culture, taking place within "the whole mountains-and-rivers mandala universe" (*Practice* 93). Bringhurst's "For the Geologist's Daughter" expresses a similar sentiment: "There will be nothing in the end, / and that is everything that ever was / and will be" (*SP* 257).

Snyder and Bringhurst share in venerating Indigenous culture as central and integral expressions of ecological ethics which emphasize a non-anthropocentric vision of humanity's place in the physical world. Like Bringhurst, Snyder's syncretistic worldview borrows from cultures which are non-dualistic and/or believe in a connection between mind and the non-human material universe. He draws from these traditions to propose a way of life which "[works] against the objectification of nature by defining it as a subject" (McClintock 109). Snyder's view depends on a belief in "the archaic commonality of seemingly unrelated cultures" (Kopecký 2007). This belief in an archaic, primordial, common ancestry of all humans enables Snyder to argue that it may be possible to return to some kind of "primal mind" capable of providing access to a supposedly more authentic way of life which is an alternative to Western civilization. Bringhurst's poetry and prose suggests that he shares a number of similar beliefs. Believing that Indigenous cultures are part of the matrix of past local wisdom that Euramericans need to learn from and adopt, Snyder's poetry frequently incorporates Native American mythology and religions in order to instruct his readers in the differences between Indigenous and Euramerican lifestyles. Each inhabitant of North America should, according to Snyder, "hark again to those roots, to see our ancient solidarity, and then to the work of being together on Turtle Island"<sup>14</sup> (*Turtle* n.p.).

Bringhurst's geographical and philosophical turn away from colonial culture has also involved a turning *toward* and embrace of the Indigenous cultures of the Pacific Northwest. Through reading John Swanton's *Haida Texts and Myths: Skidegate Dialect* in the late 1970s, as well as through his friendship with and apprenticeship to Bill Reid, Bringhurst transformed a

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<sup>14</sup> In the introduction to his collection of poems and essays, *Turtle Island*, that "[t]he 'U.S.A.' and its states and countries are arbitrary and inaccurate impositions on what is really here." (n.p). To replace these "impositions," Snyder proposes to use the name "Turtle Island," a name linked to "creation myths of peoples living here for millennia" (n.p).

deepening awareness of the “submerged history” (Dickinson 31) of the encounter between Indigenous and colonial cultures that co-exists beneath the narratives told “in the confident world of western historicism” (*Pieces* 104). Bringhurst has argued that learning to know and appreciate the myth and language of local Indigenous cultures is a necessary and respectful kind of border crossing. In his body of work, this practice of learning and seeking to understand has been expanded and incorporated into a poetics, philosophy and ethical practice (*Pieces* 99). By positioning himself in conversation with the poets and philosophers of the temporally and geographically distant, Bringhurst has sought to inherit the wisdom of cultures beyond the Euramerican colonial culture. He perceives “archaic sense of integrity” in these cultures, an integrity that “speak[s] of a wholeness which, in our rapacious industrial society, is almost unknown” (*Pieces* 109).

In addition to demonstrating the influence of Jeffers and Snyder, Bringhurst’s commitment to remain on the margins is also attributable to his study of ancient poets and philosophers. Bringhurst’s writing draws from a number of writers from the Zen Buddhist tradition as well as a number of sages from the Indian subcontinent, all of whom appear to have lived and written from a position of retreat from their contemporary societies, choosing withdrawal and solitude as a religious discipline. As a sixteen-year old in 1962, Bringhurst began reading Daisetsu Suzuki, the same person through whose writing Snyder was introduced to Buddhism (Brown 214). In addition to emphasizing “*satori*, or awakening” (215), Suzuki’s writings offer a “critique of American rationality and materialism” (207) that aims “to liberate the individual both from the cycle of birth and death and from his or her own cultural prejudices and allegiance to any state” (215). In contrast to Snyder who immersed himself in this religion, spending nearly a decade in Japan studying Buddhism, Bringhurst would “forever remain at the

door of the *sangha*, not seated within” (Dickinson 22). Still, the tradition in Zen Buddhism of countercultural critique from a place of retreat has clearly influenced Bringhurst’s philosophy and poetry. Bringhurst has “enlarg[ed] the out-of-the-way clearing” (Higgins 64) on the margins in order to create a meeting place for these multiple cultures. His poetry turns to and draws from the texts and philosophy of antiquity, Japanese and Chinese Buddhist philosophers and religious figures.

In seeking alternatives to contemporary cultural norms in non-Western cultures, Bringhurst has clearly been influenced by similar patterns in other American poets, including Snyder. Bringhurst’s writing shares commonalities with Pound’s, whose *Cantos* Bringhurst carried around while a teenager in Utah (Dickinson 22). Both poets demonstrate a marked interest in “resuscitation of past cultures and esoteric allusion” (Keller 3). Bringhurst has acknowledged Pound as an influence on his poetics (*Pieces* 105), recording that his early reading of Pound “nudged” him to learn classical Greek, an act which eventually made possible Bringhurst’s translations of the pre-Socratics (*Tree* 12). Bringhurst describes his engagement with the poets and philosophers and storytellers of the past as a type of caretaking, sharing with Pound the notion of translation as “the central task of the literary guardian” (Dickinson 29). For Bringhurst the work of translating poetry is his attempt to “keep up our links with the past” (*Everywhere* 75), and also the means humanity is able “to explore: to reveal a neighbour we did not know, a past of which we were not conscious, or one we had undervalued or misunderstood” (75). This act of cultural caretaking can be expressed in a literal act of translation from one language to another, or, as in “The Old In Their Knowing” (1982), in the type of translation wherein Bringhurst “transpos[es] ancient or modern texts or myths for performance on his own

instrument” (Higgins 77). He has also taken up Pound’s interest in adapting the musical polyphony of the fugue to poetry (*Everywhere* 42).

Pound is not the only modernist influential in Bringhurst’s poetics. Higgins has also commented on Eliot’s influence on Bringhurst’s early poetry, noting Bringhurst’s “imitative homages to Eliot,” wherein Bringhurst borrows from the musical language of some of Eliot’s later poems (Higgins 68). Bringhurst also takes up the poetics of Williams in some poems of his second volume *Cadastre*, parodying them in his early poetry as he works out his position with respect to their legacy (see Higgins 70-1). Furthermore, it is difficult not to hear the voice of Marianne Moore in poems like Bringhurst’s “Anecdote of the Squid” (1975) or “A Lesson In Botany” (1974) with their careful description and detached tone. Bringhurst’s careful consideration of the squid is not unlike Moore’s detailed deliberation of the anteater in “The Pangolin” (1936), as chapter two will show.

Despite his indebtedness to the modernists who came before him, Bringhurst attempts to distinguish himself from their poetics and philosophical positions. In his prose, Bringhurst has described the influence of the twentieth-century poets as a starting place, emphasizing the ways in which he has outgrown them and stressing his alignment with poets more temporally and geographically distant. For example, describing his early apprenticeship to Pound’s poetics, Bringhurst writes, “Pound himself touched another American bent in me too, and that was my prolonged fascination with craftsmanship and technique, with inward mechanics and outward physical forms” (*Pieces* 105). While acknowledging this early debt, Bringhurst emphasizes the ways in which he has moved beyond Pound’s tutelage, writing,

Along the way, it seems to me I have come to learn relatively less from other poets and more from artists of other kinds. I’ve learned more about composition

from the late sonatas of Beethoven, more about silence from the late paintings of Burduas, and –though I cannot write like he could play—more about tonality and broken timbre from John Coltrane than from any poet I could name. (105-6)

Bringhurst minimizes Pound’s influence on his poetics in this passage, downplaying it as early instruction for a young poet, the means of beginning until better teachers could be found, often unexpectedly in places beyond the literary world.<sup>15</sup>

In addition to distancing himself from American modernists, Bringhurst also holds himself at a distance from poetic trends and movements in Canada or abroad. The allusiveness and erudition of Bringhurst’s poetry is coupled with the frequent, though not absolute, absence of any “authorial I”—a habit he may have adopted from his study of Pound’s writing (Dickinson 28). Certainly, his poetry is not confessional in nature. On this subject, Bringhurst comments,

It seems to me . . . that my personal history has, and ought to have, rather little to do with my writing. Many of my contemporaries prefer to let the events of their lives set the shapes of their poems. . . . Where I have been, what I have done,

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<sup>15</sup> Bringhurst’s critique aligns him, however loosely, with a broad movement among poets who followed after the poets of so-called “High Modernism.” Poets like Snyder, Duncan, Creeley, and Levertov “self-consciously revolt[ed] against the poetics of high modernism” (Altieri, *Enlarging* i), seeking to “[shatter] . . . the hermetically sealed autotelic poem” in order to “[break] open to the physical moment—the literal, the temporal, the immediate” (Breslin 59). Along with other poets of his generation, this was a revolt designed to “ground [poetry] in a sharply observed physical present” (59) in order to recover “religious and sacramental aspects of secular experience” (Altieri, *Enlarging* 15). While other poets sought to return poetry to “the *kinetics* of the thing” (Olson 16), Bringhurst likewise sought new poetic forms—most notably polyphonic poetry—which are better capable, he believes, than single-voiced poetry of expressing the interrelation of all things.

gives me the lumber for the poems, but the lumber does not generate the shape.  
(*Pieces* 99-100)

Whatever the reasons for his choices, the features of Bringhurst's poetry have earned it the reputation for difficulty,<sup>16</sup> erudition, and allusiveness that differentiates it from some other contemporary North American poetry. Though Bringhurst is respectful of his contemporaries, he determinedly aligns his writing with the "intellectual ancestors" (Dickinson 41) that he claims from among the "classical Greek, classical Sanskrit, Anglo-Saxon and classical Chinese" cultures (*Story* 421).<sup>17</sup> This may have further marginalized him by "limiting public understanding of his work" (Dickinson 4) and leading to his neglect by scholars. Wood and Dickinson observe that, "in displaying little of himself to readers, Bringhurst's poetic style strays far from contemporary fashion, and his experimental work shares virtually nothing with the modes adopted by others in the vanguard. Yet Bringhurst's concern has seldom been popularity" (4). Like Stevens, when and where Bringhurst has chosen to stand apart from the crowd, he seems to have done so intentionally, for purposes of his own.

The numerous biographical and intellectual correspondences between Bringhurst's and Stevens' life experiences suggest some reasons why there may have been a natural affinity

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<sup>16</sup> For an example, John Whatley describes Bringhurst as an "intellectual poet with a stubborn and erudite sense of history." His poetry is "allusive" and "difficult" and "unravelling the network of its references. . . is a challenge." Bringhurst's poetry "is not at first obvious" (108).

<sup>17</sup> Among these "intellectual ancestors" are philosophers and religious figures such as the eleventh-century AD Japanese Buddhist monk Dogen and the pre-Socratic philosophers of Greece. In his poetry, Bringhurst has also frequently worn the mask of historical or mythological figures, such as Petrarch, who lived during the Italian Renaissance, in "The Stonecutter's Horses" (1979) or the person of Moses in his long poem "Deuteronomy" (1974)

between the two poets. There is also some evidence that their mutual experiences of the marginal or liminal may have infiltrated the way that both Stevens and Bringham write about and describe poetry. Both Stevens and Bringham sometimes describe poetry as the attempt to express the a-linguistic experience beyond the margins of human speech where poetry is a gesture towards the unsayable. Stevens sometimes describes poetry as a gesture towards an a-linguistic *something*. In one poem, he describes this as a “skreaking and skrittering residuum” (CPP 129), vaguely onomatopoeic words which hint at non-linguistic—yet still meaningful—utterance. This is Stevens’ song “[b]eyond the last thought” (476) that remains after language has failed. Poetry, even the ultimate poem, is unable to describe this ineffable “residual” reality; it remains “Notes *Toward A Supreme Fiction*,” not that fiction itself, “the fitful tracing of a portal” (74) that gestures to the non-articulable in the perceived world. As Stevens suggests in his opaque “Anecdote of the Jar” (1923), a poem is both a product of the poet’s seeing and correspondent ordering of what he or she sees *as well as* the trace of the poet’s encounter with reality that “exposes the artificiality of any given perspective” (Leggett 205). David Gilcrest has attributed this in part to Stevens’ participation in a “hermeneutical poetics in ‘modern’ American poetry” (92), a poetics that is fundamentally resistant to interpretational closure, a rhetorical practice which “retains an ambition toward some kind of knowledge” while simultaneously questioning whether certain knowledge is accessible (96). Gilcrest claims that this hermeneutics characterizes the poetics of poets like Stevens, Frost, Moore and Bishop. In contrast to the certainty in Pound’s or Eliot’s later poetry, Stevens frequently “questions [the] ability to perceive reality independent of the shaping and distorting lenses of desire” (87). Certainly, Gilcrest’s reading suggests some insightful possibilities for understanding some of Stevens’ vacillations and linguistic tentativeness. “The Idea of Order at Key West” (1936), for example, demonstrates

his unwillingness to claim that there is a correspondence between his understanding of the world, the representation of that understanding in the poem, and the symbol latent in the physical world to which the poem alludes. The poem's equivocation and its final syntactic uncertainty—the final stanza, which contains no verb, ends in an “extended apostrophe” (Carroll 77)—shows Stevens' difficulty or unwillingness to move toward a final coherence. As this study will show, this feature of Stevens' poetics necessarily affects the degree of authority which Stevens ascribes to poetry. At best, the poem can point readers toward broader realities beyond the borders of regular human experience which readers must experience for themselves.

Bringhurst's beliefs about poetry distinguish his position from that of Stevens, suggesting some possible similarities between Bringhurst and elements of the certainty of the exegetical tradition of North American poetry, which emphasizes certainty and the correspondence between poem and reality. Bringhurst's poetry and prose agree with Stevens' notion that poetry gestures toward something extra-linguistic and beyond the mundane world of contemporary culture. However, Bringhurst also maintains that poetry is a foundational property of being itself. Human poetry is understandable as part of “the underlying context of the poetry of what-is” (*Everywhere* 10)—a term used frequently by Bringhurst to describe the completeness of the totality of all being. In addition to sentient life and non-sentient matter, what-is also consists of that which is not physically present, including “what is happening / right now and what has happened here / before” (Bringhurst “Stopping By” 146). Poetry is a part of what-is. Indeed, while hinting that human poetry is not the only kind of poetry (*Everywhere* 10), Bringhurst claims poetry is a “constituent or property of being” that “must be made as well as found” (10). While not every poem expresses this poetry of what-is, Bringhurst's poetry and prose insists that there exists the possibility that a poem *may* achieve this. As such, the poet who is “free . . . from the itch to

manipulation” may be able to experience and represent a kind of pre- or sub-cognitive access to knowledge which has been “freed from the agenda of possession and control” (15, 17). If a poet is able to “answer” the poetry present in being, he or she may produce a poem which “is the trace of the poet’s *joining in knowing*” (18, emphasis in original), which has but one purpose or use: “to honor being . . . – and maybe to honor nonbeing as well – by allowing others to join in that knowing” (*Everywhere* 18). For Bringhurst, then, a true poem is one in which “the words they contain have been turned momentarily into something *outside* language. . . so they can be given . . . and they must be given, because only then can they turn, on the other side of silence, back into words” (*Calling* 11). Perhaps as a consequence of his belief in this possibility, Bringhurst’s speakers tend to assume a much more confident and authoritative voice than do those in Stevens’ poetry. Bringhurst’s occasionally didactic tone seems to be rooted in his conviction that the properly attentive poet might produce poetry that accurately expresses and participates in knowledges and wisdoms. Like the prophets of the Jeremiad tradition, they seemingly speak back into culture about the nature of what-is, the ineffable substrata of existence. For Bringhurst, this is more likely for those living in the epistemological systems of “pagan societies,” cultures beyond the margins of industrialized civilization where people believe that humans “belong to the world” instead of the other way around (*Tree* 40).

Despite differences in their beliefs about the limits of poetic speech and poetic authority, there are remarkable similarities in Stevens’ and Bringhurst’s poetics that lend great power and prescience to both poets’ bodies of work. These similarities are found in the characteristics of their poetics as well as in the vision for the role of poets and poetry as a means of enabling participatory experience in the world. The power of each poet’s work is buttressed by their shared convictions about the critical role that poetry, among the other arts, can play in helping

the individual to live rightly. The confidence, certainty, and didacticism in some of their poetry harmonizes with the beautiful often extended lyricism. Such poetics are almost infinitely compelling in their juxtapositions.

#### **IV. Chapter Outlines**

Following this introduction, I will examine in the second chapter the influence of Stevens' writing on the development of Bringhurst's poetic style and voice, arguing that the evolution of Bringhurst's poetry follows, in part, in the pattern of the evolution of Stevens' own poetry. Bringhurst's poetry develops from an early beginning in a poetic play that imitates and parodies Stevens' style in *Harmonium* in a manner that is unseen in Bringhurst's later poetry. Through powerful poems such as "Hachadura," Bringhurst establishes his independence from Stevens' tutelage and also demonstrates the maturity of his own poetic voice. This chapter will also examine how editorial decisions, including decisions related to which poems from among his early poetry to include in later collections such as *Bergschrund* (1975) or *The Beauty of the Weapons* (1982), effectively conceal the breadth and depth of Bringhurst's debt to Stevens, thereby establishing Bringhurst as an independent entity in a far corner of the field of poetry. To prove this point, the first chapter draws heavily on the poetry of Bringhurst's first volumes. From *Cadastre* (1973), I examine Bringhurst's engagement with Stevens' poetry and poetics in "Three Ways of Looking for the Northwest Passage in the Shipyards of Bristol and Rouen" (1973) and "Four Glyphs" (1973). A comparison of Bringhurst's "Hachadura" (1975) and Stevens' "Le Monocle de Mon Oncle" (1918) shows how Bringhurst distances himself from Stevens and seeks to go in his own direction while continuing to apply the poetic lessons he learned from Stevens. After examining this act of poetic self-definition, this chapter will read Bringhurst's "Anecdote of the Squid" together with Stevens' "Anecdote of the Jar" (1919), showing how these poems

function as moments of self-definition for both poets. This chapter will also offer examinations of “Some Ciphers” (1974) together with Stevens’ “Crude Foyer” (1947) and portions of Stevens’ “An Ordinary Evening in New Haven” (1950), and “The Auroras of Autumn” (1950), showing how Bringhurst’s evolving poetry took up key characteristics of Stevens’ poetry, such as his conditional hypotheses, repetition, and negation in order to consider complex philosophical problems. A comparison of portions of Bringhurst’s *The Book of Silences* (1986) and “Ararat” (1976) with Stevens’ “Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird” (1923) and “Autumn Refrain” (1936) also demonstrates Bringhurst’s and Stevens’ mutual fascination with the liminal spaces at the threshold of sound and silence.

In the third chapter, I will return to Stevens’ poetry in order to consider the longing for the possibility of transcendence that persists throughout his work. I argue that Stevens draws on the Protestant tradition of his childhood in his own efforts to develop a new “supreme fiction,” a fiction simultaneously religious and transcendental. In particular, Stevens’ poetry incorporates the language and symbology of the sacramental into his new vision. The sacramental becomes the key by means of which individual participation with the material world is made possible. For the initiated, this sacramental experience brings about a kind of sanctification while the individual experiences the physical world as “something given to make whole” (*CPP* 24). Finally, Stevens’ sacramentalism informs his vision for a poetry expressing “the idiom of the innocent earth” (361), a poetry that reflects a belief in the possibility of a state of being defined by participation in a reality external to the self. Though much of Stevens’ poetry considers the question of transcendence and demonstrates his debt to his Protestant upbringing, this chapter will first examine “Sunday Morning” (1914) as an early example not only of Stevens’ critique of Christianity, but also of his hesitations regarding a pure naturalism. Next, I will argue that “The

Comedian as the Letter C” (1923), along with its earlier, unpublished precursor “The Journal of Crispin” (1921) and “The Man with the Blue Guitar” (1937), demonstrate the persistence of sacramental thinking even within Stevens’ most ironic and humanistic poetry. These poems are contrasted with some of the poetry of his Romantic forebears, Wordsworth and Keats, in order to illustrate some of Stevens’ unique applications of sacramentalism to his poetry. Finally, “On the Road Home” (1942) and “The Auroras of Autumn” (1950) demonstrate how the individual can, through participatory attention, experience place as a nexus of multiple realities, including a transcendent spiritual reality.

In the fourth chapter, I consider Bringhurst’s adaptation and incorporation of similar concepts of sacramentalism. Like Stevens, Bringhurst also uses sacramental symbology and metaphors to inscribe poetically what he believes is the possibility of experiencing participatory communion with the physical earth. Bringhurst certainly rejects the element of the Protestant belief system that asserts that the material world merely alludes to a greater spiritual and immaterial reality. Nevertheless, this chapter will show that sacramentalism is congenial to his purposes because of the belief’s roots in a pre-Modern, Pre-Enlightenment philosophy that emphasizes the interrelation of all things and the reciprocity between humans and the rest of the natural world that can be experienced as a kind of “wholeness.” Bringhurst’s hybrid sacramentalism allows the initiate who has cultivated “attention” to the physical, material elements of the natural world to be rewarded with the “awareness” of reality which exists as part of the physical world but is not limited to it. In Bringhurst’s sacramental worldview, the base of pure existence is the primal invitation to participation. Finally, this chapter will show that, like Stevens’ before him, sacramentalism informs Bringhurst’s poetic philosophy. For Bringhurst, human literature is a product of an honorific relationship between humanity and the poetry of

being. It is an expression of an underlying communion between humans, language, and the meaning which is integral to reality. Because they are exemplary of Bringhurst's conviction that experience and recognition of the fundamentally polyphonic nature of being is integral to the experience of "what-is," Bringhurst's polyphonic poetry—"New World Suite N°3" (1993), "Ursa Major" (2002), "Ursa Minor: Monologues and Choruses from *Ursa Major*" (2009) and "Conversations with a Toad" (1987)—provides the key texts for this chapter. Bringhurst's more recent "Stopping By" (2013) demonstrates his latest elaborations of his beliefs about the relationship between poetry and the physical world.

The fifth chapter offers a comparison of Stevens' and Bringhurst's revised sacramentalism. I argue that the two poets diverge in the manner in which they construe the potential ethical imperatives that result from their beliefs about the relationship existing between poetry and the physical world. Based on a reading of Stevens' prose works, "Imagination as Value" (1948), "Two or Three Ideas" (1951) as well as parts of "Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction" (1942), "Contrary Theses (II)" (1942), and "A Primitive Like An Orb" (1950), I argue that the fundamentally private nature of the sacramental experience which Stevens' poetry inscribes calls into question the comments he makes in his prose about poetry's cultural responsibilities. For Stevens, written poetry serves as an icon which gestures towards sacramental participation in what-is beyond the poem. It is not cognitively mediated and, as such, can make no demands that poetry address contemporary ills. By contrast, Bringhurst's prose and poetry demonstrate his belief that authority is granted to the poem by its integral relationship to "what-is." Based on this authority, the poet reclaims his or her right and even obligation to address societal ills. Bringhurst's argument that poetry is a gathering place of multiple times and places makes poetry a primarily communal experience, and also, in his

opinion, a means of seeking and speaking truth. It is perhaps a result of this belief that Bringhurst's poetry takes on moral and ethical tasks that Stevens' poetry does not.

The sixth chapter of the dissertation examines the ethical implications of Bringhurst's sacramental poetics. I argue that the communal nature of Bringhurst's poetics inspires a theme of mourning that is prevalent throughout Bringhurst's poetry. In Bringhurst's poetics, mourning becomes the appropriate response to colonialism in North America and, in particular, in response to its totalizing mistreatment of Indigenous people and of the physical environment. Through an examination of Bringhurst's two most recent polyphonic poems—"New World Suite N°3" (2005) and "Ursa Minor: *Monologues and Choruses from Ursa Major*," I demonstrate that Bringhurst attempts to give polyphonic poetry the ethical responsibility to elegize the officially disremembered and marginalized cultures of North America. However, this mourning becomes an attempt to (re)member the cultures of the past through the creation of a sepulchre of textual and performative witness, making the poem itself a means of sacramental experience of temporally or geographically distant cultures which are brought together in the polyphonic time and space.

The beginnings of this study are rooted in a happy accident, a moment of double-vision and discovery when the similarity and resonances between the writings of both Stevens and Bringhurst became clear. I was happy to find that others before me had noticed similar correspondences, though curious to find how little had been said of it. The work that follows is an effort at mapping that moment, to chart the territories of two poets whose lives and works are separated by time and space, but whose territories of concern and desire overlap. Like other cartographers, I am limited to the choice of one kind of projection in constructing my particular map, a projection which will necessarily emphasize some features of the two poets' corpuses

while minimizing others. As with any map, this one cannot pretend to adequately represent in a very limited, reductive two-dimensional space the fullness of the reality of that which the poetry considers. However, if this map, with its biases and pet studies, helps bring about moments of stereopsis that will help the reader find new ways of navigating and experiencing some of the themes that inhere in the rich poetry of these two authors, then it will be a successful map for those moments.

## Chapter Two

### “Together in different directions”: Stevens’ and Bringhurst’s Uncommon Kinship

In the fourth canto of “It Must Change” in Stevens’ “Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction” (1942), Stevens writes,

The partaker partakes of that which changes him.  
 The child that touches takes character from the thing,  
 The body, it touches. The captain and his men  
  
 Are one and the sailor and the sea are one.  
 Follow after, O my companion, my fellow, my self,  
 Sister and solace, brother and delight. (*CPP* 339)

The relationships of dependence, interdependence, and even unity that Stevens describes in this stanza might profitably describe the way that Bringhurst’s writing has gained from his informal apprenticeship to the writing of the older poet. The word—partaker—in Stevens’ poem has Biblical connotations directing the mind to the Christian rites of the sacrament and the spiritual transformation which is supposed to follow in the believer’s life after the ritual of communion. Read in terms of poetic influence, Bringhurst too “partakes of that which changes him” through his “communion” with Stevens’ poetry. His poetry demonstrates that Bringhurst has taken Stevens’ writing into his poetic imagination, making Stevens’ characteristic modes and patterns his own even as he asks some of Stevens’ questions and explores many of Stevens’ theories. In consequence, Bringhurst’s writing frequently reprises Stevens’ poetics.

In this chapter, I will examine the evolution of Bringhurst's engagement with Stevens' poetics as it is expressed in his poetry. Editorial decisions relating to the inclusion and exclusion of early poems from his later collections mean that much of Bringhurst's early and overt borrowing from and response to Stevens is no longer on display in later volumes. Nevertheless, this chapter will demonstrate that, in his early collection *Cadastral* (1973), Bringhurst experiments with the playful, lush style of Stevens' early poetry in *Harmonium* (1923), adopting elements of Stevens' syntax and diction and sometimes parodying Stevens' poetics. Bringhurst's early imitations lead to his powerful critique of Stevens' poetics in "Hachadura." In this stanza by stanza response to Stevens' "Le Monocle de Mon Oncle," Bringhurst establishes his independence from the older artist while also clearly articulating the direction of his poetic vision. Even so, the poetry which follows "Hachadura" shows Bringhurst taking up a number of concerns that are central to Stevens' poetry, exploring and questioning issues related to the meaning of place and being. Ultimately, Bringhurst does not fully disengage from Stevens' poetics; in the same way that Stevens' poetry moves away from an early exuberance to a later seriousness, Bringhurst's poetry turns away from its imitations of Stevens' earlier clowning and instead adopts expedient elements of the syntax and diction that are characteristic of the more meditative Stevens in *The Auroras of Autumn* and on. In the end, Bringhurst's poetry is representative of an ongoing dialogue between the poetry and poetics of the two poets.

### **I. Early Imitations**

In her review of the work, Marianne Moore praised the poetry of Stevens' first volume *Harmonium* (1923) for its "riot of gorgeousness" (qtd. in Surette 21). A glance at the volume's table of contents demonstrates the accuracy of Moore's analysis. Titles such as "Le Monocle de Mon Oncle," "Homunculus et La Belle Etoile" or "O, Florida, Venereal, Soil" quickly suggest

that there is a decidedly unrestrained quality to Stevens' language. One sees this exuberance in lines such as "Chieftain Iffucan of Azcan in caftan / Of tan with henna hackles, halt" from "Bantams in Pine Woods" (*CPP* 60) which demonstrate Stevens' tendency to call on alliteration and assonance to create an aural and visual extravaganza. Such opulence forms an architecture present in other examples in *Harmonium*. Consider the opening lines of "Of the Manner of Addressing Clouds":

Gloomy grammarians in golden gowns,

Meekly you keep the mortal rendezvous

Eliciting the still sustaining pomps

Of speech which are like music so profound

They seem an exaltation without sound. (*CPP* 55)

The alliterative excess, internal rhymes, and formal diction of the passage of these lines are not uncommon of Stevens' first volume. The playfulness and aesthetic excess of *Harmonium* are sharply contrasted with the ennui and despair of the poetry of his contemporaries that was published at around the same time, such as T.S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* (1922), which was published nine months prior to Stevens' *Harmonium*. These differences earned Stevens' work a reputation for "trivial hedonism" (Hass *Light* 8).

Bringhurst's kinship with Stevens is not necessarily obvious upon first inspection of his *Selected Poems* (2009). Where Stevens is extravagant, Bringhurst is economical with his words. In "A Quadratic Equation" (1975), a poem wherein he is perhaps at his most efficient, Bringhurst eschews all verbs, merely suggesting metaphorical connection through the use of colons

connecting each noun with a corresponding noun phrase. Bringhurst's spare writing clearly does not indulge in the kind of literary glee that characterizes some of Stevens'. However great the distance between the two poets might seem to be at first glance, a wealth of evidence indicates that Stevens' influence on Bringhurst's poetry is both powerful and pervasive. There are poems among Bringhurst's earlier volumes which mimic the clowning sound play that is prevalent in Stevens' earlier writing in *Harmonium*, replicating Stevens' diction by paying particular attention to alliteration. Bringhurst entitles one poem in *Cadastre* (1973) "Three Ways of Looking for the Northwest Passage in the Shipyards of Bristol and Rouen" a title which obviously references Stevens' "Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird." The first section, "I: The Poet as Chef de Cuisine" begins with the lines "Polyarchitectonical metamellifluphors / sooth the savage beast / for hours or years with the strange taste / of marled multitudinous flavors" (*Cadastre* 56). The verbosity and grandiloquence of Bringhurst's language in this poem impersonate Stevens' language in poems such as "The Comedian as the Letter C" (1923). Consider, for example, lines from the first section of "The Comedian": "What word split up in cllickering syllables / And storming under multitudinous tones / Was name for this short-shanks in all that brunt? / Crispin was washed away by magnitude" (*CPP* 22). In passages like this, Bringhurst's early poetry clearly borrows from Stevens' early diction and syntax, as well as his propensity to make up words—such as "metamellifluphors"—for their sounds and aural connotations.

From these exercises in imitation, Bringhurst's "Three Ways of Looking for the Northwest Passage in the Shipyard of Bristol and Rouen" moves towards a more overt parody of Stevens' poetics. Bringhurst entitles the second section of "Three Ways," "II: Exemplum: The Poet as Chickenfarmer." In this section, Bringhurst mocks Stevens' tendency towards aphorism

through parody of Stevens' "Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird" (1923). The word "Chickenfarmer" replaces the "minimalist quiet of Oriental landscape painting brushed with haiku delicacy" (Lincoln 211) that is present in Stevens' poem with the mundane, dirty world of the farmyard. The title's metaphor—"The Poet as Chickenfarmer"—with its corresponding image of chickens pecking and scratching at the ground, resists the reader's search for poetic profundity within the poet's "scratchings." Indeed, this section of Bringhurst's poem "Three Ways of Looking" lampoons Stevens' tendency toward aphorism and innuendo, rejecting Stevens' evocative generalizing statements in "Thirteen Ways" as well as the "innuendoes [of] what is left out (the silence just after the whistling)" (Vendler, *Extended* 75). A stanza in Stevens' "Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird" such as "The blackbird whirled in the autumn winds / It was a small part of the pantomime" (*CPP* 75) suggests and alludes to the possibility that a deeper meaning might be present without offering definition. What pantomime? How is the blackbird a part? Is there a relationship between this stanza's "pantomime" and the larger pantomime of the poem itself? Though the poet does not define their meanings, Stevens' poem is pregnant with metaphorical and symbolic possibility. Contrast Stevens' suggestive stanza with the second stanza of "II: Exemplum: The Poet as Chickenfarmer," which calls on Stevens' "The Man on the Dump" (1942). In contrast to the provocative final line of Stevens' poem – "Where was it one first heard of the truth? The the." (*CPP* 280) – which insists on profundity by calling attention to questions about the singularity of truth that is indicated by the definite article—Bringhurst's final lines abruptly foreclose on questions of depth or magnitude and mock any attempts at seriousness. Without further elaboration, Bringhurst writes simply, "The sun comes up. / It is round!" (*Cadastral* 57). The stanza makes its observations without seeking truth in the contemplation of the physical world—whether the physical is represented by

a garbage dump or a rising sun. Bringhurst's round sun rises and this is the end of the matter. Bringhurst continues his parody of Stevens' poetics in the final stanza of the section. Here, he writes, "Windmills turn slowly overhead. / The !" (57). The unattached definite article mocks the contemplation of the human capacity for declaration and belief implied in Stevens' "The Man on the Dump." Truth is replaced with the bare fact of the physical windmills turning. This parodic poem gestures towards the more nuanced and fully-developed critiques of Stevens' poetry that will soon emerge within Bringhurst's poetry.

Other poems in Bringhurst's early volumes use Stevens' patterns without the satirical irony that characterizes his imitation of Stevens in the previously mentioned poem. The final section of "Four Glyphs" (1973) bears a striking resemblance to writing in Stevens' early volumes. The first lines of Bringhurst's "Four Glyphs: IV" are "Tezcatlipoca at Tula, the Toltec / Smoking Mirror . . ." (*Cadastre* 22). The opening lines of Bringhurst's work echo lines from "Bantams Among Pinewoods" (1923): "Chieftain Iffucan of Azcan in caftan / Of tan with henna hackles, halt!" (*CPP* 60). The manner in which Bringhurst borrows exotic proper names for poetic effect mirrors Stevens' diction. Bringhurst follows Stevens in using the exotic to catch the reader's eye and ear. The unusual (and imperfect) trochaic metre intensifies the sense of strangeness that is inaugurated with the encounter with the exotic names that open the poem. This is balanced, however, by the comedic effect of the alliteration in the opening lines. Bringhurst's marked attention to alliteration echoes Stevens' attention to alliteration not only in "Bantams in Pine-Woods" but also in much of his other early poetry.

While clearly imitating Stevens' "Bantams in Pine Woods," the poem is also evidence of Bringhurst's own maturing poetics. In contrast to "Three Ways," "Four Glyphs" draws from Stevens without satirizing his style. Where Stevens invents names which evoke Central

American places and possibilities without actually referring to any existing in reality, “Four Glyphs” directly borrows *personae* and imagery from the mythology of pre-contact Central American civilization, hinting at the concern with non-Western cultures that Bringhurst’s poetry will increasingly demonstrate. Furthermore, in contrast to the levity and mockery of “Three Ways,” Bringhurst’s poem deviates from the playfulness and wit that characterizes the remainder of Stevens’ poem. The tone of “Four Glyphs” is, overall, much more serious than Stevens’ poem. The seriousness of the poem alludes to Bringhurst’s vision of the violence of the natural realm, a vision that perhaps marks Robinson Jeffers’ influence on Bringhurst. These traits foreshadow a sense of peril and danger that appears with more frequency in the contexts of Bringhurst’s later poems.

Bringhurst’s work demonstrates other ways in which he borrows from Stevens’ writing in addition to the sound play of “Four Glyphs.” A cursory glance at the table of contents of *Cadastre* shows a bevy of Stevensesque titles. Bringhurst unabashedly lifts titles directly from Stevens, such as “Sunday Morning,” though, as the introduction has discussed, Bringhurst attributes this borrowing more to the fact of the poem’s inception than his debt to Stevens. Bringhurst obviously imitates Stevens’ “Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird” in his title “Three Ways of Looking for the Northwest Passage in the Shipyards of Bristol and Rouen.” Many more titles in Bringhurst’s *oeuvre* more covertly summon up Stevens’ titles. Bringhurst’s “Study for an Ecumenical Window” borrows from similar titles in Stevens’ body of writing, such as Stevens’ “Study of Two Pears” or “Study of Images I” and “Study of Images II.” Similarly, Bringhurst’s “Anecdote of the Squid” (1975), an important poem within Bringhurst’s poetry for its attempt at artistic self-portraiture—the “tongue-in-cheek description of the cephalopod-as-writer” (Wood 108)—calls to mind the multiple times that Stevens engages the word anecdote in

titles of his own poems. Stevens uses the word anecdote in the titles of five poems included in *Harmonium*: “Earthy Anecdote”; “Anecdote of Men by the Thousand”; “Anecdote of Canna”; “Anecdote of the Prince of Peacocks”; “Anecdote of the Jar.” He chose not to collect a poem written in 1919 or 1920 and called “Anecdote of the Abnormal” (*CPP* 550). Not infrequently, Stevens’ “Anecdotes” have also been concerned with the nature and role of the writer or poetry.

For example, Steven’s “Anecdote of the Jar” employs an inanimate object in order to explore the relationship between the mind, aesthetics and external reality. The poem is a fable, a very old literary form characterized by its use of anthropomorphism and epigram that has been used for purposes of instruction and delight. Though the jar in Stevens’ “Anecdote” does not verbalize, its actions suggest a kind of anthropomorphism that is used to instruct the reader on the relationship between aesthetics and the external reality of the American place. The jar’s actions are “imperial, sovereign, all-powerful” (Miller, “Connecticut (and Denmark)” 37), in the same way that the American settlement of the North American continent was believed to be imperial, sovereign and all-powerful. Mirroring this human pattern of settlement, the jar “[takes] dominion everywhere” (*CPP* 60), but the kind and degree of the jar’s mastery is suspect. The “slovenly wilderness/ . . . rose up to it,” and is “no longer wild,” but neither is it particularly orderly. It “sprawled around” (*CPP* 60). The order that the jar seemingly imposes is limited and ultimately unsatisfactory. It is sterile; it “[does] not give of bird or bush” (Haglund 130). In the end, “Anecdote of the Jar” traces Stevens’ uncertainty about aesthetic mastery over the external world and the possibility of limning the relationship between word and place.

This uncertainty about writing the American place is also related to Stevens’ struggle as an American poet to navigate his own European poetic inheritance. Stevens indicates this struggle by the poem’s clear references to Keats’s “Ode on a Grecian Urn” (1819). Stevens’ jar

is pointedly contrasted with Keats's Grecian urn. Keats's urn is covered with a variety of images, a "leaf-fring'd legend haunts about" its shape (Quiller-Couch, n.p.); Stevens' jar is "gray and bare." Keats's poem protests that the urn "canst thus express / A flowery tale more sweetly than our rhyme," but the "heard melodies" of the ode declare otherwise. The ode's "serenely purposive use of matched stanzas drawn from sonnet practice" (Vendler, *Words* 45) move confidently through their description of the scenes on the urn, neatly detailing its lessons learned. By contrast, Stevens' bare urn fails to either express the nature of the slovenly Tennessean wilderness or to take part in it. Stevens' deliberate failure in "Anecdote of the Jar" to discuss the American place in Keatsian style provides Stevens with the opportunity of "discussing the predicament of the American artist, who cannot feel confidently the possessor, as Keats felt, of the Western cultural tradition" (Vendler, *Words* 45). Stevens uses the fable to instruct on the difficulty of seeking "a native American language that will not take the wild out of the wilderness" (46).

Bringhurst follows Stevens by using the word "anecdote" as a means of naming a poem—"Anecdote of the Squid"—which is identifiable as a fable. Like the fable of "Anecdote of the Jar," Bringhurst uses his own fable to instruct his readers on the limits and purposes of aesthetic production. Through the squid, Bringhurst follows Stevens in excusing poetry and the poet from the demands of participation in political action (Longenbach, *Plain* 152). Stevens' poem "Mozart, 1935" (1936), which compares the poet to a pianist, declares his intention to "Play the present" by faithfully obeying the demands of his vocation as a poet:

If they throw stones upon the roof

While you practice arpeggios,

It is because they carry down the stairs

A body in rags.

Be seated at the piano. (*CPP* 107)

For Stevens, the poet best engages with contemporary reality by being “[t]he voice” of the moment and obeying the demand to “[s]trike the piercing chord” (107). Similarly, Bringhurst asserts that the poet’s allegiance must be to his craft: “The squid knows too that the use / of pen and ink is neither recording / impressions nor signing his name / to forms and petitions” (*SP* 23). Bringhurst contrasts this negative example of poetry’s purpose with the next stanzas,

But the squid may be said,

for instance, to transcribe

his silence into the space

between seafloor and wave,

or to invoke an unspoken

word, whose muscular

nonpronunciation the squid

alone is known to have mastered. (23-4)

In contrast to busy involvement in political activism, the poet-as-squid is a student and scribe of silence and of esoteric knowledge, speaking a language few know and which only he has mastered. The squid’s preoccupation with silence and arcane knowledge determines the nature of

his utterance. The squid leaves “artifacts” (24), suggesting their worth may go unnoticed in the present, but may be recognized as valuable in the future. In the end, Bringhurst speaks through the fable of “Anecdote of the Squid” to argue for a poetry that answers not to contemporary political agendas but to the past and the future *via* its concern with wisdom and knowledge and the “elemental matrix” of the natural world (Higgins 63). The product of this faithfulness is the “coagulating shadow” capable of instruction through their “desperate attempts at echolocation,” of hearing the voice of “being calling out to itself in the hope that being is listening” (*Calling* 11, 12). In doing so, “Anecdote of the Squid” is an *ars poetica*, a companion to Bringhurst’s statement that, “as a creature of the edges, and not of the collapsing centre” of colonial America, “[he has] made it [his] business not to parody or portray the central insanities of that world . . . but simple to find what [he] could salvage and preserve, and to pack it out into another, coterminous world” (“Breathing” 10).

Bringhurst’s “Anecdote of the Squid” is also, like Stevens’ “Anecdote of the Jar,” an effort to grapple with poetic tradition. But, in contrast to Stevens’ work to distance or differentiate himself from the European literary heritage represented in Keats’s poem, “Anecdote of the Squid” illustrates Bringhurst’s rejection of personal or confessional writing. The poem warns readers to beware the difference between the squid and its “coagulating shadows,” cautioning them to remember that these “artifacts,” as he metaphorizes poetry, should not be mistaken “for /portraiture, or / for self-portraiture” (*SP* 24). Bringhurst came of age during the years of confessional poetry in the United States, but his writing is most certainly not confessional. He states,

It seems to me . . . that my personal history has, and ought to have, rather little to do with my writing. Many of my contemporaries prefer to let the events of their

lives set the shape of their poems. But myth, as opposed to ‘mere literature,’ never works in this way. . . . I transpose my own life into the myths and the myths into my own life. (*Pieces* 100).

Instead of confessional poetry, Bringhurst allies himself with poets who emphasize technique and craft. These poets include Robinson Jeffers, Marianne Moore and Ezra Pound, the last of whom Bringhurst acknowledges as influential in his own poetic development (105). It is noteworthy that each of these older poets consciously experimented with metre, a feature of their poetics which sets them apart from their contemporaries. Both Pound and Jeffers looked to poetic metres that were common in archaic forms of poetry as alternatives to the metres that had become associated with “romantic sentiment, poetic diction, and smooth musicality” (Nadel 41). Pound’s “The Seafarer,” for example, is his version of the Anglo-Saxon poem (45). Similarly, Jeffers experimented with the metrical forms characteristic of archaic verse forms. Though he was not attempting a naïve revival of the principles of Anglo-Saxon prosody—or an imitation of the diction of Anglo-Saxon verse like Pound’s imitation in “The Seafarer” (Cates 122)—Jeffers draws on the principles of “purely accentual meter” and adapted “classical quantitative measures to English rhythm” that were integral in Latin, Greek and Anglo-Saxon poetry (119). Jeffers’ poem “Birds” (1924), for example, follows the pattern of Anglo-Saxon verse with its mid-line caesura and pairs of alliteratively-joined, stressed syllables (120): “Under my window around the stone corners; nothing gracefuller, nothing / Nimbler in the wind. Westward the wave-gleaners, / The old gray sea-going gulls are gathered together, the northwest wind wakening / Their wings to the wild spirals of the wind-dance” (Jeffers, *Vol. 2* 108). Similarly, Bringhurst’s “Anecdote” uses alliteration to reinforce the poem’s metre. In the third and fourth line of “Anecdote of the Squid,” Bringhurst uses alliteration to describe the squid’s “pen” as that “which serves / the

squid as his skeleton” (*SP* 23), ending in a dactylic cadence that was typically found near the ends of the lines and half-lines of traditional oral epics (Foley 84).

Furthermore, Bringhurst clearly imitates Marianne Moore’s style and tone as well as her close observation and admiration of the natural world. Each poet employs images, similes and metaphors which both surprise and gratify the reader. Bringhurst’s careful consideration of the squid is not unlike Moore’s detailed meditation on the anteater in “The Pangolin” (1936). Like Moore, Bringhurst joins disparate parts of nature in the world of the poem. “The Pangolin,” like “Anecdote of the Squid,” “merges inner values and outer surfaces with playful ingenuity and yet serious intent” (Molesworth 118). In the same way that Moore corrects and expands on her own descriptions of the pangolin—“the closing earridge—/ or bare ear”—Bringhurst also adds on to and improves his description of the squid: “The squid is a raised finger or / an opposed thumb”; it is “a short-beaked / bird who has eaten his single wing, or impaled / himself on his feather” (*SP* 23). More importantly, Bringhurst follows Moore in turning to the animal world in order to explore artistic identity. The pangolin is a “night miniature artist-/engineer,” an identity which allows the creature to master his environment (Molesworth 116). Moore compares the pangolin’s ability to man’s efforts to master his environment through language: “man, the self, the being / we call human, writing- / master to this world” (117). For Moore, man’s identity as “writing-/master” provides him protection in the same way that the pangolin’s scales serve to protect the animal. It is the means by which he survives life, or, as Bringhurst would have it, “grows / transparent and withdraws” when necessary. As Bringhurst’s references to the poetry and poetics of Moore, Jeffers, and Pound demonstrate, poetic lineage is an important part of “Anecdote of the Squid” in the same way that it is a critical part of Stevens’ “Anecdote of the Jar.” Bringhurst overlays the techniques of various artists—the rhythms and appeal to archaic forms of Jeffers

and Pound, the descriptive subtlety of Marianne Moore, the careful fable of Stevens—merging and modernizing them in an act of poetic self-definition.

As an artistic purpose statement, “Anecdote of the Squid” declares Bringhurst’s discipleship to wisdom and literature. In contrast to noisy activism, Bringhurst is declaring his commitment to mastering the “muscular / nonpronunciation” of the “unspoken / word” (*SP* 24). However, the poem also makes the argument that the unspoken is also related to literature—the silence is “transcribed,” suggesting it may be readable in some manner. Furthermore, if taken for literary “self-portraiture” (24) “Anecdote of the Squid” suggests that it is literature which provides the framework for Bringhurst’s life. The squid is described as “a carnivorous pocket / containing a pen, which serves / the squid as his skeleton” (23). Pen and ink are skeleton, weapon, and means of escape. As self-portraiture, “Anecdote of the Squid” expresses a commitment to literature as life. In this definitive poem among Bringhurst’s body of work, his inheritance from Stevens plays an important part in bringing the younger author to this declaration of allegiance. From Bringhurst’s early impressions of the bright surface elements of Stevens’ poetry, to Bringhurst’s imitation of form and genre to declare the purpose of his poetry, Bringhurst had the benefit of Stevens’ poetics to help chart his course.

## **II. Bringhurst’s Connecticut Uncle**

Editorial decisions about which of Bringhurst’s early poems would be included in later collections mean that some of the poems that directly consider Stevens’ work, such as “Three Ways of Looking for the Northwest Passage in the Shipyards of Bristol and Rouen” no longer

appeared in Bringhurst's collections after *Cadastral*.<sup>18</sup> Subsequent revisions to other early poems eliminate critical traces of Bringhurst's overt imitation of Stevens' style in that poem. Consider, for example, the editorial history of "Four Glyphs." After appearing in *Bergschrund* (1975), "Four Glyphs" failed to appear in any subsequent collections of Bringhurst's poetry until 2009 when the third section of the original poem reappeared in Bringhurst's *Selected Poems* as "One Glyph." When the third section of "Four Glyphs" is published apart from the other three sections of the poem among which it was originally placed, the telling details which place "Four Glyphs: III" in the context of the poem's general consideration of Central American landscape, mythology and history are lost, the imagistic qualities of the poem are emphasized, and the poem is made more universal by its lack of specificity, all characteristics which some of Bringhurst's later work tends to feature. Most importantly for the purpose of this study, by eliminating the first, second, and fourth section from his *Selected Poems*, Bringhurst's early and very pointed borrowing from Stevens is concealed. "One Glyph" becomes a palimpsest. This brief editorial history of "One Glyph" is a type of synecdoche of Bringhurst's poetic evolution. In addition to indicating the evolution and maturation of Bringhurst's voice, editorial changes like those which were effected in "Four Glyphs" strategically differentiate and separate Bringhurst from Stevens.

In addition to the distance created by these editorial decisions, Bringhurst makes direct statements in both poetry and prose about Stevens which arguably represent further attempts to increase the perceived distance between the two poets. The most important of these are related to the poem "Hachadura." "Hachadura" is a section by section response to Stevens' "Le Monocle de Mon Oncle." Bringhurst engages with "Le Monocle" in "Hachadura," quoting from the poem,

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<sup>18</sup> "Notes To The Reader," a poem in three parts which both imitates and challenges Stevens' "Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction," makes its sole appearance in *Bergschrund*.

taking up themes from Stevens' poem, answering questions that Stevens' poem asks, and, generally, forcing a dialogue in "Hachadura" with the poetry of the older poet. It is clear that Bringhurst "partakes" of Stevens in the development of his poetics and aesthetics, but, while the influence of Stevens' work on Bringhurst can be clearly observed, Bringhurst takes pains to differentiate himself from Stevens. Such differentiation is as important to note as are the poets' similarities.

"Hachadura" was first published in *Poetry* in 1975 and was collected shortly thereafter in *Bergschrund*. Until *The Beauty of the Weapons* was published in 1982, the poem was unaccompanied by any comments on its form or contents by Bringhurst. Supposedly responding to the ongoing urgings of his editor, whom Bringhurst claimed "prodded [him] relentlessly to introduce it" (*Beauty* 72), Bringhurst wrote the brief statement which precedes the poem in *The Beauty of the Weapons*. The introduction explains the provenance of the poem's title in certain "tonal and temporal affiliations," at least in Bringhurst's mind, between the poem and the village of La Hachadura in a "deforested, sunleached" land in the "ruined landscape" of El Salvador (72), a description which certainly sets the stage for some of the poem's harsher images and metaphors. Bringhurst's comments identify and elaborate, however minimally, the poem's themes, as he would see them, of negation, of home and the profound loss of home, of the relationship, in Bringhurst's words, between "life and non-life, . . . and the theme of the death without and within us" (72). Bringhurst's comments also briefly address the relationship between "Hachadura" and Stevens' "Le Monocle de Mon Oncle." He writes,

Many of the motives, though none of the themes, are filched from a very different and apparently joyful work by Wallace Stevens. The purpose of this theft, if it was not mere covetousness and venality, was, I suppose, to

test the structural analogy to music – for the poem has, if I am not mistaken, no narrative, no program, any more than Bartok’s First Piano Concerto or one of John Lewis’s jazz fugues has a program. It is a chaconne for solo intelligence in twelve fragments.

What, nevertheless, it is fair to ask, does the ghost of Wallace Stevens, in his comfortable apartments, have to do with the bitter fate of human beings in a village in Ahuachapán? *Lend no part to any humanity that suffuses / you in its own light*, he counselled himself one day. And on the same page, addressing the words themselves and the universe:

*Shine alone, shine nakedly shine like bronze,*

*that reflects neither my face nor any inner part*

*of my being, shine like fire, that mirrors nothing. (73)*

In the same way that Bringhurst’s later poetry will mimic Stevens’ pattern of uncertainty in his own poetry, as this chapter will examine below, he also prevaricates in his notes about the relationship between “Le Monocle” and “Hachadura.” Though Bringhurst’s early poetry shares affinities with Stevens, at the time that “Hachadura” was first published in 1975, critical consensus identified Stevens as “a poet of surfaces, cleverness, and opacity” (Surette 8). Misunderstood as a secular humanist, Stevens would have hardly seemed the proper model for a poet committed to the pursuit of wisdom and its application to ethics. Whether or not Bringhurst’s reading of Stevens was influenced by this critical consensus, “Hachadura” seems to respond almost solely to Stevens at his most decadent, playful, and ironic, but this does not necessarily reflect Stevens’ work in “Le Monocle.” Bringhurst’s misunderstanding is suggested

in his description of “Le Monocle” as an “apparently joyful” poem. There is little in the poem that lends credence to this reading—beginning with the irony and grief of the first stanza, “Le Monocle” continues in consideration of themes of mourning and the contemplation of death. Indeed, Vendler referred to it as a poem of unrepressed sadness (*Extended* 58). Certainly, Bringhurst’s reading in “Hachadura” does not pursue an understanding of the earthy transcendence and struggles with belief of the Stevens of *Auroras of Autumn* (1950) or *The Rock* (1954). This moment of reading and misreading, of critique and misunderstanding, illuminates much of the relationship between the poets’ different philosophies and aesthetics of poetry.

Bringhurst’s unelaborated statement in his prefatory notes that “Hachadura” shares motives with “Le Monocle” perhaps reveals more about his own preoccupation and inclinations than it does about Stevens’ work. Indeed, Stevens’ motives are unclear. He engaged in no conversation about “Le Monocle” in any of his personal correspondence except the bland explanation of the meaning of the title as “a certain point of view” (*LWS* 251). Consequently, the poem itself is the only source for divining his motives. However, the varieties of the poem’s arguments, tropes and tones render it difficult to definitively interpret, as the lack of critical consensus about the poem’s meaning suggests. Though most critics agree that the poem is mournful and elegiac in some of its features—certainly Bringhurst seems to be one of the few to find it “apparently joyful”—the source of this grief remains open for debate. Some critics have attributed the poem, replete with sadness and irony, to Stevens’ failed marriage (Carroll 42, Vendler, *Words* 6), but this biographical reading remains ultimately speculative since Stevens did not discuss the difficulties that seem to have been a part of his marriage, “never explaining or apologizing for his wife’s behaviour” (Vendler, “Made-up” n.p.). Others have argued that “Le Monocle” is a product of Stevens’ fear about “a gradual decline of his creative drive” (Carroll

41). Ultimately, the reader is at the mercy of the sharp irony that is present in Stevens' writing throughout his career (*Extended* 55). Certainly, it is as difficult to discover any definitive traces of Stevens in this poem as it is to find the physical squid in a watery cloud of ink. Since Stevens' motives are not precisely articulated, Bringhurst's assessment of them in "Hachadura" may be more illuminating of Bringhurst's motives than of Stevens'. The remainder of the prefatory note continues to suggest Bringhurst's possible mis-reading or, possibly, his intentional misdirection. *If* "Hachadura" is more than the product of a jealousy-motivated theft, *if* Bringhurst is correct in seeing a relationship between the poem and music, *if* Bringhurst is right in identifying no narrative, no program, *if* all of these things are true, then it is "a chaconne for solo intelligence in twelve fragments" (*Beauty* 73). But Bringhurst does not answer these questions, leaving the nature of the relationship between the two poems open to question. Bringhurst's comments—whether motivated by canny dissimulation or misreading—continue his pattern of directing his reader to the "coagulating shadows" of the poems themselves.

If themes are indication of authorial motive, it is certainly true that "Hachadura" does not demonstrate the concern with fading love that is prevalent in "Le Monocle." But fading love is not the only concern in Stevens' poem. The speaker of Stevens' poem is clearly preoccupied with broader questions of mortality, with "[t]he laughing sky" that "will see the two of us / Washed into rinds by rotting winter rains" (*CPP* 13). Bringhurst's "Hachadura" is similarly engrossed with mortality. In contrast to the ambivalence and fear associated with thoughts of mortality in Stevens' poem, though, Bringhurst's "Hachadura" is ultimately a statement of affirmation. Death is omnipresent in life – the "black October" which must follow on the heels of summer (*SP* 64), yet even in this blackness may be a "germinating slime" (*SP* 3) containing potential for generation.

Indeed, Bringhurst's affirmation is ultimately an affirmation of the sufficiency of the physical world and his critique of Stevens in the introduction to "Hachadura" as well as in the poem itself demonstrates his commitment to writing a poetry of the earth. In contrast to Stevens' florid, romantic diction, the treatment of religious themes and the difficulty of poetic inheritance, the first section of "Hachadura" is singularly focused on the physical world. It takes as its subject air, pebbles, sea-wind, sea-color. It contains images of "salt-hide drying inward," "sea-eaten iron, and the open / lattice of the wave" (*SP* 57). Stevens' first stanza ends with an image of a "saltier well," a possible allusion to a sorrow over the loss of religious faith and his poetic muse, both of which appear bound together in a Marian figure. The salty tears of Stevens' opening section becomes in Bringhurst's a response to the salt water of the ocean itself. Here the natural world is presented in its near brute physicality, with "aggressive 'nothings' [which] have . . . been made to go directly against the grain of Stevens' inwardly directed irony" (Whatley 111). The force of this opening section in "Hachadura" amounts to a declaration of commitment to write a poetry of nature.

Bringhurst uses this pronouncement as a means of critiquing the anxiety expressed in "Le Monocle" about the limits of poetry. For Bringhurst, Stevens' apparent concerns about poetic tradition and poetry's abilities are foolish; the poet's focus is better directed to the physical world. In "Hachadura," there is no dogma but the dogma of the physical: "In the high West there is everything / it is that the high West consists of, / mountains, / named animals and unnamed birds, / mountain water, mountain trees / and mosses, and the marrow of the air / inside its luminous blue bone" (*SP* 60). Furthermore, Bringhurst distinguishes his view of nature from that

of the British Romantic tradition which troubles Stevens in “Le Monocle.”<sup>19</sup> For the Stevens of “Le Monocle,” the “furious star” that burns “[i]n the high west” is there for “fiery boys” and “for

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<sup>19</sup> The particular diction of the opening lines of the first stanza of “Le Monocle” resonates with a number of poems by Stevens’ Romantic forebears. Carroll has argued that these lines may be related to Tennyson’s late poem “The Ancient Sage” (Carroll 42). The stanza also shares some similar diction and imagery to Wordsworth’s “The Virgin,” a poem published in Wordsworth’s 1822 *Ecclesiastical Sonnets*, which quite clearly treats the Virgin Mary.

Wordsworth himself was not, seemingly, a conventionally pious member of the Church of England, much less a Romantic Catholic. Still, the religious imagery and language surrounding Mary was clearly attractive to him. The Mary that appears in “The Virgin” stands as the object of honour that she had once been within Christendom. Wordsworth describes her life as something more than the regular human. She is “Our tainted nature’s solitary boast; / Purer than foam on central ocean tost” (151, ll. 4,5). Wordsworth’s Virgin continues to have a salvific role like the Roman Catholic Virgin Mary. Her life is a kind of visible sign of the working of an invisible God who combined in the Virgin “high with low, celestial with terrene” (l. 14). Perhaps most importantly, the tone of Wordsworth’s “The Virgin” is primarily one of reverence; in the fourteen lines, there is no note of disbelief or skepticism, regardless of how Wordsworth himself might have felt about his poem’s subject matter.

By comparison, the “mother of heaven, regina of the clouds” in the first stanza of Stevens’ “Le Monocle” is mocked and not revered. Stevens’ allusions to Wordsworth’s poem in “Le Monocle” not only give him a further opportunity to consider his inheritances from the Romantic poets; they also allow him to further define his position with respect to Christianity by considering one of its most enduring symbols. The Romantic imagination and shifting cultural perspectives where religion was concerned in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries allowed Wordsworth to exploit and aestheticize religious imagery and themes without necessarily having any personal piety. By the time Stevens is writing “Le Monocle,” cultural shifts have made impossible any naïve belief, or even any celebration like the Romantic celebration of the naiveté of belief itself. So, where Wordsworth’s Mary is “purer than foam on central ocean tost” (151), Stevens’ “mother of heaven” is reduced to foam itself. She is nothing but a “radiant bubble,” froth that “the sea of spuming thought foists up again” (*CPP* 10).

sweet-smelling virgins close to them” (*CPP* 12). For Bringhurst, Stevens’ understanding of the physical is a failure of the ability to recognize humanity’s place as one part of the “everything” that includes the star. Rejecting “Le Monocle’s” vision, “Hachadura” embodies an attempt to radically reimagine the nature of the relationship between perceiver and nature. The nature described in the poem is not nature re-cast in the image of the perceiver, but nature existing as radical other. The first section of “Hachadura” enacts this shift in perspective by avoiding depiction or even recognition of the human observer. The human appears only in fragments, allusions through its reference to hands, glands, brains. Unlike the British and American Romantic depiction of scenes in nature wherein the human is reconstituted (Hartman 222), the human presence in Bringhurst’s “Hachadura” is disjointed, even disintegrated. The sheer what-is of the physical world becomes Bringhurst’s “concretion of order, / unstable or at any rate in motion, but a certain / concretion of order inherent in one / of the innumerable forms of such a number” (*SP* 57). It is a “concretion” of the reality of the pre-eminence of the physical that takes the place of the “spuming” sea and “the radiant bubble” in “Le Monocle,” which proves to be all too easily burst. The physical world, and the philosophies which move towards unity with it instead of away from it—referred to, for example, by the figure of the pre-Socratic philosopher Eurytos in the second stanza—are the focus of “Hachadura,” working together to “[reform] a hedonistic, corrupted imagination” (Whatley 133) and to combat the “self-aggrandizement and self-projection” (133) in which Stevens seems to engage in “Le Monocle.”

Bringhurst’s serious concentration on the physical world distinguishes “Hachadura” from the introspective irony, disillusionment, and cynicism of Stevens’ poem. The sardonic wit in “Le Monocle” allows the speaker to describe him/herself and the former beloved as “golden gourds distended on our vines” that “hang like warty squashes” (*CPP* 13). Still, the ironizing voice of

“Le Monocle” easily and frequently gives way to expressions of nearly overwhelming disappointment and profound sorrow, a sorrow which comes “up-pouring from some saltier well / Within” that self-same speaker whose mockery had flown in all direction (10). In fact, the cynical mockery in “Le Monocle” is itself one response to the theme of death, and “death-in-life” (*Extended* 58) which saturates Stevens’ poem and about which the voice in Bringhurst’s poem speaks. Though the poems respond differently to the questions that their themes raise, they certainly echo one another and neither poem avoids profundity.

In the midst of its seriousness, the tone of Bringhurst’s “Hachadura” slides toward cynicism only when responding to or parodying the speaker of Stevens’ “Le Monocle.” Consider, for example, “Hachadura’s” response to the third section of “Le Monocle.” In this section, Stevens’ speaker asks, “Is it for nothing, then, that old Chinese / Sat titivating by their mountain pools / Or in the Yangste studied out their beards?” (*CPP* 11). The syntax and diction of the poem belie the seriousness of the question being asked in this section. As Vendler observes, this stanza of “Le Monocle” is one of “exaggeration and comedy in the surface of language, with titivating Chinese, barbers, and Bath coiffures like mountains, but not a shred of comedy in the emotion undergone” (*Extended* 62). This disparity creates a “conflict between language and meaning” ( 63). Indeed, there lies beneath this section’s superficial levity an underlying tone that borders on despairing fear. Stevens’ speaker fears the possibility that nature persistently proves that the work done by poets in adding artistic “curls” to the experience of the real are futile. Given his interest in etymology, it is probable that Stevens’ was familiar with the relationship between the English word barber and its roots in the Latin *barbarous* and Greek *βάρβαρος*. “The Greek word had probably a primary reference to speech, and is compared with Latin *balbus* stammering” (*OED*). By comparing poets to barbers, and by questioning whether or

not they are able to create anything of value or lasting significance, this section alludes to a poet's fear that artistic production is reducible to inarticulate stammering totally lacking meaningful content. Essentially, Stevens' speaker asks in this section if there can be any purpose for art if poetry can add nothing to a perpetually changing, regenerating nature.

In the third section of "Hachadura," Bringhurst's speaker answers the question Stevens' speaker poses. He/she replies,

It is for nothing, yes,

This manicuring, barbering, this

Shaving of the blade.

Nothing: that is that the edge should come

To nothing as continuously and cleanly and completely as it can. (*SP* 59)

While the nothing-ness that Stevens' speaker fears is seen as a negation and a negative—the loss of the possibility of immortality in the written word—Bringhurst's speaker affirms this coming to nothing as a positive; "It is for nothing, *yes*," the speaker replies (my emphasis). For Bringhurst, poetry is meant to come to nothing, to form no barrier between the word and the world. Taking the voice of the instructor, perhaps guiding the student in learning how to shape an arrowhead, Bringhurst writes, "Nothing: that is that the edge should come / To nothing as continuously and cleanly and completely as it can" (59). By finishing the section with the commands "*Tap. / Strum the muscle. / Breath. / And come to nothing*," Bringhurst's speaker counters Stevens' apparent concern with the human, suggesting, instead, that the artist's goal

should be to “come to nothing.” “Hachadura” asserts that there is a point in space and time where the work of the artist or craftsman ought to dissolve into nothing. This is the meeting place between the created object and the world. The speaker identifies this moment of arrival at nothing into a profound recognition of the implications of the body’s connection with the physical realm. The artist journeys through the body, “sharpening / the blood and straightening / the vein,” coming to the desired end self through recognizing the relationship between art, the body, and nature. The connection between self and the non-self makes all fear of existential question and experience irrelevant in the dimensions of Bringhurst’s poem. In such a world, there is nothing to fear and no room for sorrow.

Bringhurst’s rebuke of “Le Monocle” reaches its zenith in section VI of “Hachadura.”

The speaker addresses Stevens, though obliquely:

My Connecticut uncle stares into his manicured  
 thumbnail, thinking of his Riviera uncle’s  
 smoked-glass monocle. A one-eyed sun-goggle,  
 halfway useful in the lethal roselight. (*SP* 61)

In this stanza, Stevens, the “Connecticut uncle,” is caught in a moment self-absorption, a picture of privilege and detachment, the individual sheltered from “the real,” shielding himself with “a one-eyed sun-goggle.” Bringhurst pictures his imaginary Stevens gazing at his own “manicured / thumbnail” and chides him, asserting that no shielding mechanism can prevent the encroaching presence of the physical world: “the colored cores of the air lurch up / the ear, blue-gold and maroon against the blind drum” (61).

Bringhurst's direct reference to Stevens in section VI of "Hachadura" suggests some possible reasons why he may have chosen to submerge the extensive links between the two poems when discussing them in his introductory note in *The Beauty of the Weapons*. This section of "Hachadura" underwent an important revision between its first appearance in *Poetry* and *Bergschrund* in 1975 and its collection in *The Beauty of the Weapons* in 1982. The first lines in the first version say, "Ton ongle, ton ongle, plutôt que ton monocle Uncle / Wallace. Or a one-eyed sun-goggle, / halfway useful in the lethal roselight" (*Bergschrund* 74). Revised for the later publication, this section begins, "My Connecticut uncle stares into his manicured / thumbnail, thinking of his Riviera uncle's / smoked-glass monocle. A one-eyed sun-goggle, / halfway useful in the lethal roselight" (*Beauty* 77). In accordance with other editorial decisions Bringhurst made during these years, the revision veils the section's reference to Stevens without completely occluding it. "Uncle / Wallace" becomes "My Connecticut Uncle." The exchange of Stevens' proper first name in favor of the name of his home state generalizes the reference. Bringhurst also discards the French of the first line of the original version, and with it the possibility that he will be open to accusations that he indulges in the same preciousness that Stevens sometimes seemed to love. What persists from the first to the second version, though, is the way Bringhurst's speaker chooses to define his/her relationship with the older poet. In both versions, Bringhurst's speaker describes Stevens as an uncle: Stevens is "Uncle / Wallace" or "My Connecticut uncle." Significantly, Bringhurst situates himself at a slightly greater distance from Stevens as poetic predecessor. He does not define his position as that of a child relating to a parent, or of the foot soldier submitting to and following after his captain, or, perhaps most aptly given the lexical context of "Notes," as an "ephebe" undertaking the training he requires in order to gain the full rights of a citizen. Whether referring to "Uncle / Wallace" or "My Connecticut

uncle,” the speaker takes a seat at the literary table as the heir-at-a-distance of “Uncle / Wallace,” and, thereby, of the “Riviera uncle” – a likely allusion to the French Symbolist Paul Valery, who was known to have worn a monocle (Stravinsky 73).

It is in this section where the question of the identity of the speaker and the speaker’s relationship to Bringhurst becomes critical. “Hachadura” concerns itself with the generation, and regeneration, of life, and with the generations who make the perseverance of life possible and this theme is certainly treated in this section. This theme is also the means by which Bringhurst himself may enter the poem. Section six opens with “My Connecticut uncle [staring] into his manicured / thumbnail, thinking of his Riviera uncle’s / smoked-glass monocle.” Two generations of a certain type of family, though not the direct generations of fathers and children, are present here. A third is implied by the way the “Connecticut uncle” is identified with the possessive – “My Connecticut uncle.” Two uncles, two nephews, three uncommon generations, loosely defined, are found in this stanza. Interestingly, the third generation of this strange family appears in the final five lines of the section:

Notice in addition the other at this intersection:

This one who is talking, this one who is standing

In the shoes of the man who is wearing them and sitting,

This one with, undeniably, a knife in his hand,

This one, this one saying nothing . . . .

This is a strange passage, appropriately set at a crossroad, that suggests the possibility of a change in identity and direction, but a change that may, perhaps, depend on an act of violence. If each “one” identified in this passage is the same person, then this passage describes the kind of moment that both Stevens and Bringhurst love – the moment “[trembling] always at halfway

points, at the point of metamorphosis, when day is becoming darkness, when winter is becoming spring” (*Extended* 46), a moment captured in a “poetry of the transitional moment, of the not-quite-here and the not-yet-gone” (47) when two men can wear the same shoes at the same time, can be both sitting and standing, can speak while saying nothing. The sinister imagery of these final lines opens the section up to the possibility of, not patricide – the “one who is talking . . . who is standing . . . /with, undeniably a knife in his hand” is not a son, but a nephew – but, more properly, *avunculicide*, the murder of the uncle. For, ultimately, two men cannot wear the same shoes. In the order of life, the older must give way to the younger, though it be through an act of violence by the hand of the younger.

But is this an act of unlawful usurpation? The tone of accusation present in “Hachadura” when the poem addresses its inheritance in Stevens’ “Le Monocle” suggests that the speaker sees an assault of the poetic uncle as justified. The sense of the probable self-righteousness of this poetic “attack” is further borne out in the accusatory nature of Bringhurst’s question for Stevens in Bringhurst’s introduction to “Hachadura” in *The Beauty of the Weapons*. In his introduction, Bringhurst addresses a question for his reader. He asks the reader to consider, “What, nevertheless, it is fair to ask, does the ghost of Wallace Stevens, in his comfortable apartments, have to do with the bitter fate of human beings in a village in Ahuachapán?” (*Beauty* 73). Bringhurst quotes lines from Stevens’ poetry in answer to this question: “Lend no part to any humanity that suffuses / you in its own light” (73). These lines offer an answer to Bringhurst’s question, an answer which effectively relieves Stevens, and thereby Bringhurst, from the responsibility to judge the morality of events or even to bear witness via poetic representation of human suffering. Still, by withholding his own judgment on Stevens’ evaluation of the responsibility of poetry, the reader is left uncertain of which side Bringhurst would take in this

debate. The introduction also asks, “How can a man make music in the face of these preoccupations [the violence done in and to the people and place of El Salvador]?” Answering this question with another question – “How, given the chance, can he do otherwise?” (73) – Bringhurst’s position cannot be mapped with certainty. Perhaps he himself was unsure.

It is noteworthy that Stevens’ poem also shares the theme of the murder of the uncle, in his case by means of a reference to *Hamlet* in section IV. Cook concludes, “Hamlet on Yorick is commonly recognized as the model for Stevens’ skull stanza in “Le Monocle de Monocle” (*Poetry* 91): “An apple serves as well as any skull / To be the book in which to read a round, / And is as excellent, in that it is composed / Of what, like skulls, comes rotting back to ground” (*CPP* 11).<sup>20</sup> In Shakespeare’s play, Hamlet speaks and speaks of the need to act, to respond to the “rotteness” that injustice and dubious morality have brought to Denmark. Ultimately, though, his words fail to bring him to the point of action. The nephew in Bringhurst’s “Hachadura” responds to the spectre of Hamlet in Stevens’ “Le Monocle.” In stanza six, “Hachadura’s” nephew stands for a moment in the same stillness of indecision embodied by Hamlet when he *fails* to act and carry out the seemingly morally necessary murder of the uncle. “Hachadura” moves away from the scene before the moment shared between the nephew and uncle in section six is brought to a point of action. The section simply ends with “this one with, undeniably, a knife in his hand, / this one, this one saying nothing . . . .” Ultimately, the nephew does not act, but neither does he completely reiterate Hamlet’s experience. The contrast between this man’s silence and Hamlet’s wordy failure is acute and somehow terrifying by this profound

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<sup>20</sup> Predicting a major theme that Bringhurst’s “Hachadura” will later take up, Stevens’ poem affirms the connection that exists between animate and inanimate, human and non-human because of death. Apples and people – all will “[come] rotting back to ground,” the death of one leading to the life of the next.

difference. Perhaps the ambivalence toward Stevens in both Bringhurst's poem and Bringhurst's introduction to the poem leaves the "nephew" with no clear moral direction to take. Instead, he simply remains standing "at this intersection" between possibilities. Either way, perhaps it was to Stevens' advantage that he was already dead at the time of Bringhurst's writing.

The ambivalence of the relationship that Bringhurst establishes between his poem and Stevens' poem in "Hachadura" suggests further possibilities for tracing the relationship that exists between the two poets themselves. If the third generation in the sixth section of "Hachadura" is read as a kind of self-portrait by Bringhurst—a reasonable possibility given the specificity of the reference to both Wallace Stevens and Paul Valéry in the section—then taking the position of the nephew serves several functions. First of all, it protects Bringhurst from accusations of illicit aspirations to claim Stevens' poetic inheritance. Lines of descent and inheritance are not generally traced from uncle to nephew, so a position as nephew protects Bringhurst from accusations of hubris that could potentially follow were Bringhurst to claim to be a son, and thereby, the rightful heir to Stevens' legacy. Given that "Hachadura" was written by a poet only recently beginning to find an audience for his poetry that went beyond the circulation of chapbooks, Bringhurst's perhaps unnecessarily overly modest claims to kinship with a celebrated poet like Stevens are logical.

While modesty may be one motivating reason for Bringhurst's decision to position himself outside of the direct line of inheritance from Stevens, the ironic tone of the stanza suggests other possibilities. "My Connecticut uncle stares into his manicured / thumbnail, thinking of his Riviera uncle's / smoked-glass monocle" (*SP* 61). Bringhurst's lines allude to Stevens' reputation as a dandy (Bates 132) and position him within the larger family of the French Symbolists and, ultimately, their Romantic precursors, by means of his cryptic allusion to

Paul Valery, who Bringhurst calls Stevens' "Riviera uncle." The references in this stanza to men with manicured nails and monocles, living a comfortable life in affluent Connecticut or the luxurious French Riviera transport the reader into quite a different world than the world of brute, visceral, blood and bone reality which has been Bringhurst's concern in "Hachadura." The critique of Stevens' poetics and the philosophy of the Symbolist poets that is cryptically present in "Hachadura" reiterates the position of early criticism which found Stevens to be "a heartless hedonist, an ivory-tower poet insensitive to social distress, a cold, over-cerebral aesthete, a poetic conservative, and so on" (Vendler, "Hunting"). In fact, "Hachadura" attacks a Stevens who is supposedly preoccupied with writing poetry that only "enact[s] the thinking of thoughts, or the sensing of sensations, or the supposing of suppositions" ("Hunting"), a Stevens who was, according to critical perception for many years, modernism's "archformalist and aesthete" (Golding 284), someone content to "[stare] into his manicured thumbnail" (*SP* 61) instead of encountering the physical earth. In direct contrast to the image in "Hachadura" of a withdrawn, even impotent, Stevens who is detached from reality, Bringhurst's poem affirms the value and even necessity of a poetry that is integrally related to the present, the "nail and nervecord, bone marrow, molar and / bones" (63) of human experience in the physical world. The masculinity of dandified, comfortable "Connecticut" and "Riviera" uncles can only stand to lose in the contrasts in this stanza, and Bringhurst's language makes this loss evident. For this reason, the situation of a nephew may be seen as an advantage to the male poet trying to come to terms with his poetic inheritance. By distinguishing himself and his poetics from those typically attributed to Stevens in the 1960s and 1970s, Bringhurst found a way of differentiating and asserting the uniqueness of his own poetic voice.

Perhaps more effectively than turning away entirely from Stevens, Bringhurst's comments on "Hachadura" in his introduction, and his reading and misreading of Stevens' poem and poetic themes create the illusion of a distance between the two poets that is belied by the actual poem. Certainly, Bringhurst's consideration of Stevens' poem is anything but the dispassionate intellectual exploration he hints at in his opening comments. By mis-reading Stevens, Bringhurst becomes the squid he writes about in his earlier poem "Anecdote of the Squid." Through his prevarications, he "grows / transparent and withdraws, / leaving behind him his coagulating shadows" (*Beauty* 38). In the case of his notes on "Hachadura," these shadows create a new "self-portrait" which, as this chapter argues, does not portray the actual family resemblance between Bringhurst and Stevens in "Hachadura." In the distance that his introduction creates, Bringhurst is able to escape from the possibility of too-close association and, thereby, to create the necessary fiction that he forges his own path.

"Hachadura," and the introduction that accompanies the poem in *The Beauty of the Weapons*, represents an important point in Bringhurst's career. This poem indicates that Bringhurst too may have been at a crossroad like "the other at this intersection" with the "Connecticut Uncle" in "Hachadura." At this crossroad, Bringhurst redefines his relationship to Stevens. After writing this poem, Bringhurst carries on the act of submerging the debt owed to Stevens that his early poetry demonstrates, interring evidence of the close ties that once bound Bringhurst's writing to Stevens, through editorial changes and equivocation in his address to Stevens. Still, Bringhurst has let "Hachadura" stand as a clue to help the reader understand Bringhurst's debt to the older poet. The two poems share themes and concerns which run throughout each of Bringhurst's and Stevens' collected works. As the following chapters will consider, the theme of the person's relationship to place, of the integral relationship between

body and earth, is one that both Stevens and Bringhurst will persist in returning to time and time again.

### III. Stevens' themes and Bringhurst's variations

Bringhurst's poetic maturation and development, as well as his editorial decisions about which early poems would be reprinted in later collections, muted his early writing's obvious affinities with the "buoyant sensuality and dramatic character" (Keller 19) of Stevens' poetics. After the early collections like *Cadastre* (1973) and *Bergschrund* (1975), Bringhurst's imitation of, borrowing from, and wrestling with Stevens' poetics become more nuanced. References to Stevens continue to appear in cryptic allusions and oblique gestures after *Bergschrund*. While these allusions to Stevens' poetry and poetics are, in some ways, less easily excavated, they also gesture to a richer conversation between the two poets' bodies of work than the imitative and overtly allusive poetry of Bringhurst's early volumes. Bringhurst's poetry after the mid-1970s demonstrates the subtle marks of interaction with Stevens' later and quieter, more predominantly philosophical and discursive, writing.

One of the key ways in which Bringhurst's adoption of Stevens' modes is apparent is through Bringhurst's use of patterns including that which Helen Vendler called Stevens' mode of "qualified assertion" (*Extended* 17). Bringhurst follows Stevens in writing many poems whose "endings depend on . . . preceding [hypotheses], and the whole construct is a nebulous one" (15). Consider, for example, Bringhurst's "Some Ciphers," first released in a publication called *Stuffed Crocodile* in 1974 then collected in Bringhurst's 1975 *Bergschrund*. "Some Ciphers" takes up the subject of the nature and meaning of being and its relation to non-being – one of Bringhurst's favorite topics. This poem follows the philosopher's posture of speculation and posit in its opening and dependence on the word if, an adoption of a similar pattern in many of Stevens'

poems. However, the abstract nature and the mathematical language that Bringhurst uses to consider these philosophical topics excludes even many literate readers. The language used in the poem is a category of the exoticism that could alienate readers attempting to follow him from hypothesis to conclusion. The first two stanzas of Bringhurst's poem begin with and depend on their opening word "If." Bringhurst's speaker begins:

If I say  
  
 $1 + e^{\pi i} = 0,$   
  
 I have recorded a rather  
  
 elaborate but arguably beautiful way  
  
 of reducing unity to zero (*Bergschrund* 95).

While Stevens does not employ such rarefied language as Bringhurst does in "Some Ciphers," one does see similar effects to those produced by Bringhurst's poem in Stevens' more philosophical writing. Compare the first stanza of "Some Ciphers" with, for example, canto XXVIII of Stevens' "An Ordinary Evening in New Haven":

If it should be true that reality exists  
  
 In the mind: the tin plate, the loaf of bread on it,  
  
 The long-bladed knife, the little to drink and her  
  
 Misericordia, it follows that  
  
 Real and unreal are two in one: New Haven  
  
 Before and after one arrives . . . (*CPP* 414)

Like Bringhurst, the conclusions that Stevens' considers in this canto depend on the hypothesis in the first lines: "*If* it should be true . . ." (414, emphasis added). Like the reader trying to follow the complex logic of Bringhurst's "Some Ciphers," Stevens' readers may easily find themselves losing the path of his logic in the long unwinding of multiple possible ends. As Vendler observes, "Stevens . . . induces us to forget his conditional propositions . . . by making a great deal depend on them in syntactic sequence" (*Extended* 16). As this canto drifts through a string of clauses – "Bergamo on a postcard, Rome after dark, / Sweden described, Salzburg with shaded eyes / Or Paris in conversation at a café" (*CPP* 414) – the poem creates a sequence of succinct and concise possibilities that draws readers into the experiment of the hypothesis while simultaneously lulling them into a hypnotic forgetfulness of its instability. Indeed, Stevens does not attempt to discover or decide in this stanza whether or not his hypothesis, his conditional proposition, is verifiable. Bringhurst adopts Stevens' habit of concealing the conditionality of conclusions by means of complex syntax.

In this same vein of word and thought play, "Some Ciphers" takes up Stevens' own dependence on the words *if* and *may*, making these uncertainties critical to the poem's caveat. In this poem, Bringhurst begins with uncertainty, potential and possibility. The possibilities "of reducing unity to zero" that the stanza explores depend on the *if* of the first lines – "*If* I say . . ." (emphasis added). The second stanza of "Some Ciphers" follows the same pattern as the first:

If however I saw

1 + 1 = 2, or 1

+ 1 = 1, I have made a concrete

Assertion having to do

With construction or fusion (*Bergschrund* 95).

In the third stanza of the poem, Bringhurst writes,

Observe now that on certain occasions

$1 + 1 \rightarrow 0$ . The formula

$1 + \chi = 0$ , where  $\chi$

may equal, for instance,  $e^{\pi i}$

may then be of more interest (95).

The word *may* is critical to this stanza. The statements in this stanza *may* “be of more interest.” However, in the rush to consider these interesting possibilities and in obedience to the command of the rather didactic voice of this stanza to “Observe now that on certain occasions /  $1 + 1 \rightarrow 0$ ”, the reader quickly bypasses the task of questioning the stanza’s opening observation and the full import of the stanza’s dependence on the word *may* is lost. The syntax of the stanza, in particular its appeal to the formal language of mathematics and logic, creates the illusion that the statements are certainties, but the average reader who is, it may be assumed, unversed in advanced and theoretical mathematics, is unable to scrutinize the stanza’s abstract logic. This likelihood creates a distance between Bringhurst’s poem and the reader, foreclosing on understanding.

In fact, uncertainty and paradox are inherent within the mathematical language of the poem. Those familiar with advanced calculus or mathematical proofs might recognize within “Some Ciphers” Euler’s Identity, arguably one of the most famous mathematical formulae (151). The discovery of this formula by the Swiss mathematician Leonhard Euler was a kind of

mathematical happy accident<sup>21</sup> through which Euler “connects the five most important constants of mathematics (and also the three most important mathematical operations—addition, multiplication, and exponentiation)” (160). The formula links “the four major branches of mathematics: arithmetic represented by 0 and 1; algebra, by  $i$ ; geometry, by  $\pi$ ; and analysis, by  $e$ ” (160), thereby providing a kind of unifying formula for the major branches of mathematics. The formula also tests and challenges the boundary between imaginary and real (178). While the formula is true in its form, its content remains paradoxical. As a 19<sup>th</sup> century Harvard mathematician remarked over a century after Euler’s Identity had been discovered, “though surely true, it is absolutely paradoxical; we cannot understand it, and we don’t know what it means. But we have proved it, and therefore we know it must be the truth” (Kasner 103). As a consequence of the inscrutability of the proof, some mathematicians approach the formula with a kind of reverent mysticism (Maor 160) which has led to its nomination as “the most beautiful formula in mathematics” by *The Mathematical Intelligencer* (Montano 86). Bringhurst’s “Some Ciphers” mirrors the curious mix of certainty and uncertainty that is inherent within Euler’s Identity. Through its didactic tone and appeal to abstract mathematics, Bringhurst’s poem creates an air of truth and certainty that is belied by its syntax and brackets the paradoxical mystery contained within the mathematical content and highly formal language of the poem.

To continue, compare Bringhurst’s writing in the first stanza of “Some Ciphers” with Stevens’ “Crude Foyer” (1947), which begins with a positive assertion in the same vein as the opening of Bringhurst’s stanza. Stevens begins with the statement, “Thought is false happiness. .

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<sup>21</sup> According to Maor, Euler made his share of mathematical mistakes and was not particularly methodical in his practice. However, while he “derived many of his results in a nonrigorous manner,” many of his formulas have passed into common mathematical vernacular (Maor 159).

.” Stevens’ poem elaborates on this thought and begins to draw conclusions from this claim: in the poem, it becomes “the idea / That merely by thinking one can, / Or may, penetrate, not may, / But can, that one is sure to be able –” (*CPP* 270). Stevens elaborates on the opening statement of the poem, questioning it in the course of these first four lines, pushing past his initial “may,” insisting indeed that one “*can*” (emphasis added), indeed “is sure to be able” to accomplish something, though the doggedness of the musing language in the stanza leaves a greater degree of space for perplexity and frustration in the first stanza about the founding assertion than Bringham’s initial stanza does. Still, “Crude Foyer” quickly moves past uncertainty in these opening lines, teasing out the implications of the initial assertion for a further four stanzas. By the end of the poem, the speculative nature of the initial statement – “Thought is a false happiness” – and the beginning uncertainty of the poem has been left behind. As in “Crude Foyer,” Bringham’s “Some Ciphers” employs a tone of certainty to construct the logical basis within the world of the poem for the further ciphers offered in the fourth and fifth stanzas, as well as the thought experiment about the nature and meaning of being and non-being upon which they are based. This certainty is communicated by another shift in diction, where, once again, the hypothetical nature of the observations is lost in the complexities of the poem’s further explorations. The poem explores the possibility and meaning of “the creation *ex nihil* of number, or terror” (*Bergschrund* 96) with a greater assertiveness than that with which it began. Like many of Stevens’ poems, the general tone of Bringham’s poem evolves “from the less certain to the more certain” (*Extended* 16).

Furthermore, Bringham’s later poetry presumes onto his reader potentially suspect and highly abstract conclusions by following Stevens in introducing the imperative at key moments in “Some Ciphers.” Both poets introduce mid-course changes in pronouns in order to create an

aura of complicity between a poem's speaker and its readers with regard to a poem's speculations. "Crude Foyer," for example, begins in the first stanza with the potential actions of the impersonal "one" but quickly shifts to the use of the inclusive "we" in the remaining four stanzas. Stevens' speaker proclaims that speaker and reader share in this experience, alluding to "a foyer" "In which we read the critique of paradise / And say it is the work / Of a comedian" (*CPP* 270). The speaker also assumes that the speaker and reader share a common perspective of a foyer "In which we sit and breathe / An innocence of an absolute, False happiness, since we know that we use / Only the eye as faculty" (270). Finally, the speaker's pronoun choice implies a common identity for both speaker and reader, that both know "We are ignorant men incapable / Of the least, minor, vital metaphor" (270). In another example from the first canto of "Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction," Stevens' speaker begins in the didactic tone, saying, "Begin, ephebe, by perceiving the idea / Of this invention, this invented world . . . / You must become an ignorant man again" (329). While the section begins in instruction, the rhetoric shifts to the embrace of shared aspiration to wisdom by the use of the inclusive "us." "How clean the sun when seen in its idea, / Washed in the remotest cleanliness of a heaven / That has expelled us and our images" (329). In the manner of a rhapsodic psalm, this gesture of language bonds the speaker, ephebe, and reader in the assumption all will subscribe to the speaker's propositions.

Though such rhapsody is not found in "Some Ciphers," the movement from didacticism to inclusive engagement is also observable in Bringham's writing. While the first two stanzas of "Some Ciphers" could possibly be read as the statements of a person speaking to him or herself, the third, fourth and fifth stanzas of "Some Ciphers" begin in the imperative, raising the speaker's didactic voicing of the poem which demands that the reader not only overhear but also reap learning from his or her puzzling. Where the first two stanzas begin with "if," and the third

stanza begins with an invitation to “[o]bserve,” a passive action, the fourth and fifth stanza command the reader to “[c]onsider,” to actively engage in what is being proposed: “Consider, further,  $1 = 0$ ,” and “Consider, therefore,  $0$  not equal / to, or  $0 = \chi$  where  $\chi / i$  is not equal to  $0$ .” Though the reader may be unfamiliar with mathematical proofs and logic, Bringhurst’s language makes the reader an accomplice in the poem’s logic, and, hence, in the poem’s conclusions.

Bringhurst also imitates Stevens in his frequent use of negation in his syntax. Negation in Stevens is frequently coupled with what Vendler defined as his characteristic mode of “qualified assertion” (*Extended* 21). As Stevens explores propositions or possibilities in his poetry, he often employs a pattern where “the resolving term is . . . expressed after its negations – not X, nor Y, but Z” (Vendler, *Extended* 182). This pattern can be observed in Canto VIII of “The Auroras of Autumn” (1950). Stevens begins by stating “There may be always a time of innocence. / There is never a place” (*CPP* 360). This proposition is immediately negated, though not without his customary qualifications. However, after negating the proposition, he begins to question and contradict his own negations. The pattern of assertion, negation, and reassertion continues throughout the canto- “The cancellings, / The negations are never final,” is Stevens’ own summary in Canto IV of “The Auroras.” By the end, the pattern’s revolutions have taken the speaker back to the point of origin. But these negations are not a meaningless exercise. They are the means by which the speaker makes his approach to the bedrock of truth for which he is searching in the canto. His pursuit of the “innocence” he desires propels him to continue in the pattern of negation until he reaches a point of somewhat desperate affirmation that, innocence, after all, “exists, it is visible, it is, it is.” It is through these negations and qualifications that Stevens pivots and dances around the conundrums of time and place.

Similarly, Bringhurst takes up the same use of negation in his poetics. “Song of the Summit” (1975) opens with lines that could be from Stevens’ pen: “The difference is nothing you can see – only / the dressed edge of air / over those stones” (*SP* 17). Bringhurst follows Stevens’ patterns of negation, of baring to the elemental, before turning to affirmation in his final stanza of this poem: “This is what remains: the pitted blood / out looking for the vein . . . .” However, while Stevens’ praxis is the negation of excess, Bringhurst forces the poem beyond, past consideration of the elemental residue of being to explore the relation between being and nothingness.

This exploration of the negation is evident in “Hachadura.” Following the pattern of “Le Monocle,” Bringhurst’s first stanza immediately introduces the concept of negation:

There is a nothing like the razor  
edge of air, another  
  
like the tongued pebbles, syllables  
of sea-wind and sea-color  
  
another and another like the salt  
hide drying inward . . .

Like Stevens does in Canto VIII of “The Auroras of Autumn,” Bringhurst uses negation as a means of exploring the relationship between the abstract and the physical world. By coupling the word “nothing” in the first line with an indefinite article, Bringhurst makes of nothing a subject—something. This pattern continues in the lines that follow. Each subsequent nothing, signaled by the word “another,” is similarly identified and endowed with signification by means

of a simile metaphorizing it into the physical. Through his diction of negation, Bringhurst challenges the meaning of nothingness itself.

In both poets' work, negation and nothingness are sometimes paired with imagery of the liminal or transitional moment. In section V of "Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird" (*CPP* 74), Stevens considers the threshold moment when sound—here represented by the blackbird's whistling—becomes silence. Stevens questions the meaning of this transformation, finding it to be replete with "innuendoes." The listener's experience of this threshold between sound and silence raises the possibility that silence can be experienced as a repletion of some-thing, not as no-thing or the Void. Stevens returns to the threshold between sound and silence in a poem collected in his next volume, *Ideas of Order*. "Autumn Refrain" (1936) is set at the threshold between day and night, when day is being emptied of its sounds and sights. The poem begins with the "The skreak and skritter of evening gone / And grackles gone and sorrows of the sun" (*CPP* 129). In the liminal space and time of evening, the silence speaks to the listener. The absence of even a Keatsian nightingale makes its heavy impress on the silence. That bird, and everything it symbolizes to Keats about the hope and pursuit of poetic vocation (Lensing 75), "is not a bird for me," says Stevens' speaker. Though the poem's tone is anything but hopeful, in the passage through this transitional moment into night, the speaker recognizes that "something resides" "beneath / The stillness of everything gone." The silence is composed of a meaningful "desolate sound," the "residuum" of all that has been heard. Though the meaning of this sound may be ultimately unknowable, it is a guarantee of being in nothingness. These threshold spaces appear and reappear in this same aural image of sound and silence as Stevens' poetry deliberates on the nature of existence.

Images of liminal spaces and transitional moments between presence and absence, being or not being, also appear in Bringhurst's poetics. These images are regularly pictured as the transition between two different surfaces. Sometimes, as in stanza III of "Hachadura" mentioned already, they are the place where something becomes nothing, where the edge of the place "should come / to nothing as continuously / and cleanly and completely as it can." The liminal space of the mountain summit or the meeting between land and water also reappears throughout Bringhurst's poet. In "Ararat" (1976), the mountain summit is a place of both forgetting and remembering, of the disintegration of knowledge in the face of the raw physicality at the heights of the land (*SP* 18). As in Stevens' "Thirteen Ways," the aural image of sound versus silence appears in "Ararat" and is used to consider the meaning of absence. These places of transition – between earth and air, earth and water – are places where the meaning of being is less certain.

Beyond these poetic devices, Bringhurst has adopted from Stevens' writing the notion that poetry shoulders the burden of guiding and directing individuals and communities to right living, though Bringhurst deviates somewhat from particulars of Stevens' statements on the subject. Stevens made frequent remarks in his poetry, prose, and correspondence about the potential role for poetry in a culture of declining religious faith and practice. In some of his comments on the subject published in his 1942 lecture "The Noble Rider and the Sound of Words," Stevens argues that the function of the poet in society "certainly . . . is not to lead people out of the confusion in which they find themselves. Nor is it, I think, to comfort them while they follow their leaders to and fro," instead "his role . . . is to help people to live their lives" by "[making] his imagination become the light in the minds of others" (*CPP* 660). Stevens goes on to say that the means by which the poet helps others to live their lives is by "giving life whatever savor it possesses" (661). The role of the poet is to "[create] the world to which we

turn incessantly and without knowing it and . . . [give] to life the supreme fictions without knowing which we are unable to conceive of it.” (662). In other words, the role of the poet is to provide the imaginative, ordering, overlay – the “illusion equal to the [thing] itself” (663) – by means of which individuals and communities make sense of what they see and experience. The poet creates an all-encompassing reality for society in the same way that religious organization once did. The poem does so by obedience to the imagination, producing, as a result, a poem which “is a particular of life thought of for so long that one’s thought has become an inseparable part of it or a particular of life so intensely felt that the feeling has entered into it” (684), a poetry which “is the imagination of life” (684). Thus, the poet thinks on behalf of society or culture, bringing forth the truth of the imagination, and producing productively enabling fictions. Stevens’ “Notes Toward A Supreme Fiction,” of course, represents Stevens’ most all-encompassing effort to produce such a productively enabling fiction, though there is ample evidence that this “maker’s rage to order” (106) repeatedly falls short of its goal in Stevens’ poetry. Even within this ambitious poem, as in Stevens’ later poetry, Stevens indicates his own doubt about the possibility – and desirability? – of ever producing this kind of order.

Bringham shares some of Stevens’ perspective on the role of the poet and poetry and also seems to believe the poet has an important role to play in society. Like Stevens, Bringham subscribes to the notion that the poet is not ultimately responsible to any society or organization into which he or she may live; poetry is not intended to “[give] speech to the will of educated men or even to the aspirations of the common people” (*Everywhere* 32). Instead, the poet must be free from obligation to any particular political, cultural, or religious system or creed. Also, like Stevens, Bringham argues that, in addition to the poet’s and poetry’s autonomy with respect to existing power, their latent power and potential means that the poet and the authentic poetry

which the free poet will produce will also, in a sense, supersede those existing authorities. In a fashion similar to Stevens, Bringhurst's writing paints a picture of an ideal poet producing ideal poetry which serves as a kind of guide to open-minded listeners, pointing the way past and beyond the strictures of culture to a more authentic existence, to a place where the multiplicity of being is accepted (36). While Stevens turns to visual art—especially painting—for analogies of the relationship of mutuality between what is created by means of acts of artistry, Bringhurst turns to music, particularly polyphonic music, for descriptive metaphors of the role of poets and poetry in shaping human life.

Though Bringhurst's body of work is motivated by a unique combination of characteristics and concerns, it bears the marks of his engagement with Stevens' poetry and poetics. Beginning with his early imitation and parody of Stevens' poetry to his later, more nuanced engagement with Stevens' deeper themes and concerns, Bringhurst's poetry demonstrates the importance of Stevens' body of work to Bringhurst's evolution into a mature poet. The early "apprenticeship" to Stevens' work helped draw Bringhurst into a kind of dialogue with the older poet's work and thinking in poems like "Hachadura" which has endured through the present day. As the next chapters will show, one central topic of this "conversation" is the theme of the possibility of sacramental encounter with place.

## Chapter Three

### “He knelt in the cathedral with the rest” – Stevens’ Sacramentalism

In the architectonics of both Bringham’s and Stevens’ poetry, one finds in excavating their writings the artefacts of a deeply longed for possibility of transcendence. These artefacts of longing are submerged like the sunken cathedral in Debussy’s musical prelude of the same name—a work piece based on the Breton myth that, under the right conditions, a sunken cathedral may rise through the clear waters off the Island of Ys (Imberty 9). In Stevens’ poetry, the marks of his hope for transcendence rise to the keystone of a carefully architected vault which one posits is a dream or longing for supreme and transformative aesthetics. In this sacred space—defined by a poetics open to the numinous and the extra-linguistic numinous—the sacramental experience is anticipated and felt to be in reach. Stevens reaches after sacramental participation through poetry through a lifetime of writing and experimentation.

In Stevens’ poetry, from its beginning to its end, one recognizes a striving to find “the great poem of the earth” (NA 142). His sensitivity to the stimuli of the physical world and his desire to respond to its force is already evident among Stevens’ earliest preserved writing. In a 1904 journal entry, which was written while returning from a long ramble outside New York City on a spring day, Stevens writes:

I thought, on the train, how utterly we have forsaken the Earth, in the sense of excluding it from our thoughts. There are but few who consider its physical bigness, its rough enormity. It is still a disparate monstrosity, full of solitudes + barrens + wilds. It still dwarfs + terrifies + crushes. . . Man is an affair of cities. His gardens + orchards + fields are mere scrapings. Somehow, however, he has

managed to shut out the face of the giant from his windows. But the giant is there, nevertheless. And it is a proper question, whether or not the Lilliputians have tied him down. (*LWS* 73)

The awareness of the looming giant just beyond the window endures throughout much of Stevens' writing; he never ceased longing for a world where "the passing of the season . . . [might be] a matter of some importance" instead of the simple backdrop to scenes of human endeavor (721).

If the desire to come face to face with the earth was clear in Stevens' poetry and prose, it is equally clear that the object of his desire was not so easily attained. In truth, there was much to distract from the desire latent in the twenty-four year old's musings to embrace "the giant" with his thoughts, to throw back the blinds and stare him in the face or, better yet, to run out the front door and test his personhood against the dwarfing, terrifying, crushing Earth. The growing urbanization of life in the United States and the grim realities of a world repeatedly at war were distractions from that desire to write the poem of the earth. Moreover, Stevens faced charges of irrelevance in a political climate that demanded single-minded ideological devotion. For example, the editor of *The New Masses*, after dismissing Stevens' first volume as "the kind of verse that people concerned with the murderous world collapse can hardly swallow today except in tiny doses" (Burnshaw 365), said that Stevens' latest volume, *Ideas of Order* (1936), was valuable primarily as a sign of the "confusion" of the "members of a class menaced by the clashes between capital and labour" (366). Stevens' distrust of political dogma overruled any latent desire he may have had to capitulate to the demands for socially relevant poetry, though the criticism of his poetry in *The New Masses* stung him enough to prompt the poem "Mr. Burnshaw and the Statue" (1936) (*OP* 78), first published in *The New American Caravan*

(Kreymborg 255).<sup>22</sup> Still, Stevens remained uninterested in aligning himself with any political ideology, whether of the left or the right (Longenbach, *Plain* 144). Stevens resisted this political pressure by continuing to develop his poetics of doubt and inconclusiveness, his “endlessly ambiguous poetry” serving, in part, as a critique of the ideological single-mindedness demanded of the poet in the United States during the first half of the twentieth-century (147). Still, the pressure of this period of history may have lent some of the tone nearing desperation in assertions like those in “Evening Without Angels” (1936) that “Bare night is best. Bare earth is best. Bare, bare . . .” (*CPP* 112).

In addition to enduring political pressures and the criticism of poetry’s irrelevance, Stevens also had to abide with the overarching, even overbearing, categorical influence of the English Romantic tradition. Stevens even asserted in *The Imagination as Value* (1949), that “[t]he great poems of heaven and hell have been written and the great poem of the earth remains to be written” (*CPP* 730). In a poetic generation that strived to “make it new” (Eliot “Introduction” xiii), Stevens wrestled with the Romantic legacy and the philosophical underpinnings of this movement which seemingly hampered him from creating the specific type of “poem of the earth” that he desired to create. Stevens’ poetry can be found examining the influence of these earlier poets, offering general critiques of the lush sonnets of his Romantic forebears in poems such as “The Comedian as the Letter C” and “Le Monocle de Mon Oncle.” Stevens also responds to individual poets from within the Romantic tradition, writing back to

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<sup>22</sup> Stevens eventually revised and renamed this poem as “The Statue at the World’s End” for inclusion in *The Man With the Blue Guitar* (1937), omitting the original version from his *Collected Poems* (1954).

Keats in “Autumn Refrain” (1936) and “Anecdote of the Jar.” He also specifically addresses himself to Wordsworth in “The Man With the Blue Guitar” (1937), as this chapter will show.

In addition to the political and poetic milieu in which he lived, Stevens’ inheritances from his Protestant Christianity are an equally important part of his desire and struggle to write “the great poem of the earth.” Indeed, his musings on the forgotten “face of the giant” can be understood, in part, as the reflections of a young man wrestling with the influence of his Protestant, Reformed upbringing and educational formation. Catechized in a highly anti-Catholic environment that was nevertheless deeply sacramental in its religious rituals, Stevens’ early religious consciousness was fully imbued with sacramental theology. During his childhood, Stevens attended “Sunday-School” at the First Presbyterian Church in Reading, Pennsylvania (*LWS* 139-140). As a part of the Reformed church, the First Presbyterian Church would have limited the sacraments to the Lord’s Supper and Baptism—the only two sacraments, they claimed, that were instituted by Christ. The Presbyterian Church originated in post-Reformation Calvinism and has historically had a close relationship to religious groups adhering to the same Covenant theology that proved influential among the Puritan settlers of New England. Like their progenitors amongst post-Reformation Calvinists, the Presbyterians affirmed the sacraments of the Lord’s Supper, also known as communion, and Baptism as a means of grace in the human covenant community. Within the doctrinal system of these sects, a sacrament is defined as “a holy ordinance instituted by Christ, in which by sensible signs the grace of God in Christ, and the benefits of the covenant of grace, are represented, sealed, and applied to believers, and these, in

turn, give expression to their faith and allegiance to God” (Berkhof 617).<sup>23</sup> According to Reformed doctrine, a sacrament contains three parts: a material element, though the material nature of the element is insignificant unless understood to “denote both the sign and that which is signified”; the “*materia interna*,” or the “inward spiritual grace signified and sealed”; and, finally, the relation between the sign and signified (618). It is not difficult to perceive in Stevens’ poetry that the doctrinal teaching about the sacraments remained in his consciousness throughout his life. The teachings surrounding these doctrines endure as artefacts at the foundation of his poetic aesthetics, even in his continued longing for transcendence.

The religious tradition in which Stevens was raised had a complex theology of the physical earth in its materiality which further complicated Stevens’ desire to write “the great poem of the earth.” Although the theological system of this tradition taught that the physical world is corrupt and decadent as a consequence of its obligatory participation with humanity in the Fall, the system also maintained that the physical world is a testimony and symbol of the divine’s continuing work in the world. As such, the physical world is a paradoxical sign, not only of humanity’s disgrace, but also of God’s revelation, serving thereby as a source of spiritual

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<sup>23</sup> Protestant denominations differed from their Catholic counterparts in emphasizing that participation in the sacraments is not necessary for salvation. Nevertheless, they did teach that “willful neglect of their use results in spiritual impoverishment and has a destructive tendency” (Berkhof 618). Consequently, the right use of the sacraments was taught to be one way in which the believer might “add to the effectiveness of the Word [the Bible], and therefore to the measure of the grace received,” representing a “spiritual nourishment and quickening” (654). Importantly, in the protestant tradition the sacraments were not only a means of entering into communion with other believing adherents but also with the divine God who instituted the sacraments.

insight (Merchant 100). As revelation, it may function as “a book inscribed by God for men and women to read” (Gilcrest 92). This teaching emphasized the transcendent over the imminent and the coming spiritual kingdom of God over a purportedly the less significant, even ephemeral, realm of human endeavor. It can come as no surprise that Stevens, on emerging from this tradition and education, may have been eager to reconsider the material world on very different terms.

Though Stevens turned away from many aspects of the Protestant tradition in which he was raised, he continued to express admiration and veneration for orthodoxy in general. Stevens’ journals and letters record accounts of visits to churches and church services with surprising frequency. Part of his interest in the church seems to have been rooted in the religious aesthetic attached to traditional rituals as well as to the church structures themselves. McCann argues that it was based on this appreciation of religious aesthetics that Stevens’ urged his then-fiancé, Elsie Moll, to become a member of a church (*LWS* 96). She writes, “The desired (and most desirable) image of his beloved in church bears on the division between a logical-practical-masculine side of life and a feeling-artistic-feminine side he then believed in . . . ‘He’ claims to be ‘not in the least religious,’ but ‘she,’ his other self, muse and medium, can barely be conceived of without a simple faith” (3). Stevens also had a personal interest in the religious that extends past the pleasure of imagining Elsie Moll in attendance during religious services. In describing one of his visits to a church to his fiancé, Stevens writes, “[t]he space, the gloom, the quiet mystify and entrance the spirit. But that is not enough.—And one turns from this chapel to those built by men who felt the wonder of the life and death of Jesus—temples full of sacred images, full of the air of love and holiness—tabernacles hallowed by worship that sprang from the noble depths of men familiar with Gethsemane, familiar with Jerusalem” (*LWS* 139). While turning away from the

dogmatic tradition of his childhood, Stevens remained responsive to the religious symbolism of the Christian tradition throughout his life.

In this chapter, I will demonstrate that, despite the widely-accepted presumption that Stevens' poetics arise from a rational and empirical humanism (Surette 7), their character shows Stevens to be motivated to find an object for belief, a search that is outlined in his poetry. His search was one of personal pietism, not corporate or dogmatic religious organization.<sup>24</sup> He states: "I do seek a center and expect to go on seeking it. I don't say that I shall not find it or that I do not expect to find it. It is the great necessity even without specific identification" (*LWS* 584). As Stevens wrote in a letter on December 9, 1940, "it is a habit of mind with me to be thinking of some substitute for religion. I don't necessarily mean some substitute for the church . . . My trouble, and the trouble of a great many people, is the loss of belief in the sort of God in Whom we were all brought up to believe" (348). The question of belief, of finding a new object of belief adequate to his time and separate from his religious formation, was the impetus for his reinvented poetics. Stevens draws on the Protestant tradition of his childhood in his own struggle to develop a new "supreme fiction," a fiction which is at once religious and transcendental in character (Carroll 1). Though it might be unconventional to think of this philosophical poet as religious or difficult to reconcile his anti-pietistic reputation with a religiously-oriented inquiry, his effort to create a new paradigm of belief in place of Protestant orthodoxy was an integral

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<sup>24</sup> By pietism, I mean "the tendency to emphasize individual devotion and ethical behaviour rather than the authority and corporate life of a church" (*OED*), not the specific Protestant movement in the seventeenth- and eighteenth century in Germany.

aspect of Stevens' poetry, prompting the "deep strain of the mystical . . . the desire for transcendence that runs from his first to his last poems" (McCann 1).

To demonstrate this argument, this chapter will show that, although his revisioning varies within his body of work—a fact which is unsurprising in poetry which proclaims that "the cancellings, / The negations are never final" (*CPP* 357)—Stevens' poetry incorporates the sacramental as a metaphor describing the possibility of transformative, individual participation in the material world. In poems written earlier in Stevens' career, such as "The Comedian as the Letter C" (1923) and "The Man with the Blue Guitar" (1937), this participation is described as the momentary fulfillment of encounter with the pure materiality of the world. Later, beginning with the poems of Stevens' *Transport to Summer* (1947) and continuing in *The Auroras of Autumn* (1950) and *The Rock* (1954), Stevens elaborates other possibilities, even the possibility of the experience of transcendence, with more clarity and certainty. Though the shape of Stevens' vision for a transcendental, sacramental vision and ontology varies and changes, Protestant sacramental language shapes the nature of the unity that Stevens desired with "[e]verything, the spirit's alchemicana / Included, the spirit that goes roundabout / And through included, not merely the visible" (*CPP* 402). In Stevens' poetry, it is the "believer's" participation in the sacramental nature of the physical world which makes the moment of vision possible, though the vision may be material—"the strict austerity / Of one vast, subjugating, final tone" (24) of the early *Harmonium* poems—or transcendent, represented in the "fulfillment of fulfillments" (378) of some of the later poems. For the initiated, this sacramental experience effects a sanctification while the individual experiences the physical world as "something given

to make whole” (24).<sup>25</sup> The sacramental nature and sanctifying work of the physical world as it is described in Stevens’ poetry comes to represent the possibility of a “post-Christian covenant” promising “a renewed, authentic relation of humanity and the earth” (Garrard 59). Finally, for Stevens, this “sanctification” that is authorized by participation in the sacramental reality of place results in meaningful aesthetic production and poetry, in particular, as the individual takes on an identity as a native of place. This is “The poem of pure reality, untouched / By trope or deviation, straight to the word, / Straight to the transfixing object” (*CPP* 402), indeed this type of poem forms the foundation of an entirely new catechism of belief.

## II. Stevens in the Empty Hall of Orthodoxy

Not surprisingly, critics have commented extensively on the anti-pietistic poetry of Stevens’ early volumes, expounding on his attempts to wrestle with Christianity in a number of key poems in *Harmonium*, particularly “Sunday Morning” (1914), “A High-Toned Old Christian Woman” (1922), and “Ploughing on Sunday” (1919), all poems which are regularly anthologized. These poems show Stevens’ efforts to free poetry from the kind of moralizing prevalent in the poetry of some of his predecessors, above all the Fireside Poets—William Cullen Bryant, Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, James Russell Lowell, Oliver Wendell Holmes. In a journal he kept while a student at Harvard, Stevens criticized these poets, writing, the “New England school of poets were too hard thinkers. For them there was no pathos in the rose except as it went to point a moral or adorn a tale. I like my philosophy smothered in beauty and not the opposite” (qtd. in

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<sup>25</sup> In the theological idiom of Protestant Christianity, sanctification refers to “the action of the Holy Spirit in sanctifying or making holy the believer, by implanting within him the Christian graces and the destruction of sinful affections” (“sanctification,” *OED*).

Bates 167). Reacting against what he perceived as the cloying moralizing prevalent in this school of poetry, Stevens attacked not only sentimentalism about beauty and art but also the religious institutions of his own childhood, the same religious institutions in which the Fireside poets encouraged Americans to trust (Pearce, *Continuity* 204). The anti-pietistic poems which followed from this desire attempt to move beyond religious categories, sometimes, as in “Sunday Morning,” celebrating pagan traditions, through “simple identification[s] with natural cycles” (McCann10). Nevertheless, even the anti-pietistic poems of *Harmonium* address the theme of “the loss of faith and the search for a replacement suitable for a changed and decentred world” (5).

As his anti-pietistic poetry demonstrates, Stevens’ experiments with finding new objects for belief were coupled with a biting critique of the puritanical Protestantism that formed his religious milieu in the United States. Indeed, these poems demonstrate a marked anti-Protestantism. In them, Stevens judges Protestantism guilty of promoting a focus on the ethereal promises of a metaphysical heaven that distracts the individual from what they might have better sought and found “in comforts of the sun, / In pungent fruit and bright, green wings, or else / In any balm or beauty of the earth” (*CPP* 53). In “Sunday Morning,” which Vendler calls his *Götterdämmerung*, or his death of the gods (*Extended* 55), Stevens offers a critical assessment of American Protestantism as it was inherited from the Judeo-Christian traditions of the early immigrants to the United States. In its eight stanzas, Stevens sets out to counter Christian orthodoxy with his interpretation of the human experience of the natural—even mundane—cycles of life and death. The poem becomes a long elegy which mourns the end of a Christian tradition that Stevens believed was limited to “silent shadows and . . . dreams” (*CPP* 53). In a reversal of Christian ideology which warns its adherents to anticipate the eternal kingdom of

God, “Sunday Morning” judges Christianity guilty of leading its followers astray by teaching them to focus on the “imperishable bliss” of an immaterial afterlife. In the poem, Stevens turns away from the orthodox Christian vision of mortal life as the place of waiting for admittance to such bliss, instead resolutely fixing his gaze on the earth. “Sunday Morning” depicts life on a physical earth that is an “island solitude, unsponsored, free” (*CPP* 56). The earth is set apart from divine purposes and is ultimately bound to perish. The vision of reality inscribed in the poem—which proclaims that, for better or worse, physical life is the sum total of existence—is one source of its deeply elegiac and melancholy tone. Still, the poem proposes that this melancholy will pass when the last echoes fade of the “voice that cries, ‘The tomb in Palestine / Is not the porch of spirits lingering. / It is the grave of Jesus, where he lay’” (56). Though a resurrection will not occur, the poem holds out the hope that the celebration that follows from achieving freedom from religious sophistry will be in itself enough to dispel melancholy.

Stevens’ poem also argues that the “balm or beauty of the earth” can certainly be, when properly valued, an adequate substitute for the “thought of heaven” which Christianity had previously offered as consolation for grief elicited by death. In doing so, he continues the tradition of some of the nineteenth-century American Romantic poets. Consider, for example, Emerson’s “chiding Sea” in his poem “Sea-shore” (1867). In Emerson’s poem, the sea calls to the observer, affirming its all-sufficiency:

Say, Pilgrim, why so late and slow to come?

Am I not always here, thy summer home?

Is not my voice thy music, morn and eve?

My breath thy healthful climate in the heats,

My touch thy antidote, my bay thy bath? (*May-Day* 125).

Here, Emerson attributes a type of subjectivity to the sea, thereby making it possible for the human observer to find that it is not “the simple genuine self against the whole world” (qtd. Pearce, *Continuity* 153). Instead, the one to whom the sea calls can experience the feeling of being welcomed, fostered, and cared for by an element of the physical world that is both fruitful and generous to humanity. Following Emerson, “Sunday Morning” offers a hope—wistful and even unsure though it may be at points (*Extended* 55)—that the individual may experience liberation and fulfilment in this life once the physical world is recognized as capable of providing the ultimate good. This liberation is, first of all, a freedom from the idea of an external, transcendent divinity. Part two of “Sunday Morning” states, “Divinity must live within herself” (*CPP* 53), but this is a divinity which is completely areligious. Like Emerson’s chiding Sea,” it gives “a hint of that which changes not” (*May-Day*), but remains distinct from Protestant notions of the divine. It is the expression of an almost synesthetic identification of the self and all of the self’s emotions—passion, grief, elation—with nature and the seasonal round. Turning away from the idea of a transcendent deity, the vital experience for the female figure in “Sunday Morning” is to “let herself be a mirror of the nature that engendered her and of which she is a part” (McCann 9). The identification of self with the external world, which, as part four makes clear, should lead to the desire for this external world above all else, is the source of this powerful new divinity, though this divinity may last only as long as life and desire last.

In parts six and seven, “Sunday Morning” extends the implications of the identification of self with the physical world rather than any notion of the transcendent. Part six ends with the lines “Death is the mother of beauty, mystical, / Within whose burning bosom we devise / Our earthly mothers waiting, sleeplessly” (*CPP* 55). Carroll argues that, by including the word

“mystical” at the end of stanza six, Stevens hints that the “ring of men” chanting “their boisterous devotion to the sun” (*CPP* 55-56) in stanza seven has a transcendent element which “shifts the locus of ‘divinity’ from the ‘moods’ and ‘passions’ of the individual to a region of experience that transcends individual consciousness” (Carroll 52). The individual’s experience of union and unity with the natural in part two is expanded into a description of a communal experience with others who share the same perspective. The “ring of men” in section seven is oriented around the sun, which is itself “naked among them, like a savage source” (*CPP* 56). Men and sun stand together in “the heavenly fellowship / Of men that perish and of summer morn,” different parts of one all-encompassing cosmos: “Their chant shall be a chant of paradise, / Out of their blood, returning to the sky” (56). They model human participation in nature, albeit expressed as androcentric and bearing the masculine force of the Christian orthodoxy of Stevens’ early formation.

In later stanzas of the poem, Stevens qualifies his assertion that there exists a possible transcendence. By the final stanzas of the poem, the possibility of the transcendent is muted, even absent and the exuberance of human participation in nature is no longer present. The final section of the poem presents an array of religious alternatives to orthodoxy. Following the fact of bare existence—“We live”—the poem presents a variety of possible ways to understand this fact, each alternative marked by the line break and the word “or.” “We live in an old chaos of the sun, / Or old dependency of day and night, / Or island solitude, unsponsored” (*CPP* 56). In the end, “doctrinal choice dissolves in mystery” (Vendler, *Ocean* 256). The tone of this stanza is elegiac and the diction is ambivalent. Such is the paradox: “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” (*CPP* 56). Humanity is “free” but exists in a freedom that is “inescapable” and,

ultimately, vaguely troubling. The same sky which houses the sun as the source of all life and energy in part seven of the poem is also the source of “an atmosphere of spiritual alienation” in part eight (Carroll 55). The process of exploration and exegesis which this stanza undertakes calls into question the individual’s ability to experience any transcendence through participation in the natural cycles of the physical. Ultimately, the poem does not indicate that it chooses any option.

In the end, “Sunday Morning” maintains an ambivalence toward two of the possible remediations that it proposes to a discarded Christianity—naturalism and transcendentalism. The cold uncertainty of the final stanza suggests a degree of uncertainty about the consolations of naturalism. But neither does the earthly consolation of “Sunday Morning” seem to satisfy, suggesting Stevens was unconvinced by the possible solution of a transcendental fusion of divinity and mind that was proposed by Emerson, Thoreau and others among Stevens’ forerunners. The nature inscribed in Stevens’ “Sunday Morning” differs from Thoreau’s “organismic” nature “imbued with spirit, knowable through subjective experience in addition to rational thought” (McClintock 11). It also differs from Emerson’s sea, a representative of a type of natural world which invites the observer to experience the comfort and relation that is also described in Emerson’s “The Over-Soul” (*Collected II* 276). Where Emerson celebrated the ability to “come from our remote station on the circumference instantaneously to the center of the world” (*Collected II* 276), Stevens’ poem, with its vision of an “unsponsored” existence in an “island solitude,” follows a trajectory that moves away from a notion of unity at a centre, tending instead to emphasize isolation. This is a vision which fears humanity is fundamentally and finally alone. As such, the conclusions of the poem doubt the possibility of experiencing a synesthetic connection of self and world that stanza two had initially proposed. “The measures

destined for her soul” that “Sunday Morning” proposes are limited to the seasonal cycles of the physical world, but these guarantee neither warmth nor comfort.

Still, of the available options, Stevens turns to the natural world as the best and truest object of worship, if people must indeed worship. “Sunday Morning” suggests that, faced with a choice between some form of naturalism, an impotent Christianity and a questionable paganism, the physical and material is the obvious choice. The physical world itself must be enough, regardless of how much sorrow arises from that tentative conclusion. In the end, “Sunday Morning” gestures towards the liberation inherent in the movement away from old belief systems to a new form of attachment to the natural world. In this poem, Stevens is unwilling to venture any final moment of vision except that which is afforded by the physical world. A new relationship with the earth is itself the source of a type of an entirely natural, though limited, sanctification. There is no visionary alternative to the Christian myth beyond this identification of the individual self with the physical world. The only prophecy contained in “Sunday Morning,” then, is a prophecy of the power of relinquishment—a word and concept to which the poem frequently returns—with nothing more and nothing less left to satisfy than the physical world.

## **II. Beyond Naturalism: Reviving the Inheritance of Sacramentalism**

“Sunday Morning” memorializes Stevens’ break with Protestant Christianity and demonstrates his attempt to find satisfaction in the alternative creed of naturalism, though the results of this attempt are ambivalent. As Stevens continues to search for a ground for belief, the arc of his poetics ultimately builds toward a new orthodoxy of wisdom. Though naturalism alone would not suffice to satisfy Stevens’ desire, the relationship between the individual and the natural

world explored in “Sunday Morning” remains integral to Stevens’ creation of his “supreme fiction,” even if the process is full of uncertainties, doubt, trial, and error. Carroll observes that,

[b]y the time he is a young man and has begun keeping journals, it is already ‘an old argument’ with him “that the true religious force in the world is not the church but the world itself: the mysterious callings of Nature and our responses.” He still feels the pathos of traditional religious worship, but the poet in him responds more powerfully to the divinity in nature, where he sees “every leaf and blade of grass revealing or rather betokening the Invisible.” (32)

Along the way, despite his critique of the religion of his childhood, Stevens continues to call on its images, metaphors and doctrines. These borrowings are charted in the course of his poetry, even built into poems that express Stevens’ doubt about the possibilities of belief and transcendence. Whether he is exploring an “unrelieved materialism” (McCann 27)—observable in some of Stevens’ mid-career poetry such as “The Man with the Blue Guitar” (1937)—or experimenting with a revised Romanticism, the Protestant Christian tradition in which Stevens was steeped remains an integral part of his poetic vision, shaping the nature of his alternatives to both his heritage and the Romantic transcendence that he sometimes attacks, sometimes reprises.

The theology which influenced the church’s teaching about the material nature of the sacraments influenced the manner in which theologians and believers sought to understand and explain the material nature of the physical realm as well. The sacramental nature of the physical world rested on a foundational teaching about the physical world’s “derivation from, its dependence upon, and its reflection of the Divine Maker” (Scott 52) who created everything for human use and enjoyment (Oelschlager 61). This doctrine is inscribed in article twelve of the shorter catechism which likely would have been a part of the religious training in Stevens’

Presbyterian upbringing (Westminster 4). In the same way in which sacramental language made bread and wine a symbol of the body and blood of Christ (Berkhof 657), theologians also argued that the physical world could be seen as a symbol of the spiritual. However, based on the church's theology, it was also taught that the physical world participated in the Fall of humankind and was therefore similarly subjected to decay and death. Based on these twin beliefs, Protestants tended to teach that the physical world serves as a symbol and sign of the divine providence of God, sometimes called by its theological term "*revelation realis*" (36). Despite its participation in the Fall, the visible world retains its identity as "a created fabric, held together by a continuous emanation of divine power, apt to be dissolved into nothing should the divine energy be withheld" (Miller, *Mind* 14). The fragility of the ongoing existence of the physical world, its dependence on divine support, was meant to encourage Christians to focus on "the coming of Christ and the possibility of redemption in heaven" (Oelschlager 63). Consequently, "what had seemed real – nature and ourselves as part of it – now turns out to be unreal, pure phantasmagoria; and that which had seemed unreal – our concern with the absolute or God – that is the true reality" (66).

There is diversity within Christian tradition in how the finer points of this doctrine are described and understood. Still, within the post-Reformation, Calvinist Protestant theology of the nineteenth-century eastern United States, church-goers, like the boy Stevens and his family, would have been encouraged to have confidence that the natural world was "intelligible and significant, that it is directed by a consciousness who orders all things for the best, even though in many instances the benefit is not immediately obvious" (Miller, *Errand* 114). The source of this encouragement was based on the doctrine of God's providential sustenance and presence within the physical world. By choosing to sustain the physical world, the divine gains another

means of revelation, communicating to humanity the immutable truths of eternity through a fallen and temporal medium, but obviating human spiritual relationships by means of nature and any of its possible sacramental powers. This belief dovetails nicely with the prevalent notion in the writing of Romantics like Emerson and Coleridge that the physical world has a meaning that is subjectively and objectively knowable, a belief that was likely influenced by their familiarity with that same Protestant doctrine (*Collected II* 276; Pearce, *Continuity* 154). Stevens' sacramental view of the physical world demonstrates his inscription by this belief, which "proposes that certain objects or actions or words or places belonging to the ordinary spheres of life may convey to us a unique illumination of the whole mystery of our existence, because in these actions and realities something "numinous" is resident, something holy and gracious" (Scott 49).

Though teaching about these sacraments was an integral part of a religious upbringing, Stevens' writing does not explicitly reference the doctrinal concept of the sacraments. This fact is unsurprising since Stevens takes a strong stance against the Protestant religious tradition, particularly in the writing of his earlier adulthood. Though Stevens does not refer to this religious instruction which would have been a part of his childhood, it is evident in the manner in which the careful apprehension of the physical world in his poetry becomes a means for Stevens to "focalize" what is "Radically Significant" in the world around him in order to convey "an inward and spiritual grace" (Scott 50). Toward this end, Stevens uses sacramental language in order to gesture to new ways of engaging with place.

"The Comedian as Letter C" (1923) provides early examples of this in Stevens' poetry. Written nine years after "Sunday Morning," this poem exploits the close ties between Orthodox Christianity and the features of traditional quest poems in order to explore possible sacramental

connections between individual and place.<sup>26</sup> Indeed, the relationship between Christianity and the quest poem helps to contextualize and explain some of the overtly religious language in the poem. Though Stevens ironizes this tradition through his mockery of Romanticism, as well as by his determination *not* to exalt the hero at the end of the poem (Frye 186), “The Comedian” nevertheless closely follows other elements of the pattern of quest poems. The motif of the journey in the tradition of quest poems is frequently blended with religious concepts of the “crossing . . . from death to second life or from exile to redemption” (Hartman 307). Final redemption is a product of the purification which takes place during the journey. Stevens drew on the paired concepts of exile and redemption in “The Journal of Crispin” (1920-1921), the poem upon which “The Comedian” is based. Section IV of this first poem states that it was a “reproach / That first drove Crispin to his wandering” (*CPP* 994). Similarly, “The Comedian” portrays Crispin’s journey away from civilization into exile in order to find redemption and a renewal of life. The first section of “The Comedian as the Letter C” (1923) describes a rite of purification whereby the adventurer, Crispin, undergoes a purgative cleansing during his sea voyage from the old to the new world. In section one, Stevens’ speaker says, “The salt hung on his [Crispin’s] spirit like a frost, / The dead brine melted in him like a dew / Of winter, until nothing of himself / Remained, except some starker, barer self / In a starker, barer world” (*CPP* 23). The language describing Crispin’s experiences during this journey into exile draws on Biblical symbolism and, specifically, imagery and metaphors related to the sacramental, spiritually symbolic nature of the physical world. In the context of this journey into exile, this “dew / Of winter” might be understood as the dew related to the manna described in the book of Exodus, “small as the hoar frost on the ground” (Exodus 16:14). Within Jewish and Christian

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<sup>26</sup> The poem is also influenced by Shelley’s *Alastor* (1816) and Keats’s *Endymion* (1818) (Longenbach, *Plain* 91).

theology, manna was a symbol of the divine's guidance as well as his provision for their needs. It was a material sign of a spiritual reality. Within "The Comedian," this manna-like salt is a material sign that has a spiritual significance—it is sea salt that hangs, not on Crispin's body, but on his "*spirit* like frost," where it "melted in him like a dew." Imitating the Biblical account of the Exodus, the material sign of the dew in this section of "The Comedian" also effects a change, almost in the manner of a sacrament, in Crispin's nature.

In "The Comedian," the physical world stands as a symbol of a larger spiritual reality which changes the direction of Crispin's fate: "Here was no help before reality. / Crispin beheld and Crispin was made new" (*CPP* 24). Again following the tradition of the quest poem, this change helps to prepare Crispin for the tasks that will face him in the new world to which he is journeying. This experience of the symbolic nature of the physical world prepares Crispin for his experience in part two of the poem, subtitled "II: *Concerning the Thunderstorm of Yucatan*" (italics in original). In this section, Crispin takes shelter from a storm in a cathedral. The cathedral serves both as a symbol of the Christian religion, but it is a symbol from which spiritual power and Christian content has been evacuated. Within the physical space of the cathedral, it is the sound of the weather—"The wind, / Tempestuous clarion, with heavy cry" which Crispin hears, not the voice of the cleric which one might ordinarily expect to hear within that space. A mystical or transcendental element is introduced, not through the symbols of Judeo-Christianity, but through the sounds and sights of the storm, the "Gesticulating lightning, mystical" which "Made pallid flutter" (*CPP* 26). While kneeling in the Cathedral "with the rest" and hearing the sounds of the storm, Crispin finds himself paradoxically "free, / And more than free, elate, intent, profound" (26). In this moment in which he experiences the power of the physical world and a correspondent freedom within the confines of the cathedral, Crispin also

hears the “quintessential fact” of the storm’s “proclamation.” Crispin is paradoxically free, but also “possessed” by a new self. This new self “possessing him, / . . . was not in him in the crusty town / From which he sailed” (26). Given Stevens’ interest in etymology (Cook, *Poetry* 7), it is likely that Stevens used the word “quintessential” to exploit the word’s relationship to classical and medieval philosophy. Within these philosophical systems, the quintessence was believed to be “a fifth essence in addition to the four elements, supposed to be the substance of which the celestial bodies were composed and to be latent in all things” (*OED*). Bloom argues this “self possessing him” is the very voice of the storm which “needs to be vociferated again through his lips to the unawakened American earth” (*Climate* 78). However, the setting and allusions to Protestant rebirth throughout the poem also suggest the possibility that this “self possessing him” is the new self that is born through sacramental encounter with place, the self reborn in the moment of crossing. Crispin “vociferates” in response to the storm, but he does so *as himself*, by means of a self that has been reconstituted through the process of the journey. The material world stands as a physical symbol of the “ding an sich” (*CPP* 23). “The Comedian” does not try to define the nature of this reality but it does suggest the possibility of a communion with something beyond the human. The cathedral, a symbol of a Christian orthodoxy that is emptied of its former power, becomes the scene in which Crispin is able to experience the fact that he is reborn in response to the power and presence of the natural world. His participation in the materiality of the new world effects a spiritual change, a communion with the elemental reality of the new world, a sacramental revisioning, however ironic.

As in the Biblical narrative of the Exodus, Crispin’s sacramental communion with the materiality of the place of the new world leads to a redemption that is both personal and communal. His journey into exile leads to the propagation of a population supposedly able to

remediate the sins of their forebears. In the “The Journal of Crispin,” the poem summarizes this in the following way: “Crispin delineates his progeny: / A race of natives in a primitive land, / But primitive because it is more true / To its begetting than its patriarch, / A race obedient to its origins” (*CPP* 992-3). Crispin’s re-birth makes a new manner of life possible for his descendants. This concern with origins is found throughout Stevens’ poetry. In the context of this poem, it suggests it is necessary to slough off old ways. The “distortion of romance” (24) must be done away with and, in a moment of overt reference to the anthropomorphic Christian God, Crispin’s pilgrimage must also “drive away / The shadow of his fellows from the skies, / And, from their stale intelligence released, / To make a new intelligence prevail” (30). For the new “race of natives,” nothing remains to separate the individual from the elemental, originality of place. They exist in communion of “relentless contact” (27) with the physical world. This new race exists free from the “shadow” (24) of any egotistical self-projections; the anthropomorphized god of the monotheistic religions is forgotten in favour of “blissful liaison, / Between [self] and [his/her] environment” (28). In the poem, being “obedient to its origins” means the race lives in accordance with the physical reality of their place. Here, “The natives of the rain are rainy men” (993). As heirs of Crispin’s redemption, “The Comedian as the Letter C” imagines the inhabitants of its fictive “Carolina” as joint heirs to a new, vital, and enmeshed relationship with the place of this new-found Eden, an Eden happily empty of the Judeo-Christian categories of God and of any divine transcendence.

Crispin’s vision will ultimately fail in “The Comedian,” however. “[D]ay by day, now this thing and now that / Confined him” (32-33) and the possibility of sacramental communion between person and place is relinquished. In contrast to the man on the journey who “vociferate[es]” the storm of the Yucatan, the Crispin at journey’s end finds himself with nothing

to say: “deep a sound fell down it grew to be / A long soothsaying silence down and down” (34). Yet the vision of a sacramental communion in the natural world, however momentary, stands in the poem as a symbol of a renewed spiritual vitality. Though it would be some years before Stevens would revisit and expand on this vision to its fullest extent in the poems of *The Auroras of Autumn* or *The Rock*, this early experiment with sacramentalism helps Stevens to limn the possibility of a new existence within the physical space of the new continent.

Stevens’ struggle to navigate these possibilities places him in the company of the Romantic poets attempting to “solve” the problem of self, self-consciousness, and nature (Hartman 301). A sacramental vision offers a metaphor for a possible communion between spiritual and natural or material realities. It is another avenue by which the poet may “achieve concord once more” between self and the world. Self-realization can become a moment of participation between self, the material world as represented by the symbol of the sacrament, and the spiritual reality which the sacrament represents. Thus, the believing participant can “explore the transition from self-consciousness to imagination and to achieve that transition while exploring it (and so to prove it still possible)” (307) even in a world where, for Stevens, the power of the Christian religious myth no longer held sway. As such, “The Comedian” explores the possibility of the transformation of identity as a sacramental experience with an enchanted world. In this way, the sacraments allow Stevens to find a means whereby “the wound of self is healed” by interaction with nature (309).

By adopting sacramental metaphors to describe the relationship between person place, Stevens also resists the “seduction of the poetical genius by the *genius loci*” (Hartman 319)—expressed by Stevens’ “struggle to keep things from losing their particular identities in fusion, synthesis, or cannibal devourings” (Fisher 117). While poems like “The Snow Man” (1923)

explore the possibilities of this possible fusion without much emotion, others express Stevens' fear of the loss of subjectivity that might be a part of the experience of union of self with world. "Domination of Black" (1916), for example, offers a dramatic depiction of a physical world which might easily dominate and depose the human mind. The various objects described in the poem—leaves, fire, bushes, hemlocks, and a poetic "I"—are "assimilated into each other" by the poem's "sinuous prepositions and conjunctions" until memory and the emotion of fear are the only means by which the individual retains subjectivity (Vendler, *Words* 66). In contrast to the fear about the potential sublimation of self by nature expressed in "Domination of Black," sacramentalism offers a mode of communion between person, natural or material realities, and the transcendent that does not place subjectivity at risk, which depends on the volition of the independent subject. In fact, this sacramental participation *depends* on the individual's retention of selfhood. The participant in sacramental tradition must maintain the ability to contemplate both the connections and the distinction between the sign and symbol of the sacrament. The participant is strengthened by his or her experience of the metaphysical, but retains his or her individuality. By applying sacramentalism to the quest to experience unity with nature, Stevens is able to propose a means of maintaining individuality even in the act of participation. This sense of the sacramental provides a logic which allows a return to a "state of nature" (Hartman 304) which does not threaten individual self-consciousness. It provides Stevens with an "aesthetic 'immune system'" (Fisher 117).

### **III. The Nadir of Belief**

Stevens' poetry of the 1930s indicates that he had more or less completely dismissed the possibility of transcendence as wishful thinking or naiveté and entered a period of "unrelieved materialism" (McCann 27) when "the romantic visionary tradition seems already to have

exhausted itself” (Carroll 5). Written more than two decades after “Sunday Morning,” “The Man with the Blue Guitar” (1937) expresses the nadir of Stevens’ belief in the possibility of the transcendent. In section XXI of this poem, Stevens compares “all the gods” to “one’s shadow magnified, / Lord of the body, looking down, / As now and called most high” (*CPP* 144). The section ends with a litany-like affirmation of “One’s self and the mountains of one’s land, / Without shadows, without magnificence, / The flesh, the bone, the dirt, the stone” (144).<sup>27</sup> In lines seven and eight of section V, Stevens writes, “The earth, for us, is flat and bare. / There are no shadows” (136). In 1940, he glossed this section in a letter to his long-time correspondent Hi Simons, telling him that it means “[e]verything is as you see it. There is no other world” (*LWS* 360). In the flat light of this world, poetry takes the place of religion and its impulses: “Poetry / Exceeding music must take the place / Of empty heaven and its hymns” (*CPP* 136-37). Even the possibilities of paganism and a nature-based transcendence that were celebrated in “Sunday Morning” or “The Comedian” have been put aside. All that remains for comfort is the work of imagination as it is expressed in poetry.

Even so, Stevens persists in engaging sacramental metaphors to describe the relationship between individual and place in “Blue Guitar”. In section XXVIII, Stevens turns to sacramentalism to explore possible relationships between the person, the word and the world in the absence of the transcendent. First, this section explicitly rejects the idea that humanity is the offspring of God. Stevens’ speaker states:

I am a native in this world  
And think in it as a native thinks,

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<sup>27</sup> This quartet—flesh, bone, dirt, stone—is also found in Bringhurst’s “Hachadura.”

Gesu, not a native of a mind

Thinking the thoughts I call my own,

Native, a native in the world

And like a native think in it.” (*CPP* 147-48)

Stevens’ speaker distinguishes his position from both Protestant Judeo-Christian and Romantic beliefs in the transcendent, in particular, by repudiating the doctrine of Concursus. Within Protestantism, this doctrine postulates that the divine God is, while still somehow separate from the material world, also diffused throughout it as a result of his act of creation and his ongoing work to sustain it (Miller, *New England Mind* 33). The belief in the orthodox insistence that man and nature are corrupt and lacking the right of power to create anything except with God’s help waned during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries (Pearce, *Continuity* 24). As the doctrine which supported this belief was called into question, the pendulum swung toward the idea that “God is diffused through nature, and the substance of man is the substance of god, . . . that man is divine, that nature is the garment of the Over-Soul” (Miller, *Errand* 196). Taken to its logical conclusion, the individual might assume that, as one part of creation, man’s thoughts are also the divine’s thoughts (Pearce, *Continuity* 5). Stevens’ speaker rejects this notion just as adherents to some of the Protestant sects did, though perhaps for different reasons. His thoughts are his own, not the thoughts of “a mind / Thinking thoughts [he] calls [his] own.”

The resonances between this section of “Blue Guitar” and a passage from the book of Acts help shed light on some possible motives for Stevens’ rejection. The seventeenth chapter of the book of Acts records a story where the Apostle Paul addresses the Greeks of the Areopagus

in response to seeing an altar that was dedicated to an “unknown god.”<sup>28</sup> In the Biblical account, the Apostle Paul instructs the Greeks saying, “God that made the world and all things therein . . . giveth to all life, and breath, and all things . . . That they should seek the Lord . . .and find him, though he be not far from every one of us: For in him we live, and move, and have our being; as certain also of your own poets have said, For we are also his offspring” (Acts 17:22-8).

Specifically addressing his comments to the Christian figure of Jesus, called in this section by his Italian name, “Gesù” (*CPP* 147), Stevens’ speaker draws on the language of the passage from Acts to assert his independence from the divine. Using the diction from the closing of Paul’s speech, Stevens’ asserts, “Here I inhale a profounder strength / And as I am, I speak and move / And things are as I think they are” (148). Paul’s statement in the book of Acts is made to assert that humanity’s existence is daily made possible by the sustaining power of God, who “giveth to all life, and breath,” but Stevens turns it to assert his autonomy. The “breath” that Paul claims is given by God in the book of Acts is nothing in “Blue Guitar” but “[t]he wind in which the dead leaves blow.” The works of the imagination alluded to in the passage from Acts that once asserted ““We are his offspring,”” are, in “Blue Guitar,” the works of “a native in the world”

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<sup>28</sup> See Acts 17:22-28. “Then Paul stood in the midst of Mars' hill, and said, Ye men of Athens, I perceive that in all things ye are too superstitious. For as I passed by, and beheld your devotions, I found an altar with this inscription, TO THE UNKNOWN GOD. Whom therefore ye ignorantly worship, him declare I unto you. God that made the world and all things therein, seeing that he is Lord of heaven and earth, dwelleth not in temples made with hands; Neither is worshipped with men's hands, as though he needed any thing, seeing he giveth to all life, and breath, and all things; And hath made of one blood all nations of men for to dwell on all the face of the earth, and hath determined the times before appointed, and the bounds of their habitation; That they should seek the Lord, if haply they might feel after him, and find him, though he be not far from every one of us: For in him we live, and move, and have our being; as certain also of your own poets have said, For we are also his offspring.”

asserting that the individual's profound connection is to place. This is a revision of the relationship between person and place that directly affects the kind of cultural work such "thinking" can perform (Altieri, *Modernity* 10). It makes poetic thought valuable for the manner in which it expresses the intersection between person and place, not for the way it expresses the working of the divine in the physical world.

The resonances in this section of "Blue Guitar" with the work of a number of Romantic poetics suggests that Stevens is also responding to the Romantic vision of the quasi-divinity of man, "an Adam who . . . might well be one with God" (Pearce, *Continuity* 5). This vision as it was developed by Stevens' poetic predecessors is an extension of the doctrine of *concursum*. Though she comments that Stevens' "verses on belonging and thinking should not be ascribed to any single philosophic stance," Fisher suggests that Stevens may also be "strumming a variation on a theme by Coleridge" in this section of the poem. Fisher argues that Stevens is responding to Coleridge's notion of the "native Passion," a belief "that great poetry requires serious thought" (Fisher 125). I think it is likely that this section is responding to Wordsworth's ecstatic description of "the presence that disturbs [the poem's speaker] with joy" in "Tintern Abbey" (*Poetical Works* I. 94). Wordsworth describes a presence in "Tintern Abbey" that is "interfused" with everything in the material world, including "the mind of man." It is a "motion and a spirit" that "impels / All thinking things, all objects of all thought / And rolls through all things" (ll. 94, 96, 99-102). In Wordsworth's writing and cosmology, "the sentient relation between man and nature derives from the transcendental "soul" that he identifies with "the God who sees into the heart" (Carroll 34). The aesthetics of this conflation of God and human soul are evident when the speaker recognizes this sublime spirit is at work not only in nature but also "in the language of the sense," where he perceives the sublime at work as "the anchor of my purest thoughts, the

nurse, / The guide, the guardian of my heart, and soul / Of all my moral being (Wordsworth, *Poetical Works* 108-111).

The speaker of “Blue Guitar” denies that “the wave / In which the watery grasses flow” acts in any way similar to the River Wye in “Tintern Wye” which “rolls through all things.” For the speaker of “The Blue Guitar,” there is no trace of a sublime or interfusing presence “in the language of the sense.” The speaker disagrees with Wordsworth’s assertion that there is “a spirit, that impels / All thinking things, all objects of all thought” (ll. 100-1). The work of the imagination is a “native” thinking that is a simple consequence of the poet identity as a “native in this world,” nothing more. Indeed, “Poetry / Exceeding music must take the place / Of empty heaven and its hymns” (*CPP* 136-37). Poetry is part and parcel of the pure materiality that “The Man with the Blue Guitar” describes. Such poetry both gives and takes “[i]n the universal intercourse.” As such, the poem rises from the aesthetic reality in which it exists.

However, even while proclaiming the import of the sheer materiality of the physical world, Stevens is unable—or perhaps unwilling—to completely abandon the idea of an inspiration external to the imagination. The material world is limited to its physicality, yet, somehow, it still provides the “profounder strength” that inspires the speaker who “[inhales] . . . strength” (148). This is a strength which enables the poem’s speaker to “speak and move” (148). This respiration gives life to creative action as an aesthetic response. Even as Stevens questions and undermines belief in the transcendent, he continues to turn with longing toward the idea that the solely physical still pronounces his experience in understanding it as a symbol or sign of the essence of a transcendent reality. Continuing in section XXIV, the speaker hints at a “baffled longing for spiritual fulfillment” (Carroll 64), suggesting the presence of a lingering desire to find in the material world an aesthetic product that can meet a persistent metaphysical hunger.

The speaker in this section communicates in the convolutions and diminutions typical of Stevens' poetry, attesting to the intense desire "to know": "A poem like a missal found / In the mud, a missal for that young man, / That scholar hungriest for that book, / The very book, or less, a page, / Or, at the least, a phrase, that phrase, / A hawk of life, that latined phrase: / To know" (*CPP* 145-146). A missal is a religious document, meaning either "a book containing the service of the Mass for the whole year" or "a Roman Catholic book of devotions, especially when illuminated" (*OED*). By means of this simile, Stevens makes an explicit connection between a religious, devotional source and material reality, "the mud" of the physical earth. However, Stevens' speaker will not long ponder this unmet longing, drawing back after expressing this desire by quickly reducing it to jest: "I play" (*CPP* 146). Truly, if this be play, it is a play without mirth, hinting at grief over the loss of sacramental possibilities between poetry, the metaphysical, and the spiritual.

#### **IV. Sacramentalism in Stevens' Later Poetry**

Stevens did not long remain in the nadir of belief which characterizes the poems of *The Man With the Blue Guitar*. Beginning with *Parts of a World* (1942), Stevens turns away from skepticism to pursue visionary transcendence. For example, "Landscape with Boat" begins to explore the possibilities of belief. In this poem, a speaker who has "brushed away the thunder, then the clouds, / Then the colossal illusion of heaven" nevertheless finds himself "want[ing] to see," "to know," "the neutral centre, the ominous element, / The single-colored, colorless, primitive" (220). Even while persistently denying that anything can be known with certainty, "It was his nature to suppose, . . . He received what he denied. / But as truth to be accepted, he supposed / A truth beyond all truth" (220). This "supposing" which is still not the same as belief hints at the possibility of a different mode of existence, one which points towards the

possibilities of connection between the individual and the broader world where the speaker might say, “The thing I hum appears to be / The rhythm of this celestial pantomime” (221). In “Contrary Theses II,” another poem from *Parts of a World*, skepticism is left behind in the wake of desire and experience. In this poem, the main figure, another third-person “He,” “wanted and looked for a final refuge, / From the bombastic intimations of winter” (242). Instead of the passive “supposing” of the male figure in “Landscape With Boat,” this figure is active, in motion. “He walked toward / An abstract, of which the sun, the dog, the boy / Were contours.” The reward of his desire and his activity is experience, for a moment, of a transcendent reality, “[t]he premiss (*sic*) from which all things were conclusions” (242). This notion of essential and integral unity is one to which Stevens will frequently return in his poetry, alternately celebrating and interrogating it, as he presses towards his visionary poems of his late volumes.

Stevens returns to this notion of a central unity experienced in fleeting moments in “Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction” (1942). The poem begins with a provocative and cryptic rhetorical statement: “And for what, except for you, do I feel love?” (329). The person or thing to whom or to which this question is addressed remains unidentified, but the syntax of the brief introduction suggests the possibility that the “you” being addressed may be the “living changingness” of a light in which the speaker “sit[s] at rest, / For a moment in the central of our being” (329). This living, changing light is contrasted to the “uncertain light of single, certain truth,” which pales in comparison to the living light of the stanza’s addressee. In this introductory statement, the stanza reaffirms Stevens’ suspicion and rejection of the dogmatic truth typical of religious systems. Instead, it celebrates the “vivid transparence” inherent in a “light” that is mutable and non-doctrinaire, a “first idea” or truth that is quick to escape “the ravishments” that would seek to make the first idea static, concrete, removing it from the reality

of existence in a physical world. The sections that follow this introductory stanza continue to celebrate the significance of the momentary experience of the transcendent or absolute:

The poem refreshes life so that we share,  
 For a moment, the first idea . . . It satisfies  
 Belief in an immaculate beginning

And sends us, winged by an unconscious will,  
 To an immaculate end. (*CPP* 330-1)

This momentary epiphanic experience “brings back a power again / That gives a candid kind to everything” (331). In other words, the momentary experience of transcendence illuminates the underlying “kind-ness,” kinship, familial bond of that which exists (*OED*). This bond is also revealed to be “candid,” unbiased, but, to draw on older senses of the word, pure, stainless, innocent. This innocence of kinship is the foundation for momentary experience of participation, but it is a participation wherein subjectivity is maintained: this place “is not our own and, much more, not ourselves” (*CPP* 332). Stevens’ poetics return to the notion of a communion that initiates a new mode of existential participation with the material world that avoids fusion of self *with* world.

In this visionary poetry, Stevens continues to use the Sacramental diction and metaphor of his Protestant upbringing. Consider the fourth section of “It Must Change,” part two of “Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction”:

Two things of opposite natures seem to depend  
 On one another, as a man depends

On a woman, day on night, the imagined

On the real. This is the origin of change.

Winter and spring, cold copulars, embrace

And forth the particulars of rapture come.

Music falls on the silence like a sense,

A passion that we feel, not understand.

Morning and afternoon are clasped together

And North and South are an intrinsic couple

And sun and rain a plural, like two lovers

That walk away as one in the greenest body.

.....

The partaker partakes of that which changes him.

The child that touches takes character from the thing,

The body, it touches. (*CPP* 339)

The language in this passage is robust with Biblical overtones, and certainly can be inflected by Stevens' reading of Hebrews, which, in the King James Version, shares a similar diction. Christ

is called “the captain of . . . salvation” (Hebrews 2:10) while “both he that sanctifieth and they who are sanctified are all one” (Hebrews 2:11). Later in the Biblical chapter, children are called “partakers of flesh and blood” (Hebrews 2:14). These theological resonances provide a fruitful gloss on this section of “It Must Change.” This passage echoes and incorporates these Biblical metaphors and themes of sanctification and unity through the sacraments in order to describe a possible unity of contraries. In such sacramental language, the material becomes the immaterial. It is Eucharistic in its dimensions and in its unification of the divine and the physical. The participant approaching the natural element in belief enacts this relationship. As a result, this sacramental transmutation affects lived experience. The speaker ends with the paradoxical exclamation, “Follow after, O my companion, my fellow, my self, / Sister and solace, brother and delight” (*CPP* 339). Self and other, male and female, are one and not-one, together and separate.

Stevens’ late poetry continues to envision a communion between person, material world, and transcendental reality. This is perhaps most lucidly seen in “The Hermitage at the Center” (1954). This poem weaves together two poems entailing two separate and distinct visions—one a vision of a material world and one a seemingly metaphysical vision of the transcendent where “the desired / Reclines in the temperature of heaven.” Stevens signals the distinct nature of each of the two poems by employing indentation and long dashes as rhetorical devices:

The leaves on the macadam make a noise—

How soft the grass on which the desired

Reclines in the temperature of heaven— (*CPP* 430)

Here, “The leaves on the macadam make a noise” is the first line of one poem, while “How soft the grass on which the desired / Reclines in the temperature of heaven” are the first two lines of the other. The two poems of the first four stanzas are followed and summed up by the three line coda of the last stanza which finally weaves together the various threads of the preceding four stanzas. The poem endeavours to describe the synthesis of disparate experiences; a material realm and a transcendent, metaphysical realm, a unity between past and present, spring and autumn, life and death are concurrently seen within the “binocular frame” of the poem (Vendler, *Last 4*).

The vision of a female figure is central to deciphering the possible meanings of this poem. Vendler identifies the woman in “The Hermitage at the Center’s” second poem as a version of “Keats’s central divine figure opulently whole and surrounded by her filial forms” (*Ocean 272*). For Vendler, “the desired” female figure in “The Hermitage at the Center” is a type of Primavera, an “earth-goddess” (259) of the spring. The first poem’s autumnal images of a wind that “sways” and leaves skittering down the macadam are contrasted with the second poem’s scene of peace and stillness, soft grass and the “intelligible twittering” of birds. Still, dichotomous imagery creates an impression of harmony and rest, of time slipping into quiet like “tales that were told the day before yesterday” (*CPP 430*). Another reading of this goddess figure can be located in Milton’s influence on Stevens’ poetics. Stevens refers to Milton in his journals and letters over the years (*LWS 26, 46, 90, 300*) and rethinks Milton’s poetry in various places, including, as Eleanor Cook has argued, “Sunday Morning” (*Poetry 108*). The idea of a hermitage itself in the poem’s title coupled with the presence of a female muse-type figure calls to mind

Milton's *Il Penseroso*.<sup>29</sup> Though Milton's "Melancholy" is "o'er laid with black, staid Wisdom's hue" because her "Saintly visage is too bright / To hit the Sense of human sight" (*Il Penseroso* lines 13-15), it is the "lucent children" who surround the female figure in Stevens' poem who are the bright ones. As in Milton's "Melancholy," the contemplation of Stevens' female figure in "The Hermitage" also leads to visionary experience. While reviving—and revising—Milton's *Il Penseroso*, Stevens' poem deviates from Milton's conclusions. The "extasies [that] bring all Heav'n before [the speaker's] eyes" (l. 165-166) in *Il Penseroso* are transmuted in Stevens' poem to a strange double vision wherein mutually exclusive experiences—and perhaps truths—"are both equally true, and must be simultaneously held in a binocular frame in which neither can obliterate or dominate the other" (Vendler, *Last* 4). Ultimately, the premonition of death that speaks through fall is refused in favor of the conclusions that "this end and this beginning are one" (CPP 430).

The poem's constellations of images and etymological meanings draw on the Biblical language that was Stevens' and Milton's shared Christian inheritance. The second poem in "The Hermitage" depicts an Eden-like setting. The female figure, also a type of Eve, is present in an utterly hospitable natural environment. She is comfortably naked—"sleek in a natural nakedness"—suggesting a prelapsarian innocence. She is listening to "birds called up by more than the sun." The verb "called up" in conjunction with the evocative "more than the sun" suggests an initiative or presence from beyond that alludes to the Biblical creation myth. Though not seen together with the Eve-like figure, Adam is also present in the poem when, in autumn,

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<sup>29</sup> Milton's "charm of earliest Birds" (*Paradise Lost* IV. 651) may also be reprised in the third stanzas of "The Hermitage," appearing as "birds called up by more than the sun, / Birds of more wit, that substitute —/ . . . Their intelligible twittering / For unintelligible thought" (CPP 430).

“the leaves on the macadam make a noise” since “Macadam” is not only a type of pavement across which the reader might imagine the dry leaves of fall skittering, but it is also a Scottish name meaning “son of Adam.” In the context of this conceit, the opening line of “The Hermitage at the Center” might indeed refer to the figurative speech of the leaves about the son of Adam in the postlapsarian, autumnal world. In its combinations and juxtapositions, the binocular frame of “The Hermitage at the Center” balances images of spring and fall, with their incumbent ideas of sowing and reaping, life and death, uniting both pagan and Judeo-Christian symbols. It also makes the “macadam”—the son shaped by multiple inheritances—the progenitor of a new system capable of holding multiple truths in tension.

Stevens’ poetry does not always sustain the heady visionary heights of *Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction* and *The Auroras of Autumn* (1950) (Carroll 6). Perhaps Stevens was speaking of himself when he wrote in “Landscape With Boat” that “It was his nature to suppose, / To receive what others had supposed, without / Accepting” (CPP 220). Nevertheless, even those poems that doubt the existence of the transcendent continue to explore the possibilities of participatory, sacramental engagement with the natural world. One example can be observed in the brief, untitled poem beginning “A mythology reflects its region” (476). Written in 1955, the year of Stevens’ death, this poem repudiates the visionary transcendence of “Notes Towards a Supreme Fiction,” with its affirmation that “[t]here was a myth before the myth began, / Venerable and articulate and complete” (331). Stevens writes “[h]ere, / In Connecticut, we never lived in a time / When mythology was possible” (476). The speaker renounces all theologies—the “mythy mind” of Jove in “Sunday Morning” (54), “the giant, / A thinker of the first idea” (333) in “Notes,” the “father” who “sits / In space, wherever he sits, of bleak regard” in “The Auroras of Autumn” (357). What remains is Connecticut, with its woods, stones, fields and

mountains (476). However, as in so many of Stevens' poems, the poem cannot rest for long in such a bald, final assertion. Instead, it quickly begins to question and re-imagine its own statement: "we never lived in a time / When mythology was possible—But if we had—/ That raises the question of the image's truth" (476). Though claiming belief is impossible—perhaps suggesting the difficulty of overcoming the disenchantment of the world following the Enlightenment (Gatta 11)—the poem nevertheless attempts to imagine a return to it, to find an image which can bear the weight of belief. For the image to be true, "[t]he image must be of the nature of its creator" and is to be constituted by its place: "It is he in the substance of his region / Wood of his forests and stone out of his fields / Or from under his mountain" (*CPP* 476). Perhaps this is the archeological site of "the great poem of the earth" that Stevens desired but never quite attained, a poem which is the product of integral communion with the physical reality of the material world. Stevens did not depart from the concept established in his early poems, "The Journal of Crispin," or "The Comedian as the Letter C." To the end of his writing, he relied on the integral relationship between person, place, artistic creation, and mythology. And sacramental language runs throughout.

## **V. Poetry as Sacramental Language**

Whether Stevens was writing in "repudiation of the visionary tradition" or participating in the "renewal and continuation of that tradition" (Carroll 5-6), his poetry expresses a desire for a participatory involvement with place. Stevens' poetry and prose demonstrate his belief that this participation affects the manner in which the individual thinks and speaks. He begins explicating this idea early in his career, arguing in his earliest poetry that language can either bring the individual closer to a participatory relationship with place or it can separate him from it. The second section of "The Journal of Crispin" begins with the lines, "They say they still scratch

sonnets in the south, / The bards of Capricorn. Medicaments / Against the weather” (*CPP* 987). It continues a few lines later, “The Maya sonneteers / Of the Caribbean amphitheatre, In spite of hawk and falcon, green toucan, / And jay, still to the bulbul make their plea” (987).<sup>30</sup> In this critique of the Romantic tradition, represented by those who “scratch sonnets in the south,” Stevens describes the kind of poetry his predecessors wrote, as “medicaments,” or “substance[s] used for medical treatment” (*OED*) “*Against the weather. Useful laxatives*” (*CPP* 987, italics mine). The figure in the poem finds these “medicaments” unable to meet his needs, to “[c]onvey his being through the land” (989) before him. The weather in the new world, representing the force of the physical reality of the place, proves too powerful for the “fourteen laboring mules,” in other words, the fourteen lines of the sonnet form (989). Old forms prove themselves to be obsolete, unable to meet the demands of place, which requires “[a] more condign / Contraption” (989), perhaps alluding to Stevens’ “great poem of the earth.” Through Crispin, Stevens “arraigns” the Romantics for their very desire to inoculate *against* the weather, for writing poetry which distracts against the very encounter with places which Stevens’ writing argues is integral to life.

“On the Road Home,” published in *Parts of a World* in 1942, affirms the power of speech to initiate a participatory experience. It is a fable-like poem that narrates a nighttime walk through a dark wood. The two figures in this poem reject absolutes, particularly the idea of absolute truth, in favor of the notion of relative truth, the paradoxical “little ignorance that is everything, the humility through which the ignorant man mates his life with life” (Morris 162).

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<sup>30</sup> The bulbul is a bird belonging to the thrush family, sometimes called “the ‘nightingale’ of the East” (*OED*). This cryptic allusion to the nightingale and those who “make their plea” to this bird is almost certainly a reference to Keats’s “Ode to the Nightingale.”

Renouncing absolutes, the figures are initiated into a new experience of the physical world: “It was when I said, / “There is no such thing as the truth,” / That the grapes seemed fatter” (*CPP* 186). The individuals in this poem reject the homocentric vision of monotheistic religions, finding that the physical world rises to meet them with a vision of “secular grace: an unmerited assistance given man for his regeneration, or sanctification” (Morris 164). The final stanza of the poem begins with the lines, “It was at that time, that the silence was largest / And longest” (186). These superlatives hint at a new type of experience wherein “the world lost to man through his rational malformations” (Morris 163) is restored to him in a near synesthetic experience of silence and wisdom. The product of this new knowledge is silence, not speech or poetry, a reply to the Adamic naming which is the opposite of a poem like “On the Road Home.”

Stevens continues to consider the results of this transformative relationship as he attempts to reconstruct a framework for belief in the transcendent. The beautiful eighth and ninth sections of “The Auroras of Autumn” capture the effect of the sanctifying relationship that is possible for the person who responds rightly to the physical. This is the “salvation of receptivity” (Cambon 94). Section eight of “The Auroras” calls on the sacramental language of the Eucharistic tradition, which includes phrasing and metaphors like those found in I Corinthians 10:17, “For we being many are one bread, and one body: for we are all partakers of that one bread.” In the Christian sacramental tradition, believers “partake” of communion—variably referred to as the Lord’s Supper or the Last Supper within the Protestant tradition—as a sign and symbol of their salvation. As evidence of salvation, though not a means of it, the believers’ participation in the act of communion is an expression of their ongoing sanctification (Jehlen 434). Section eight of “The Auroras” draws on this language, insisting on the possibility that the individual might “partake” of “innocence, / An innocence of the earth” (*CPP* 361) by recognizing that the

physical earth is simply, purely, present in its thus-ness. In a manner analogous to that taught in the theology of the Eucharistic tradition, “partaking” in “the innocence of the earth” has a salvific and sanctifying force. The aurora is “not a spell of light, / A saying out of a cloud, but innocence” (361). This innocence is not the product of the cunning artifice of one who desires to deceive or entrap; it is not the “false sign / Or symbol of malice” of a divinity of any kind, but merely part of the guileless reality of the physical world. If the beholder can recognize this—“partake thereof”—he or she may be able to enter into a new mode of participatory existence in place. The poem characterizes this existence by means of the image of children lying “in the quiet of sleep” hearing, as if in a dream, the voice of their mother.

This section of “The Auroras of Autumn” reflects elements of the Romantic notion of the return to a second naiveté which is, nevertheless, not itself a return to a state of nature because the individual—though as if “in the quiet of sleep”—retains a sense of self-consciousness. Based on the language used in this section of “The Auroras,” Stevens may have been drawing on Blake’s idea of “Organized Innocence.” In “The Auroras,” there is a partial return: “That we partake thereof, / Lie down like children in this holiness,” but it is incomplete, bracketed by the reminder that this is at best a simile, “As if, awake, we lay in the quiet of sleep, / As if the innocent mother sang in the dark” (361). The desire for a fulfillment which is ultimately incomplete is echoed in the speaker’s insistence that “There is or may be a time of innocence / As pure principle” which bears a hint of desperation—“But it exists, / It exists, it is visible, it is, it is” (361). This desperate protestation itself may be Stevens’ defiance of his English forebears, an indication of his refusal to agree that there is no way of returning to that time of innocence before consciousness turned to self-consciousness (Hartman 301).

According to “The Auroras of Autumn,” those who “partake” of the “innocent earth” are able to think of each other “in the idiom / Of the work, in the idiom of an innocent earth” (*CPP* 361). The idiom—the language—that is produced is distinguished from the language that is the effect of the “enigma of the guilty dream” (*CPP* 361), another one of Stevens’ description of the inherited language of orthodox Christianity. In “the idiom of the innocent earth,” time and place are blended. The “outlandish”—that which is “of or belonging to a foreign country; foreign; alien; not native or indigenous” (*OED*)—becomes a time, “another day / Of the week, queerer than Sunday” (*CPP* 361-2). This foreign time and place of innocence and holiness becomes the place of home and homosocial fellowship reminiscent of section seven of “Sunday Morning” with its “ring of men” chanting their “boisterous devotion to the sun” (55-56). The homosocial fellowship in “The Auroras of Autumn” once again has a natural setting. However, the qualities of the place in which it takes occurs make it more like the Biblical “Promised Land” than the Garden of Eden, lending a future-oriented slant to its yearning for coming peace instead of a backward glance at what was lost. Like the “Promised Land,” the place of fellowship in “The Auroras of Autumn” is a land flowing with honey, though the milk associated with the Israelite’s Promised Land goes unnamed (362). For Stevens, there was much to be gained if one could find a way of partaking in the “innocent earth” and returning to this dream-like state of childlike innocence.

“The Auroras of Autumn” slides away from this rapturous, Edenic existence. This section turns from “innocence” to “experience,” to a self-consciousness that makes the “[b]are limbs, bare trees and a wind as sharp as salt” the sign of an imminent disaster. Following the question, “Shall we be found hanging in the trees next spring?” an allusion, perhaps, to leaves that will fall, Stevens writes, “The stars are putting on their glittering belts. / They throw around

their shoulders cloaks that flash / Like a great shadow's last embellishment" (362). Here is another "myth" by means of which the mind of the imagination is protected from analytic intellection which would deny the possibility of its enchanted existence (Hartman 302). The section ends on a wistful, hopeful note; the true and final return to the "innocent earth" may occur at some point. It is, once again, language itself that might make this possible: "It may come tomorrow in the simplest word, / Almost as part of innocence, almost, / Almost as the tenderest and the truest part" (*CPP* 362). The desire to "partake thereof" is the first step towards experiencing a revivification through the physical. It forms a ground for aesthetics in that the return "may come tomorrow in the simplest word, / Almost as part of innocence" in the idiom of the innocent earth.

The sacramental language of the orthodox Christian tradition thus influences the way that Stevens envisions the possibilities for the relationship between person, material world, and transcendent spiritual reality. Place becomes the nexus between multiple realities, and the person who approaches with belief might, through "partaking" of the present, experience a communion. Stevens' early anti-pietistic poems, the work of a man seeking to respond to the imposed doctrinal categories of a strict Reformed childhood formation, do not overrule the importance of this Christian inheritance and the role that sacramental language played in shaping his poetics over the course of his life. Stevens productively captured this Protestant heritage in the formation of his poetics, incorporating its mythology in the creation of his own cosmology and reimagining an ontology of post-Christian sacramentalism. His rejection of the orthodox Christianity of his youth notwithstanding, from beginning to end of his poetry, Stevens endeavours to sacralise the physical world, yet the elegiac tone of much of Stevens' poetry suggests he retained a profound anxiety about the possibility of spiritual fulfillment in lived human experience. Particularly in the

middle phase of his writing, there are moments when his poetry can barely contain a despairing fear that the physical world is absent of the transcendent. One must not fail to mention here his late-in-life purported conversion to Catholicism, perhaps the ultimate capitulation to the sacraments, though, as Vendler doggedly continues to insist, one must remember that there is no final evidence for this conversion (see “The Hunting of Wallace Stevens” and “Wallace Stevens: The Real and the Made-Up” for Vendler’s opinion about this “apocryphal” tale). Perhaps influenced by his increasing ease with the idea that “the theory of poetry . . . often seems to become in time a mystical theology” (*NA* 173), the ultimacy of the sacraments becomes even clearer in the writing of Stevens’ later life. Although Stevens does not return to the philosophy of his early Christian traditions, this “mystical theology” is still clearly indebted to his Protestant formation. No analysis of his writing can be considered inclusive or conclusive that does not take this into account.

## Chapter Four

### “Time and space close over us, toad”: Poetry, Participation, and Ontology

Sacramentalism is one of a group of metaphors originating in pre-Modern, pre-Enlightenment religious and philosophical systems that Bringhurst employs to describe what his writing suggests is an essential relationship between language, the material world, and an immaterial what-is. Like Stevens, Bringhurst engages sacramental symbology to poetically describe the individual’s experience of participation with the physical earth. Though he has seldom written about his childhood, Bringhurst likely gained his familiarity with sacramental symbology and metaphor through his parents’ Mormonism (Dickinson 21). Where he does write about his youth, his family’s connection to Mormonism is mentioned in passing through reference to “the Virgin River country—my Mormon great-grandfather’s mountains” (*Pieces* 101).<sup>31</sup> Bringhurst’s parents’ participation in that religion goes entirely unmentioned, though there is some evidence that the faith may have had more significance for Bringhurst’s parents than simply being the faith of the “great-grandfather” (Dickinson 21). Minimizing his possible childhood familiarity with Christianity or Mormonism, Bringhurst’s “Autobiographical Meditation” emphasizes instead his engagement with Buddhism through the teaching of Nyogen Senzaki, whom Bringhurst calls “a great crosser of borders” (*Pieces* 102). Senzaki was a Zen Buddhist monk who moved to Los Angeles in the 1930s. He was, in turn, a disciple of D.T. Suzuki, a Japanese Zen Buddhist influential among the Beat poets (Brown 215, 220) whose teaching offered a sharp

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<sup>31</sup> Bringhurst has discussed his youth in “Breathing Through the Feet: An Autobiographical Meditation,” first published in *Canadian Literature* in 1985 and then collected with the poems of *Pieces of Map, Pieces of Music* in 1986.

critique of Western rationalism while also proposing Zen as a means of salvation for the West (211, 217). Though the Zen Buddhist missionary monks to America may have been more nationalistic than they appeared (Brown 204), they did successfully emphasize Buddhism's transculturalism, showing how the religion began in India, moved through China, and then Japan, absorbing Taoism in the process. For their American admirers, this image of Zen painted a picture of a new "liberating awareness of the world" that is freed from cultural particulars (218, 221). Indeed, this may have been one of the features of Senzaki's writing that most appealed to the young Bringhurst. Bringhurst certainly emphasizes Senzaki's hybrid identity and his life of border-crossing, tying it to his all-absorbing intellectual curiosity. He describes Senzaki as "a Siberian-born, renegade Zen monk, trained at Engakuji, who read Thomas Carlyle (and everything else) in his spare time" (*Pieces* 102). In Senzaki, Bringhurst finds another example of a living wisdom tradition that was seemingly non-nationalistic and highly eclectic in its makeup. While Bringhurst does not write of Christianity with the same enthusiasm as he devotes to Senzaki in this autobiographical comments, his writing certainly demonstrates familiarity with the precepts of the Christian religion, particularly by means of his use of Sacramental metaphor. Indeed, Bringhurst's poetry combines Senzaki and Suzuki's teachings of "vitality, freedom, biological connectedness, and psychological wholeness" with the language of sacramentalism.

Like Stevens, Bringhurst's poetry demonstrates a preoccupation with exploring the relationship between poetry as human product, the poetry that Bringhurst argues is a fundamental constituent of being (*Tree* 312), and the physical world. In a lecture entitled "Poetry and Thinking" delivered in 2001, Bringhurst quotes both Herakleitos and Parmenides to argue the idea that "poetry is not manmade; it is not pretty words; it is not something hybridized by humans on the farm of human language. Poetry is a quality or aspect of existence. It is *the*

*thinking of things*” (*Tree* 139).<sup>32</sup> Indeed, he calls on the language of the Protestant tradition of the Eucharist to suggest that the human and animal flesh are “the medial *entre-deux* between the whole of Being and each individual fragment” (Kearney 90),<sup>33</sup> as contemporary philosopher and narratologist Richard Kearney would describe it.<sup>34</sup> A comparison between Stevens’ and Bringham’s poetry evidences Stevens’ influence on Bringham’s mature poetry while also suggesting their mutual endeavours to discover a “new, nondogmatic relation to Nature . . . that opens on the embodied” (Kearney 93). This relation preserves and celebrates mystery “not as ecclesiastic dogma but as a mystical affirmation of incarnate existence: [w]ord made [f]lesh in the ordinary universe” (102).

In this chapter, I argue that Bringham’s writing indicates that he has usefully deployed some elements of the imagery and metaphor surrounding Christian sacramentalism in his efforts to describe his vision of a state of being defined by participation with the not-self. This symbology has been incorporated into his poetics in spite of his rejection of Christianity’s

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<sup>32</sup> Bringham writes, “Herakleitos says something that might help us get this clear: ξυνόν ἐστι πάσι τό φρονέειν: “All things think and are linked together by thinking.” Parmenides answers him in verse: τό γάρ αὐτό νοεῖν ἐστιν τε καί εἶναι: “To be and to have meaning are the same.” These are concise definitions of poetry and brief explanations of how it has come to exist” (*Tree* 139).

<sup>33</sup> I draw on the philosopher and literary theorist Richard Kearney here because of his remarkable study of literature as a sacrament in the Eucharist sense. See *On Stories, Atheism*.

<sup>34</sup> Bringham’s language is strikingly similar to that of Maurice Merleau-Ponty and Julia Kristeva, though Merleau-Ponty’s name does not appear in Bringham’s writing and he expresses an antipathy towards the kind of deconstruction with which Kristeva has been associated. Where deconstruction emphasizes the need to consider everything from the position of the individual, Bringham draws on the sacramentology of the Eucharist as a unifying force, making it a common experience which unites humans regardless of difference.

teleological focus and his repudiation of the dualism that is associated within post-Enlightenment Christianity. Bringhurst draws on the sacramental as one example of pre-Modern, pre-Enlightenment philosophy and religion which emphasizes the interrelation of all things. He places sacramentalism in the context of other religious systems or spiritualities, including Buddhism and some Indigenous religions, which also emphasize the possibility of experiencing a fundamental “wholeness” through a cultivated attention to being. The combination of elements from these various belief systems leads to the creation of Bringhurst’s hybrid system of participatory being. This chapter will also demonstrate that Bringhurst’s deployment of sacramental metaphors and symbols is arguably most fully-developed in his polyphonic poetry. Polyphonic poetry is poetry that “enacts and embodies plurality and space as well as (or instead of) timelessness and unity. A poem in which what-is cannot forget its multiplicity. A poem in which no one – not the poet, not the reader, not the leader, and not God – holds homophonic sway” (*Everywhere* 16). In his polyphonic poetry, Bringhurst attempts to model the unity in multiplicity which he argues is the nature of existence, though whether or not he is successful is debateable (Kane, “Reply” 185). Still, by attempting to speak polyphonically, these poems serve as an invitation to the reader to experience through the “polyphonic *effect*” (Kane 192) the “aural whole” that is unity in multiplicity, an “eros of coherence” (Zwicky, “Open Letter” 181-2). Bringhurst’s reach toward polyphony and multiplicity seeks to make the poems fundamentally participatory in the same way that, in Bringhurst’s sacramental worldview, the base of pure existence is also a primal invitation to participation.

### **I. Bringhurst and the Christian Tradition**

Bringhurst turns to systems of thinking untouched by the philosophical influences of Modernism and the Enlightenment in order to develop his vision of the sacramental in nature. These

“counter-cultures” include the wisdom traditions represented in the Upanishads of the Hindu, Jain and Buddhist religions, the myth and story of Indigenous North American cultures, the writing of fourth and fifth-century Buddhist philosophers, and the preserved writings of the pre-Socratics (Wood 5). Though obviously diverse in their features and accompanying cosmologies, these traditions share commonalities of perspective and “modes of consciousness . . . in which the essential principle of reciprocity between the human and the rest of the natural world is maintained by myth, philosophy and literature” (5). This reciprocity between humans and the rest of the natural world is experienced as “a wholeness” wherein everything has “a relationship with or a place in the natural order” (14). Bringhurst describes it as a moral, spiritual and intellectual “sense of integrity” (“Breathing” 14).

This “sense of integrity” or “wholeness” flows from a belief that humans are integrally related to and enmeshed with the non-human, a belief which some anthropologists and ethnologists have referred to as the “law of participation.” The nineteenth-century French anthropologist Lucien Lévy-Bruhl explains the law of participation as that which “governs the way in which primitive mentality conceives the relation between man and the world” (Scott 28). In this conceptual framework, the human has a sense of “participation in all the great realities, both animate and inanimate, into commerce with which he is brought by the adventures of life” (28). As such, the phenomena of existence are seen to “give forth and . . . receive mystic powers, virtues, qualities, influences” (Lévy-Bruhl 61);<sup>35</sup> almost like *gestalten*, these relationships are “conceived under the law of participation” (Scott 39). Bringhurst follows in the footsteps of Lévy-Bruhl as well as the ethnologist Claude Levi-Strauss by insisting that this conception of

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<sup>35</sup> Lévy-Bruhl’s use of the word mystic and mystic powers implies singular, non-causally affected phenomenon (See Scott 30).

participation is in no way indicative of a lack of intellectual rigour (28). The “primitive” teaches an ordering of the world which is “the logic of the hand, of actual practice” rather than “the logic of the head” (Scott 28). Indeed, Bringhurst argues that those cultures which live according to the “law of participation” belong to cultural systems highly steeped in myth rather than empiricism (*Tree* 40). From these “less self-enclosed, less-human-centred” perspectives (*Everywhere* 175), so-called primitive cultures offer crucial illuminations to “those who think the world belongs to them” (*Tree* 40). The existence of these alternative cultural forms make it possible to resist the hegemony of dualistic empiricism and desacralization of contemporary culture through a “rediscovery of a dimension of holiness in the quotidian” (40) by both intellectual and mystical/mythological experience.

Bringhurst’s hybrid sacramentalism allows the initiate who has cultivated “attention” to the physical, material elements of the natural world to be rewarded with an “awareness” of something which exists as part of the physical world but is not limited to it; whether material or immaterial, a concrete object or abstract concept, everything that exists participates in and expresses nature and being—“Mental events are as real as any other kind” (*Everywhere* 138). For example, Bringhurst attributes to myth an autonomy of existence by which myths “*think themselves in people,*” quite apart from human mental effort (*Story* 15, italics in original). Human mythtellers do not create a new reality, but instead express the fundamental nature of what already exists. For Bringhurst, a critical part of reality is its multiplicity and he suggests that this multiplicity is readily apparent in myth that have not been unduly marked by post-Enlightenment, Western cultures (*Everywhere* 52). This notion is not original to Bringhurst, of course. Sean Kane, researcher of oral philosophy and literature, observes, “Before the Agricultural Revolution . . . nature was accepted as polyphonic, emergent, the place of the Gift.

For hunter-gatherer civilizations, reality is plural and at minimum two” (186). The language that responds to this primary multiplicity is “polyphonic discourse” which “gives to myhtelling people . . . an emotional and philosophical and scientific language of living on the Earth on the Earth’s own terms, not according to some trajectory of recorded human history” (Kane 187). In polyphonic discourse, aspects of the whole may be voiced or unvoiced in the telling of the myth, but are nevertheless considered to be present, a notion which Bringhurst incorporates into his poem “Conversations With A Toad” (1987). In this poem, which includes a stage marking for “*Bufo boreas*,” or the Western Toad, who is, nonetheless, “silent through” (*SP* 192), Bringhurst asserts, “I am convinced . . ./that the silences of the toad / are the most important—I mean/ the most meaningful—parts of the poem” (*SP* 193). In this concept of the unvoiced polyphony of being, where non-speaking auditors are assumed to be present, “stories very often tell us more than their tellers ever know” (*Story* 15).

As part of his turning toward and embrace of non-Western belief systems, Bringhurst rejects the Protestant conviction that the material world—theologically defined as a composite of physical elements—merely serves as a teleological foreshadowing of the coming “kingdom of God,” reminding humans of a greater and more important spiritual and immaterial world. According to this doctrine, the material world is insignificant in itself except as it is understood to denote the “spiritual grace” signified by means of its existence (Berkhof 618). The Protestant theological system that relies on the presumed relation between the sign and the signified fails to capture Bringhurst’s vision in which there is no relationship but rather a complete continuity between the sign and the signified. Instead, Bringhurst advocates a belief that the material world is simultaneously sign and signified—a *materia interna* existing in complete conjunction with the physical. Paradoxically, the physical and the *materia interna* are one: “it is the face assumed

by one / to face what seems to be another” (*SP* 243). For Bringhurst, this is the difference between “Homer’s world, [in which] . . . it is the gods and spirits dwelling *in the things*, and not the things themselves, who act and speak” as opposed to “African, Australian and aboriginal American oral literatures, [in which] the distinction between a thing and its resident spirit is often absent or very lightly drawn” (*Everywhere* 175, italics in original). However, Bringhurst’s attraction to this mode of thought is not a desire to return to an animistic faith in resident spirits. Instead, it stems from deep appreciation of the morality espoused by such cultures. According to Bringhurst, these cultures share perspectives in which inanimate physical objects are “*entitled to a voice*”, existing in a state of being which “merits our attention”; it depends on the affirmation that “*what-is is really alive*” (178, italics in original). This is foundationally contrary to the Reformed, Protestant theology that the colonizers brought to the New World.

Nevertheless, the sacramentalism of the Protestant tradition is one expression of the “law of participation,” though one profoundly reconfigured by Enlightenment dualism. Like Stevens, Bringhurst both draws on and removes himself from Protestant presuppositions, syncretizing its elements with other traditions in order to portray a universe of participation, not possession. Riffing on Robert Frost’s “Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening,” Bringhurst speaker subverts the entire colonial notion of conquest and land ownership that was undergirded by Protestant theology, observing,

Whose woods these are I do not know.

I bought them from a man who said

he owned them, but I only have to be here long enough to take a breath

and then it’s clear he did not own them,

nor do I.

What is it possible to own? (“Stopping By” 144).

Unlike Stevens’ more overt borrowings from Protestantism, Bringham’s sacramentalism has been sifted through the fine sieve of his study of other traditions. In this crucible, all notions have been carefully expunged from sacramentalism of the Biblical notion of a holy or singular transcendent Divine which was used to justify possession:

And I do not know how to measure  
 the depth and extent of what is in the world,  
 but I think that when counting gods, zero and one  
 are two answers equally useless” (*SP* 214, I.96-9).

Bringham’s rejection of much of the Christian tradition is a protest that is a “welcome deconstruction of the false idols that every religion has carried on its back at some time or other” (Kearney 152).

Though rejecting the monotheistic elements of the Christian tradition, Bringham recognizes commonalities between the various “pagan” traditions that he celebrates and the religious perspective and practices of pre-Reformation Christianity. Indeed, Christianity was long practiced by its adherents in tandem with older, “pagan” traditions. Here, one is reminded of the Canadian philosopher Charles Taylor and his extensive analysis of the philosophical, religious and intellectual shifts from a belief in an “enchanted world” to the “disenchanted world” of Post-Enlightenment dualism. For both the pre-Reformation Christians and the many “pagan” societies which coexisted with them, “[o]ne could not but encounter God everywhere,”

Taylor posits (25). Indeed, the rituals and beliefs of the coexisting Christian and “folk religions” within communities were mutually informing (439). This relationship, though denied by Reformers who wanted to “purge [community ritual of all] magical and pagan elements” (440), profoundly informs the Christian symbology that is fundamental to Bringhurst’s revision of Protestant sacramentalism. Indeed, Bringhurst’s syncretistic impulses reflect his deep understanding of a time in which these threatening dichotomies were not filled with intense desires for religious dominance, purposes and hegemonies. This was a time when it was assumed and that “[r]eality is plural and at minimum two” (187).

Bringhurst does not definitively describe or name the nature of this plural reality, being content to refer to it most often as “being” or “what-is” (*Everywhere* 15). Whatever it is, what-is lies beyond “human organization” (25) and cannot be known by those confident in the certainty of “neolithic supremacy.” Instead, it must be approached with the mindset of “Paleolithic complicity with and acceptance of a world beyond human control” (23). Bringhurst’s writing suggests that all humans have the capability to experience this reality, even if the experience is pre-cognitive, since “what is is *everything that is*: a simple, seemingly trivial idea with some decidedly nontrivial and difficult results” (179, italics in original). Bringhurst quotes Gerard Manley Hopkins’ journal entry and essay about Parmenides to describe the relationship between what-is—which Hopkins calls “Being”—and human existence:

To be and to know or Being and thought are the same. The truth in thought is Being, stress, and each word is one way of acknowledging Being, and each sentence by its copula (sic) is . . . the utterance and assertion of it. . . . the mind’s grasp . . . is to be looked for in Being . . . alone.” (*Everywhere* 136).

In addition to being, perhaps, a sign of his struggle with a potential ineffability, Bringhurst's reluctance to define the nature and/or characteristics of "being" may also be an expression of a quality that he praises in others as a "hunterly discretion" (18). This quality of humility in the face of what-is is necessitated by a belief that what-is exists in a state of constant flux and change, and, indeed, humans "do not, cannot, need not, must not fully understand" it (249). To attend to what-is is to refuse its categorization and definition.

## II. Polyphonic Poetry and Ontology

In Bringhurst's sacramental worldview, the base of pure existence is the primal invitation to participation. Existence itself is portrayed as a material sign of an imminent "being-ness," a what-is which is both the visible and the invisible. One encounters this in the first movement of "New World Suite N°3" (1993), where voices one and two provide a cartography of the paradox inherent in the relationship Bringhurst proposes between human, material, and immaterial being. Voice one asserts, "What is is an idea recurrent in time" (*SP* 214, I.100). Voice two interjects, "What is is an idea, yes, / but what is is right here" (*SP* 214, I.100-1). What is, then, is both an idea—an immaterial reality—but it is a present immaterial, it is "right here." In so arguing, voice two gestures, perhaps, towards both the existent physical and the always imminent incarnation of the "idea" of "what is." What-is is a paradox, both immaterial and material, past and present, human and non-human.

"New World Suite N°3" indicates that, for Bringhurst, existence is imbued with unifying possibilities. Indeed, everything that exists is a particular expression of the immaterial, material, past and present what-is. However, Bringhurst's writing also suggests that individuals must be taught to pay attention to these possibilities. Consequently, his polyphonic poetry takes on a decidedly didactic nature in some places. Bringhurst attempts to model this in the third

movement of “New World Suite N°3,” entitled “The Children of Zhuang Zi Confront the Frozen Saskatchewan River” (*SP* 225). The title alone demonstrates the melding of multiple times, places, and philosophies. Zhuang Zi was a Chinese philosopher who lived in the fourth century B.C.E whose writing is affiliated with Daoism. In “New World Suite,” however, his “children” are found far from the times and places in which Zhuang Zi lived; they are not in China, but in North America, specifically, beside the Saskatchewan River in winter. Their position here is posited as a “confrontation” of some kind, but the musical direction for the movement, “*adagio*,” suggests, though, that this is a confrontation that will take place at a slow tempo: a confrontation of the mind and winter, perhaps.

The title of the movement makes a momentary unity of these diverse times and places and this unity is echoed in the speaking voices. The first voice in the third movement asserts, “What you are is what is. It runs / all the way through. The grass / and the stars are your innermost nature” (*SP* 226, III.12-14). Physical life—being itself—becomes, in Bringhurst’s vision, a material sign of other realities. In other words, human beings commune with the greater what-is beyond the self by sheer virtue of their existence. Such communion is *prima facie*, even if only through the experience of life and death, at which point each individual “[returns] to the earth’s lap all that remains of all she has given” (*SP* 215, I. 111-2). In this worldview, the existence of the one gestures toward the existence of all, suggesting a fundamental unity between self and everything that is:

to breathe is to be breathed,

to give up the ghost and receive it again,

to belong to the shared and exterior lung,

rich with its livery of sunlight and moonlight—

rose petals, icicles, willow-leaves, waves. (“Elements” 81)

In “Ursa Minor: Monologues and Choruses from *Ursa Major*,” a reworking for his 2009 *Selected Poems* of his earlier *Ursa Major: A Polyphonic Masque for Speakers & Dancers* (2002, 2003), Bringhurst argues that both human and non-human participate in and mutually express the fullness of “what is.” He bases this claim on observations that humans and the physical earth share the same elemental life:

Earth at its purest

is crystal and metal:

aluminum, calcium,

iron, potassium,

manganese, sodium,

silicon, zinc. Those

inorganic proteins:

the orthogonal, hexagonal,

simple, symmetrical,

latticed, rotational

thoughts of the gods,

that twist with their milk-smooth

faces and crystalline edges

in the breasts of human beings.” (*SP* 238)

This third section of the poem observes that humans and every other constituent of the universe share the chemical elements comprising all existing things. This “pureness,” as “Ursa Minor” calls it, is shared by all through the perpetual metamorphosis entailed in the life and death, the formation and destruction, of each constituent of the physical world: “air transforming into air and earth to earth/ and fire to fire and water to water / and blood to water and blood to snow/ and hunter to hunted and breath to air” (242). The poet maintains that such union and interpenetration define the nature of being: “[t]he self is neither element nor recipe. / The self is just what is as it splits and turns” (243).

Though rejecting the Christian theology and metaphysical beliefs that have historically been attached to the practice, Bringhurst draws on the symbolic eating and drinking of the Eucharist sacrament in order to further characterize the relationship between self and what-is. The spiritual tone of the language that Bringhurst uses to describe the act of eating in his poetry recreates the central Christian sacrament that has been referred to variously throughout church history as the Eucharist, Communion or the Lord’s Supper. In this sacrament, the act of eating initiates and expresses a relationship of communion between the believing participant and the Christ whose body and blood is mysteriously represented in the Eucharistic elements. There is, of course, disagreement among Christian theologians about the correct way to characterize the nature of the relationship between the material element (bread, wafers, wine, juice etc.) and that which it signifies. Some sects, including the Roman Catholic Church and the Eastern Orthodox churches, argue that the body and blood of Christ is present in the Eucharistic elements, while, generally speaking, Protestants argue that Christ is only metaphorically present in the elements.

Regardless of disagreement over the nature of the symbol, eating has an important part in the Judeo-Christian myths and religious practices. Indeed, in the Judeo-Christian tradition, it is the act of eating which initiates humanity's Fall, but it is also redeemed as a covenantal symbol between Yahweh and the people of Israel. In the Christian tradition, it is also mandated by Christ as the means of participating in the Divine through the sacrament of the Eucharist.

In his poetry, Bringhurst draws on the sacramental connotations of the Eucharistic act of eating to metaphorize the realities of its symbolic embodiment. "Conversations With A Toad" (1987) defines the world as "whatever is already eaten" (*SP* 195). As such any act of ingestion initiates the moment of transformation which Bringhurst calls a "resurrection." In "Conversations With A Toad," Bringhurst describes a moth. In the course of the description, which traverses a range of similes, the moth is likened to a hazelnut, a goat, brown cornsilk, fern fronds and feathers as well as a monk with his "hazelnut tonsure" (*SP* 195). By emphasizing the relation between each form of being, Bringhurst establishes the moth's likeness to other animate and inanimate, animal and human forms. The speaker says of the moth that the toad may eat,

He too is transformed.

*This is the last life, toad.*

Those who eat will be eaten. That

is the one resurrection. (*SP* 196, italics in original).

If and when the toad eats this moth, or any other moth, the act is a ritual participation in all of those other modes of being. This participation through eating takes on an almost spiritual tone in the poem, which makes death into a resurrection predicated by eating, even preying on the

individual, whether human or animal. The resurrection of what-is which follows such acts is perpetual and infinite.

Borrowing this language from the Judeo-Christian tradition, Bringhurst's re-situates it within his prose writing within the broader heritage of "pagan" traditions to characterize the relationship between person and place. Indeed, it is difficult to think of a cultural tradition where rituals associated with eating are not central. In his essay "The Polyhistorical Mind," Bringhurst compares the Judeo-Christian story with pagan stories around the world. Bringhurst contrasts the symbolic resurrection of one individual as a portent of mass resurrection to come as it is taught in the Christian tradition with the place of resurrection in pagan traditions. He finds that,

There is death and resurrection and reincarnation, but it happens every day, through making love, bearing children, telling stories, killing animals, eating their flesh, wearing their clothes, and leaving animals enough, and fish enough, and trees enough, that they will be here next year and the next and the next without end. (*Tree* 34)

In Bringhurst's judgments of both Judeo-Christian and pagan tradition, the physical act of eating indicates the individual's participation in a deeper reality which has both material and non-material significance. Being and existing, the presence of the natural world itself, is the sacrament, without need for religious contexts or hegemonies.

### **III. Poetry and Sacramental Attention**

In Bringhurst's worldview, language is integral to the physical world. In "The Blue Roofs of Japan" (1986), Bringhurst writes, "Water is wordless. Earth / is information. Earth is words. / This too is the logos" (*SP* 188). The word *logos* is "a term used by Greek (especially Hellenistic

and Neo-Platonist) philosophers in certain metaphysical and theological applications developed from one or both of its ordinary senses ‘reason’ and ‘word’” (*OED*). It was also adopted by the writers of the New Testament as a designation for Jesus Christ. By calling the earth “logos” in “Blue Roofs,” Bringhurst suggests his belief that some communicable order and language is integral to the make-up of the physical world, but he also borrows some of the metaphysical connotations that have been attached to the word over the centuries, lending a quasi-mystical tone to his poetic statement. The non-material, but somehow linguistic, *materia interna* of the material earth is a truth that exists like “a gesture, a form within matter” (*SP* 186), expressed in human and non-human utterance. In this poem, Bringhurst also suggests that there may be ways in which animals also share in the language of existence. “The trees--/ karamatsu, gingko, sugi, bamboo--/ . . . speak for themselves” (*SP* 178), as do other animals in the world of Bringhurst’s poetry. Consider, for example the toad in “Conversations With A Toad,” whose loud silences, the poem argues, are “the most meaningful . . . parts of the poem” (193) and make it possible for “the man in the poem to speak” the poem itself (194). In “Stopping By,” Bringhurst’s speaker defines the poetry of the natural world as polyglot and polyphonic, but also as easy to miss by the sheer fact of its difference from human language and speech:

I said [these woods] could sing, and they do.  
 We’ve all heard it. You might, in that case,  
 think they would tell us. They do, I suppose,  
 in their polyglot language. But there are no words,  
 only grammars and things, in the thousands of tongues  
 spoken at once by the forest. The sounds

go way below and way above

what our ears can keep track of. (“Stopping By” 111)

To hear and respond to this “polyglot language,” the “thousands of tongues” in which the forest speaks, may be impossible for humans, yet Bringhurst’s poetry and prose argues that a willful decision to disregard this aspect of reality simply because it is incomprehensible is akin to a moral failing.

Furthermore, Bringhurst argues that language—and consequently song and story—is part of human existence because language is a part of the nature of being whose existence humans share: “When we are actually / speaking, what we say is not man-made” (*SP* 255). According to Bringhurst, “language is one of the methods we use to mime and to mirror and admire [a quality or aspect of existence]” (*Tree* 139). Bringhurst names this “quality or aspect of existence,” poetry. In a recent essay “Reading Between the Books: Northrop Frye and the Cartography of Literature” (2015), Bringhurst comments, “the study of literature, like the study of feathers and seashells, or the study of human anatomy, is rightly a branch of biology” (32); human language is a consequence of humans being “[tied] . . . to the world / beside us” (*SP* 186). Bringhurst’s poetics argues that physical, material existence is incomplete without song and story, which add to “the wholeness of bone” “the sudden completeness / of being” (181), as he calls it in “The Blue Roofs of Japan.”

Notably, Bringhurst does not give any particular pride of place to written literature. He writes, “Until a few thousand years ago, all of the world’s literatures were oral. Most of them still are. Literature isn’t *created* by writing. It isn’t even *encouraged* by writing except among oddballs like ourselves, who have come to use writing the way signers use their hands, as another

way to speak” (*Everywhere* 77, italics in original). Instead, Bringhurst compares writing to a kind of “domestication” of language. “Writing is planting. / Writing is born in the lands of wet-farming. / The field prefigures the table and page. / The garden prefigures the table and page” (*SP* 182). Human writing is a kind of “planting” that imitates the refined disorder of the natural world in the same way that a man-made field for cultivating rice imitates the growing conditions of wild rice, but regulates and meliorates the conditions that one might find in nature. In the implications of this analogy, writing is certainly ‘natural,’ after a fashion: “Humans are part of the natural world . . . [and] literature is not an industrial product. A paperback edition of *Beowulf* or the *Iliad* or the works of the Haida poet Skaay or the Navajo poet Daghaashzhiin (Black Mustache) is indeed an industrial product, but the text within—the order of words within—is not more intrinsically unnatural than a wren’s song or a robin’s nest or a footprint” (“Frye,” 31).

Human literature—which for Bringhurst includes unmetred oral narrative, verse, and prose (26)—is thus a product of this mimicking, mirroring, and honorific relationship between humanity and the poetry of being. For Bringhurst, poetry is “an aspect of reality” and writing poetry should be “*the realization of the poetry of reality in the poetry of language*” (“Lucky” 198, italics in original). Bringhurst’s writing argues that, though they may be immaterial, story and song are crucial components of what-is, non-material elements equal to food and water in sustaining human life. Life-giving literature participates in the sacred what-is of Bringhurst’s mythology. In their ideal forms, story, myth, poetry, or the written word function as “the seed capsule of culture: one of the central parts of a parallel system of reproduction and evolution that mimes in the cultural sphere what genetics achieves in nature” (*Tree* 274). A language that continues to “replant” these seed capsules of story and song serves as a force for cultural continuity. It ensures participation in what-is by the transmission of habits and methods of

“attention” from generation to generation. Living story and song ensures participation in what-is—the cycle of all life and being.

Meaning and thinking are, in Bringhurst’s paradigm, integral to reality and “language is one of the methods we use to mime and to mirror and admire [the thinking of things]” (139). It is to this that poetry as it is written and taught owes its existence. Since literature carries this burden of making attention and participation possible, the poet in Bringhurst’s worldview—as in Stevens’—has an integral cultural responsibility. The ideal poet is, in a sense, the most acute listener, the most devout disciple of what-is. It is in his or her ability to attend to “the presence of what-is” (*Everywhere* 73). In “The Persistence of Poetry,” Bringhurst writes, “I have been listening to the world for barely half a century. I do not have the wisdom even of a young tree of an ordinary kind. Nevertheless, I have been listening—with eyes, ears, mind, feet, fingertips—and what I hear is poetry” (*Tree* 43). Elsewhere, he explains further: “I routinely have the sense, in composing a poem, that I’m engaged in *making* something—and that I’m doing so in the presence of something *else*. I don’t have the sense that I’m making anything *up*. So I’m quite happy with the thought that composition is itself a form of translation. Making poetry into words is the act of primary rather than secondary translation” (*Everywhere* 73). The poet’s role in culture, then, is “to honor what one finds by paying it attention: drawing it into the human domain in such a way that human life is shaped around it” (74). It is an essentially devotional act meant to “enlarge and refresh our sense of the world and to shape our place within it” (74). It is the act of “[giving] ourselves to something else, which is not us,” by means of which we are made “whole” (*Tree* 312). The ideal poem will, by consequence of the poet’s careful attention, direct the reader/hearer to that same attention and sacramental communion. For Bringhurst, then, the poet’s integrity in paying attention to what-is determines the ultimate worth of the poem and

whether it has any value in society. The poet who attends to what-is may succeed in writing a poem that will indeed “enlarge and refresh our sense of the world.” If not, the poet will “only reinforce its known shape and size” (*Everywhere* 74), leading others away from the truth, as Christianity did when it ceased working to connect humans to this world by re-directing their attention to another one.

In Bringham's ethics, then, human aesthetic production—myth, song, story, poetry—bears the responsibility of teaching and modelling this attention to the incomprehensible multiplicity of being. Indeed, the songs, stories, myths, or poems which do so sustain life. In “New World Suite N°3,” Bringham describes this kind of life-giving song: “The singers bring / in the hands of their voices / thought like dried meat” adds the third voice (*SP* 215, I.105-6). The movement also calls song “edible thought / but not seedgrain” (215, I.104-5), by which he suggests that this “edible thought” must be consumed immediately, in the moment, it cannot be “stored.” Like the Israelites who were fed by a daily gift of manna in the book of Exodus (Exodus 16:1-36), the devotee must remain in constant contact with the singer.

Based on his suspicion of post-Enlightenment religious and cultural systems, as well as his critique of postmodern theories of language, Bringham's body of work suggests his belief that humans are losing or have lost the ability to maintain life-giving story and songs. Furthermore, Bringham's poetry suggests that listening to non-life-giving stories or songs may bring negative consequences. In the second movement of “New World Suite N°3,” Bringham refers to a fictional place called “God's Narrows,” where the people are “fed on / the sugar of other men's dreams” (*SP* 211, I.73-74), “songs / [that] come to them weekly on tape from Tennessee” (210, I.66-7). Though these songs still feed their hearers, their sustenance can be compared to “eggwhite and sugar” (211, I.73). They are the “dead words” of the missionizing

colonists, “visions of life after death in a different world” written in “the Holy Book,” (211, I.73-4), teaching a “hunger for life everlasting.” With bitter irony, Bringhurst suggests in this movement that these words, divorced from the sustaining reality of the local, “will kill us” (212, I.84).

The movement argues that these “egg white and sugar” songs and stories promote a religion which has effectively severed the individual and culture from the life-giving sustenance of the earth. Bringhurst argues that contemporary human culture—even those rooted in religious traditions focused on the spiritual and supernatural—largely prevents the individual from acknowledging the *materia interna* inherent in physical existence; he proposes that each is blinded from recognizing his or her connection with the other and also robbed of the ability to give simple attention to existence. In the first movement of “New World Suite N°3,” “history” is named as the culprit for this loss. Here, history serves as a metonym for the religious, anthropocentric, and teleological worldview of the post-Enlightenment West. The worldview associated with this way of thought acts like “a blade / sliding between the earth and our shoes” (207, I.40-1), a severance which has consequences that are increasingly destructive. The movement argues that the concept of a “history” that is moving toward an ultimate conclusion—a notion which is integral to the Christian ideology wherein the material world will be destroyed—has replaced a cyclical worldview where what-is is continually resurrected. The apocalyptic teleology of the “egg white and sugar stories” supplants the supposedly natural “rhythms / of giving and bearing” (*SP* 204, I.10-11). It emphasizes obedience to “God on his tall parade to the end of the line” (205, I.17). The stories of this worldview replace the “meat of the knowledge” (211, I.75) that “there is no other world / than this” (212, I.79-80) with the teaching that the material realm is created solely for human benefit and will ultimately be destroyed. Its

adherents inevitably authorize themselves to consume, use and abuse the earth and its inhabitants in any way they see fit because the earth is destined for apocalyptic destruction. Since the material nature of physical is detached from what it signifies, it is easily diminished and is effectively desacralized. The material world—including human life—is desacralized. Sanctioned by this fundamental shift in the way existence is understood and supported by Christian doctrines extolling man's dominion over nature, the material world is objectified and manipulated for human gain. The result is torture of the earth (208, I. 44), “homicide, genocide, fluvicide, terracide” (208, I.46). While grieving this destruction, “New World Suite” specifically rejects this teleological worldview, insisting: “What is is an idea / recurrent in time, not / your apocalypse, not your jihad, not Armageddon” (209, I.52-5).

In contrast to this destructive, hegemonic ideology, Bringhurst's poetry suggests that cultivating careful attention to the physical world may enable the communion that is possible through a recognition of human participation in what-is. The significance of the percipient's *attention* to place can be clearly seen in Bringhurst's “Sunday Morning.” Beginning in the seventh line of the poem, Bringhurst writes, “The mind is made out of the animals / it has attended. / In all the unspoken languages, / it is their names. / Mule deer, black bear, killer whale, salmon” (SP 168). Bringhurst emphasizes the identity-changing outcomes of purposeful “attention” to the other, the mind's attention to the physical, here, in particular, animals. The verb “attend's” etymological roots are in the Latin “*ad + tendere* to stretch” (OED). It carries with it connotations of effort and even desire. As Bringhurst uses the word, it seems to be related to Canadian poet Tim Lilburn's notion of *eros*, the ultimately unrequitable desire to have and know that turns the individual toward the other (*Desire Never Leaves* 22). In Bringhurst's poem, “The mind is made out of the animals / it has attended”—the animals it has stretched toward, has

listened for, waited upon, expected, watched over. The act of attention changes the mind itself, which takes on aspects of the identity of the object that is held in the mind's gaze. As in the process of photosynthesis, where exposure to light is transformational, one's attention to the other affects the nature of being; it is a metamorphosis of the one as a result of attention to the other. "The loved is what stays / in the mind," the poem later states, suggesting the possibility that the mind itself becomes a new dwelling place, "that is, it has meaning, / and meaning keeps on going" (*SP* 169). The act of attention, then, is a way of countering the teleological, dualistic and desacralizing worldview that became prevalent in previous millennia. It participates both in what-is and in reviving and continuing cultures which have taught that the experience of life in the material world is cyclical, unitary and transformative.

Bringhurst's poetry also attempts to demonstrate the process by which elders might teach the younger those songs and stories which help communicate the path to find "what is" (215, I.103-6). Bringhurst sketches a scene in "New World Suite N°3" in which a grandson and grandfather walk together: "Watch your step, my grandfather said. / And I did so and tripped, and he laughed. / Not your foot, but your step, he said" (225-6, II.7-9). The grandson misunderstands the direction given by the grandfather. He is preoccupied with self, an anthropocentrism which draws attention away from the more important but abstract "step" to the foot. As the grandfather continues to instruct the grandson after this initial failure, the relationship between the seen and the unseen remains central to the teaching moment. He explains that "[t]he gods come, unseen, to drink / at the thought's edge" (226, II.15-6), and then poses the provocative rhetorical question: "why / where, and from whom could one hide?" (226-7, II. 16-7). The grandson is meant to understand the integral relationship which exists between everything that is, seen and unseen, where everything is paradoxically present in every other

thing, even though absence—an “unseenness” which is hiding in the present—may be a part of such presence. Such is the primer of sacramental participation in what-is. Here language and literature are sacramental primers that invite others to experience sacredness.

For Bringhurst, poetic attention is the practice by which each individual recognizes his or her own participation in what-is via a kind of “translation” through a complex web of interrelation. Bringhurst develops this notion in his polyphonic poem “Ursa Minor” (231-243). In this poem, translation and metamorphosis are the means by which the relation of one to the other is expressed:

In the aspens and the spruces,  
 the larches and birches,  
 earth is climbing a ladder of water  
 and water a ladder of air,  
 and air is climbing a ladder of fire,  
 and fire descending a stair  
 of air and water into the earth  
 that is reaching and climbing with tiny hands  
 a ladder knotted of water, fire, and air. (242)

Attention to what-is reveals that mutuality and participation are possible between disparate constituents; what-is is in a constant state of translation from one form to the other. However, participation is not equal with total incorporation. The metaphor of translation, in its very nature

as a metaphor, assumes and preserves the discrete nature of individual existence. The metaphor “make[s] a claim for sameness that is clearly, according to common linguistic sense, false” (McKay, *Vis* 68). The translation of one elemental expression of being to the other assumes and maintains a sense of their mutual difference: “The persistence of poetic attention during the act of composition is akin to the translator’s attention to the original, all the while she performs upon it a delicate and dangerous transformation” (26). In this complex web of interrelation, “radical otherness exists” (26), but “[i]f there is nothing that can be translated perfectly,” still “there is nothing that cannot be translated,” as Bringhurst states (Engler 313).

Significantly, as in Stevens’ notion that the transcendent can only be approached by the non-grasping mind, the Bringhurst’s elaboration of his notion of poetic attention as translation ensures space for radical otherness. In contrast to anthropocentric theories of knowledge, attention is opposed to the “primordial grasp” of the human mind, with its desire for comprehensive knowledge. Bringhurst gestures towards the presence of such an ungraspable, radical otherness in the third movement of “New World Suite N°3” through the development of themes of seen and unseen, known and unknown. In this movement, the second voice is an observing third presence, a silent observer who turns what seems to be a dialogue into a trilogy containing an “I,” a “you” and a “he.” The second voice records, “I watched you. You tripped, / and he laughed” (*SP* 226, III.8-9). Like “[t]he gods [who] come, unseen to drink / at the thought’s edge,” this second, unseen “I” stands on the edges of the scene, silently observing, commenting on, and interrogating the teaching on attention being given by a grandfather to a grandson. In response to the grandfather’s statement, “[t]he grass/ and the stars are your innermost nature” (226, III.13-4), the unseen presence objects, “I don’t see any grass” (226, III.14). In this scene, poetic attention, however careful, does not finally or fully comprehend the

present in its completeness; the unseen remains in the “empty space” “[t]hat is the core” (227, III.21, 24). As this movement attempts to demonstrate, the radically other cannot be contained or comprehended, but its presence informs and shapes the experience of poetic attention and the experience of what-is.

The awareness and attention Bringhurst argues for is not unlike Thoreau’s rendering of kinship to nature: “Am I not partly leaves and vegetable mould myself?” (*Walden* 294). Like Bringhurst after him, Thoreau argued for the necessity of recognizing humanity’s union with the physical world based in material existence: “I was so distinctly made aware of the presence of something kindred to me, even in scenes which we are accustomed to call wild and dreary, and also that the nearest of blood to me and the humanest was not a person or a villager, that I thought no place could ever be strange to me again” (207). However, while Bringhurst employs language similar to that of Thoreau, differences exist between the attention which he describes and the sense of kind that Thoreau elucidates. Bringhurst refers to Romanticism as “supercharged nostalgia” (*Everywhere* 31). Like another Canadian poet, Don McKay, Bringhurst distinguishes between the world-enlarging contemplation of what-is that he describes and Romanticism which “begins in the contemplation of nature [but] ends in the celebration of the imagination in and of itself” (McKay, *Baler Twine* 25). As McKay understands it, Thoreau’s notion of nature “speaks directly to a deep and almost irresistible desire for unity. But poetic attention [such as Bringhurst endorses] is based on a recognition and a valuing of the other’s wilderness; it leads to a work which is not a vestige of the other, but a translation of it” (25). While celebrating the wholeness of what is, Bringhurst’s polyphony is also cognizant of the strangeness, the wildness, the incomprehensibility of what-is. This is not necessarily a question about the limitations of language, but more of the recognition of difference, a kind of “poetics of

bafflement” (Vargas 458) which exists at the core of the encounter with the other, reminding the individual of “the incompleteness of one’s way of apprehending the world” (464).

In spite of its limits, Bringhurst believes that poetic attention is still the means by which the human being learns to be at home in the world. Given its antithetical nature to what Bringhurst believes is the human mind’s predilection for possession, this ability to attend to what-is in a non-colonizing impulse must be learned. The prevalence of stories which direct attention away from the earth means that individuals need to be taught how to cultivate poetic attention through hearing the ethical, even mystical, story: “What is / is not hidden, although it is hiding” (*SP* 225, III.2-3), writes Bringhurst at the beginning of the third movement of “New World Suite N°3.” Because what-is is hiding, humans must be encouraged and taught to see it. Thus, attention must have a pedagogy, a poetics. Poetic attention is a sacramental participation which is contrasted to the “Judeo-Christian presuppositions about time, the scientific idea of nature, Cartesian dualism, and the Baconian dream” (Oelschaleger 158). In other words, Bringhurst’s attention is a movement away from paradigms of thought which authorize modern anthropocentrism (Taylor 346) and produce the “buffered’ self” no longer “open and porous and vulnerable to a world of spirits and powers” (27).

In Bringhurst’s reinvented sacramentalism, the responsibility to attend to and participate in the poetry of what-is and to translate poetry which enables others to do the same is Bringhurst’s counterpart to Stevens’ “comprehensive mythology of life, death, and the imagination” the “supreme fiction” (Carroll 9). Indeed, Bringhurst believes in the unified existence of all, including language and literature. Though the ideal poem may not exist, Bringhurst affirms that poetry can indeed arise from and express its connection to reality. The poem may “recede into the world of [its] own making” instead of working to “illuminate, or

*connect with, the world beyond the human*” (*Tree* 311, 312), but its existence—and the existence of the poet itself—marks the fact of participatory interconnection. What-is, the reality towards which the poem gestures, will always be present in poetry. This is so even though, as Bringhurst admits,

The rhythms of our bodies and our voices are not, as we know, immune to the rhythms of things around us. . . [and ] what we hear in many poems is institutional or habitual form: the stride of fixed opinion, not the brief ecstatic dance; not the wary step that gauges every syllable, or the distance runner’s meditative pace, subtly changing with the changing ground. (*Everywhere* 29).

Or, as Bringhurst phrases it in his essay “Everywhere Being is Dancing, Knowing is Known” (1995), it is incumbent on the poet to learn how to recognize that “poetry is present to begin with; it is *there*, and poets answer it if they can,” producing poems as “the trace of the poet’s *joining in knowing*” (18). Though the poet may not fully succeed in transcribing this sacramental experience, “the grammars and things in the thousands of tongues / spoken at once by [the world]” exists (“Stopping By” 147). Poetry gives and gains access, however narrow, to it. “[It] is a breathing hole in the ice of our identity. It is also . . . the name of what passes through that orifice or can be sensed on the other side” (*Tree* 312). Bringhurst’s reinvention of a sacramental participation is cosmological, insisting that reality is the ground in which the poem is rooted and flourishes.

Bringhurst asserts that the poetic nature of what-is authorizes the myth-maker’s mandate for cultural and environmental action. Furthermore, Bringhurst’s poetry and poetics suggests that the poet must recognize the inheritance of the local place, rooting his myth both in local myths and, by a simultaneous recognition of the integral unity existing between near and far, temporal

past and present, in other symbiotic mythologies. In so doing, he argues that language, imagination and poetry are essentially connected to reality, the what-is that is the ground of all being. The primary relationship that Bringhurst supposes exists between language, poetry, myth and the material earth allows him to claim an authority for his all-encompassing mythological system which Stevens could not envision or prophecy. As the next chapter will consider, the difference between their two visions divides the two poets in the kind of authority they seek for their poetic visions and provides the root of Bringhurst's critique of Stevens.

## Chapter Five

### “The planet of which they were part”: Sacramental Poetry and Responsibility

Beginning from differing Protestant origins—Stevens from Dutch Reformed Calvinism and Bringhurst from Mormonism (Dickinson 21)—one is not surprised that Stevens’ and Bringhurst’s poetics might continue to display the influence of their early exposures to these Christian sects. Indeed, both poets attempt an ambitious and far-reaching cultural reorientation of ritualized religious perspectives. Stevens rejects the apocalyptic dogma of his childhood religious training along with its emphasis on the “imperishable bliss” (*CPP* 55) of the coming “Kingdom of God.” Instead, he endorses a radical inversion of the anthropocentric aspiration to such ethereal bliss in this coming kingdom that ignores the balm or beauty of the earth in its pursuit of eternity. Seeking “[a] place to go in his own direction” (435), he found “[i]t was in the earth only / That he was at the bottom of things / And of himself” (236). Even though his writings do not suggest that he experienced much personal connection with the Protestant tradition with which his family was affiliated, Bringhurst also rejects that religious inheritance. Indeed, he rejects monotheist religion altogether, launching his critique from the position of an outsider motivated by the concern over the rampant exploitation and misuse of the physical as condoned by the monotheistic religions with their “dream of the end of the world” (*SP* 209). Exposed to Buddhism, both through the writing of Zen Buddhist monks who lived in the United States in the first half of the twentieth-century and his study of ancient Buddhism, Bringhurst would also incorporate elements of this religious tradition into his poetics. He “would remain forever at the door of the *sangha* [the Buddhist community of monks, nuns, novices and laity], not seated within, able to grasp the central truths of Zen Buddhism without being swallowed up by rigid adherences to its ritual gestures” (Dickinson 22).

Stevens' and Bringhurst's respective reactions to the Protestant religious traditions of their childhoods shape their poetics and lead us to the dialogue and dialectic of their responses to aesthetics and ethics as one branch of aesthetics. Each poet finds in the physical earth a "skreaking and skittering residuum" (*CPP* 129), the "resonant and clear" what-is that "is everything that ever was and will be" (*SP* 257) and it is this residuum toward which poetry reaches and which it hopes to articulate. Yet, their poetics suggest there is an ineffability about this what-is, the "ghostlier demarcations, keener sounds" (*CPP* 106) that cannot be captured in poems with "the poverty of their words" (*CPP* 450). Still, as Stevens' writes in "The Planet on the Table" (1954), poetry might display

Some lineament or character,

Some affluence, if only half-perceived

In the poverty of their words,

Of the planet of which they were part. (*CPP* 450)

In the context of this study of influence and of Stevens' and Bringhurst's exploration of the transcendent, Stevens' choice of the word "affluence" to describe the mark in poetry of "the barren rock"—the "stern particular" of the physical world mirrored through the individual—is noteworthy (*CPP* 447). Like the word influence itself, the word affluence is related to the Latin word *fluere*, to flow. Here, Stevens uses the word to establish a contrast between the riches and abundance of the source of his poetry with the poverty of the poems themselves, suggesting their inability to describe the profusion which prompts them. Bringhurst's writing suggests that he has a greater degree of confidence in poetry's potential to successfully refer to this richness, nevertheless, Bringhurst's poetry and prose describes a similar disparity between poetry and the

reality it attempts to describe. For Bringhurst, “[w]ords must be in some sense emptied of themselves” (*Tree* 312). If this takes place, “the resonance of being can be heard” and the poem is momentarily “lit from within, or perhaps from behind, by the light of what is beyond language” (*Tree* 312). However, Stevens and Bringhurst diverge in the manner in which they construe the potential ethical imperatives related to this aesthetic response to the physical.

As previous chapters have shown, their bodies of work each suggest that Stevens and Bringhurst believe that the sacramental experience of what-is is personally transformative. But, beyond the personal, each also ascribes to poetry a broader cultural role. Stevens claims that the poet bears the responsibility to provide an object of belief in a culture that is mourning the death of God (*LWS* 378).<sup>36</sup> The poet has a responsibility to “help people to live their lives” by “[giving] to life the supreme fictions without which we are unable to conceive of it” (*NA* 28, 31). However, this chapter will argue that, despite Stevens’ rhetoric of cultural responsibility, the primarily intimate and personal nature of the sacramental experience that Stevens’ poetry describes limits poetry’s ability to take on the role in the broader culture which he imagines for it. For Stevens, written poetry serves as an icon which gestures towards sacramental participation in what-is beyond the poem. Stevens expands on this idea in “The Rock” (1954), where he ascribes to poetry a transformative and even salvific role. As an icon, “a realistic representation or description in writing” (*OED*), poetry serves as the only cure for any of the ills of existence, “in the predicate that there is nothing else” (*CPP* 446). Poems “bloom” and “bear fruit” that

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<sup>36</sup> In this letter, Stevens writes, “The major poetic idea in the world is and always has been the idea of God. One of the visible movements of the modern imagination is the movement away from the idea of God. The poetry that created the idea of God will either adapt it to our different intelligence, or create a substitute for it, or make it unnecessary. These alternatives probably mean the same thing” (*LWS* 378).

“make meanings of the rock”—which is a symbol for the “particular[s]” of being—making it possible to gain a kind of understanding of “[t]he plenty of the year and of the world” (*CPP* 446). However, the understanding which poetry gives of the nature of being is always qualified, a gesture toward the “plenty . . . of the world” that it cannot claim to contain. Ultimately, the sacramental experience of the physical world which Stevens’ poetry delineates is an unknowing, an advance toward the transcendent what-is that cannot be finally described in thought or poetry. Here, poetry remains the mark of “the irrational, the more than rational distortion” (*CPP* 351). In “The Irrational Element in Poetry,” an essay first delivered at Harvard in 1936, Stevens develops this idea of the non-rational, non-discursive centre of poetry further. He defends the mystical and irrational element of poetry, arguing that seeking to capture this language-transcending experience in words is unwise: “When we find in poetry that which gives us a momentary existence on an exquisite plane, is it necessary to ask the meaning of the poem? If the poem had a meaning and its explanation destroyed the illusion, should we have gained or lost?” (*CPP* 786). Stevens’ writing also suggests that he recognized that, if the encounter with the transcendent is not cognitively mediated, poetry’s ability to address contemporary ills or evils is limited (*OP* 225); indeed, Stevens argues that there is “a life apart from politics” in which the poet lives in “a kind of radiant and productive atmosphere” (*NA* 57). Poetry is “personal in a pejorative sense that its value is slight and it is not the equal of philosophy” (*CPP* 672). It cannot, in other words make the kind of demands on logic that philosophy can make. All it can do is “possess the reader” and “[naturalize] him to its own imagination” (*CPP* 673), perhaps thereby providing a liberating “exodus,” “justice” and “purification” (674). In other words, reading or hearing a poem may be the means of initiating sacramental experience for the other, as it was for those listening to the song of the woman who “sang beyond the genius of the sea” in “The Idea of

Order at Key West,” whose experience of the shore at twilight was influenced by the song they heard (*CPP* 105). However, this hint at the possibility of sacramental experience is the extent of its power.

Bringhurst makes claims similar to those of Stevens for the role of the poet and poetry in society. For Bringhurst, poetry, along with storytelling in general, “is at its best a means of seeking truth” (*Story* 424), a pathway back to “the free world” that “isn’t something to conquer or subdue” (*Tree* 261, 268). The nature of the sacramental experience that Bringhurst’s poetry describes leads him to claim a greater degree of authority for poetry than Stevens, an authority the poet can use to address societal ills. Bringhurst grounds this authority in the relationship between the written or spoken poem and the underlying poetry that is part of what-is and is expressive of the “resonance of being” (312). Based on a belief in the primarily and fundamental unity of all things, Bringhurst’s writing hypothesizes that the poem itself can be experienced as sacrament; the poem can be the moment of “juxtaposition and interpenetration of timelessness and time” (*Story* 49), the place and time of revelation wherein the individual may experience “the resonance of being can be heard” (312). In contrast to Stevens, though, the poem in Bringhurst’s vision is necessarily communal, a space in which multiple places and events, both past and present, can be gathered. The poem is the “portal” itself, not Stevens’ “fitful tracing of a portal” (*CPP* 74). In Bringhurst’s dialect, “it is . . . the name of what passes through [the breathing hole in the ice of our identity] or can be sensed on the other side” (*Tree* 312), providing an exit for the percipient from “the interlocking prisons of society and time” (*Story* 420). Communal and participatory in its nature, poetry itself can become the means of personal and communal transformation.

## I. The Ethics of Stevens' Sacramentalism

Stevens' corpus demonstrates that his concern with the relationship between the imagination and reality was, at least in part, rooted in a pursuit of "visionary fulfillment" (Carroll 5)—an essential openness to the experience of the transcendent. Stevens' belief in the possibility of personal experience of the transcendent explains the vacillation in Stevens' poetry between "the urge toward Significance, toward mastery of the landscape by mind and by poetic order" and the "prodigal humility toward the earth, as the locus of significance and the proper source of moral and aesthetic order" (Costello, "Soil" 413). In pursuit of fulfillment, Stevens' poetry exhibits a tension between belief and disbelief, despair and desire (Vendler, *Words* 40-1). The drama of this variation can be seen enacted throughout his whole body of work and sometimes on the level of the individual poem, such as "Saint John and the Back-Ache" (1950), where both end-members of Stevens' dialectic of belief and disbelief struggle for supremacy (*CPP* 375). In his corpus, he attempts to describe a relationship between a possible "supreme fiction" and that which lies beyond "the end of the imagination," that base-line of experience which is known almost a *gestalten*, a unified whole of being that cannot be described simply by its constituent parts. Sacramentalism defines, in part, the nature of the knowledge of this reality beyond the edge of imagination. Through sacramental, non-linguistically mediated experience, this "reality" is personally experienced as transformative, but part of its transformative power is a result of the incomprehensibility, linguistically-ungraspable nature of the experience.

There is textual evidence to believe that this notion of the transformative power of the ungraspable is related to the Stevens' dialectic of "reality" and "imagination," concepts to which Stevens' poetry and prose returns frequently. For Stevens, the word imagination seems to serve as a synecdoche for the aesthetic function of poetry "to abstract [the poet], and to withdraw with

him into his abstraction the reality on which the lovers of truth insist” (NA 23). Here Stevens uses the word “abstract” in its verb form, meaning to withdraw or to move away. Stevens’ use of the word “abstraction” as a state implying almost monastic withdrawal from the worldly or sensual (*OED*) draws on the connotations of detachment which accompanies. The theme of abstraction can suggest that Stevens’ was a poetics of philosophical inquiry entrenched in an unmoving dualism, the product of a thinking self who is removed from the physical, troubled by the Cartesian split between subject and object but unable to overcome it (Lensing 116). The reality under consideration in Stevens’ poetry and prose is, in this critical perspective, “utterly removed, encased, from the reality then felt by the world. ‘Revolving in Crystal,’ as it were” (Brogan 26). In this schema, imagination is, in other words, the “violence from within that protects us from the violence without” (NA 36), where this violence is the reality of the world outside of the mind which may overwhelm and even consume the poet.

Such an understanding of Stevens’ poetics produces is contrary, I believe, to Stevens’ desired effect. It tends to imagine in Stevens’ poetry a move *away* from the real, instead of towards it. As often as Stevens’ poetry suggests that “reality can be reduced to, and is indeed the product of, the imagination” it much more consistently asserts the opposite: that there is “a reality that resists the power of imagination” (Critchley, *Things* 85). This reality is “the *Ding-an-sich* [we see] every day; it is not hidden from us; but we can only see it as we locally see it, in the manner in which we see it today” (Vendler, *Words* 53). It is a source of ongoing aesthetic delight for the poet who cultivates attention to it. Stevens writes,

Poetry is passion, not a habit. This passion nourishes itself on reality. Imagination has no source except in reality, and ceases to have any value when it departs from reality. There is nothing that exists exclusively by reason of the imagination, or

that does not exist in some form in reality. . . . Imagination gives, but gives in relation. (*LWS* 363-64)

Stevens' struggle to find and inscribe in his poetry this sense of connection with reality was an ongoing one. In other words, "we make the world we *know* out of our pre-cognitive *experience* of a world we do not *comprehend*. In essence, Stevens' whole project is based on the axiom that the 'world' presented to the mind is not a ready-made datum, but a construct based on a reality independent of us" (Surette 179-180, italics in original). In the encounter with the earth, its physical presence incarnates more than the physical. Indeed, Stevens believed that this "reality independent of us" is neither merely physical nor naturalistic (Voros 7). The mystical sign and symbol of the sacrament is one means by which Stevens' describes contact with this reality, creating "glimpses of the reality in which we are embedded" (Surette 209). In this experience, as "The Hermitage at the Center" hints, the transformative what-is is present in the physical: "one last look at the ducks is a look / At lucent children round her in the ring" (*CPP* 430). In my understanding of Stevens' poetry and poetics, the metaphors of sacramental participation and experience, which assume the individual's ongoing subjectivity even while celebrating the self's experience of the other, help to define this interpenetration.

Stevens explores this paradoxical notion in "Imagination as Value," an essay first delivered as a lecture at Columbia University in September 1948. He writes that reason and imagination are in a constant struggle to master reality, with "the loss, or gain, of the world" hanging in the balance (*NA* 29-30). This is the struggle like the one alluded to in "The Snow Man" to gain the "mind of winter" (*CPP* 8) in order to encounter what-is apart from the limits of human subjectivity, rationalization or the anthropomorphism. To experience reality thus involves a near-total loss of subjectivity which leads to a paradoxical personal gain as one becomes

“nothing” in order to “behold / Nothing that is not there and the nothing that is” (8). Stevens may have gained some of the language to express this idea through his reading of the essays of Maurice Blanchot in *Nouvelle Revue Francaise* (Critchley, *Things* 86). Blanchot was a French philosopher whose writing Stevens claims to have “loved” (LWS 879). Since Stevens did not generally describe in detail his reading of other writers (Mariani n.p.), the possibility of Blanchot’s broader influence on Stevens remains speculative. Nevertheless, Stevens uses language and ideas similar to Blanchot’s own, particularly those related to the notion of the central poem and, indeed, centres in general. Stevens shares with Blanchot the idea of the unfixed, moveable centre, resisting the mind’s final comprehension, a mystical “opacity at the centre of every text, what remains after every interpretation, and which . . . refuses our grasp” (Haase 14). Blanchot’s elaboration on this theme of the certain but unfixed centre was expressive of his desire to “interrupt the purposeful steps we are always taking toward deeper understanding and a surer grasp upon things. . . . to make us hear, and become unable to ignore the stifled call of a language spoken by no one, which affords no grasp upon anything” (Smock 2). Blanchot’s notion also describes a literary centre which must be sought after, but which eludes the grasp. Blanchot writes,

A book, even a fragmentary one, has a center which attracts it. This center is not fixed, but is displaced by the pressure of the book and circumstances of its composition. Yet it is also a fixed center which, if it is genuine, displaces itself, while remaining the same and becoming always more hidden, more uncertain and more imperious. (v)

The language that Stevens employs is strikingly similar to Blanchot’s, using similar concepts to claim that he seeks “the essential poem at the centre of things” (CPP 377), while also suggesting

that the search will be perpetual: “I do seek a center and expect to go on seeking it. I don’t say that I shall not find it or that I do not expect to find it. It is the great necessity even without specific identification” (*LWS* 584).

Blanchot’s philosophy of texts draws on Levinas’ conception of the ethical response to the demands of the other, which “calls into question [one’s] ownership of the world” (Haase 71). On the level of literature itself, each word in the text is fundamentally “ungraspable” but also “unreleasable: the indecisive moment of fascination” (Blanchot 24). Blanchot refers to a moment which is not unlike Stevens’ notion of being possessed by a poem, where the reader is naturalized in the world of that poem in a fashion outside of intelligence (*CPP* 673). In responding to a text as an “other,” the mind must turn away from its habitual attempt to grasp the object and, instead be held by the text itself. In this way, Blanchot proffers a vision of an ideal literature which “takes the side of things and tries to let things thing, as it were, to let substantives verbalise: letting the orange orange, the oyster oyster, the palm palm and so on” (Critchley, *Things* 86). This ideal literature seeks to address the other in a way that “[does] not annihilate their distance so as to reduce them to me; rather to speak to someone is to respond to their difference”; it is the “ethical difference between us that prevents us from being reduced to the same thing” (Haase 74). Blanchot relates this idea to Levinas’ *il y a*, “the sheer ‘there is’ of things where they seem to look at us rather than us looking at them” (86).

While the degree of Blanchot’s influence on Stevens’ is unknown, such a non-grasping relation to the *il y a* is reproduced in Stevens’ notion of the real that is encountered by “the mind of winter,” a reality that is experientially recognized rather than known on any rational grounds; it is known “not through enduring creeds or transparent vision, but in eccentric, tentative architectures of thought” (Costello, “Traveling” 21). This kind of non-grasping knowledge or

experience is the source of the transformative power of sacramental experience. This notion appears in Section XXV of “An Ordinary Evening in New Haven” when Stevens writes,

Life fixed him, wandering on the stair of glass,  
 With its attentive eyes. And, as he stood,  
 On his balcony, outsensing distances,

There were looks that caught him out of empty air.

*C'est toujours la vie qui me regarde . . .* This was  
 Who watched him, always, for unfaithful thought.

.....

The hidalgo was permanent, abstract,

A hatching that stared and demanded an answering look. (*CPP* 412-3)

In this canto, reality, which is a possible name for being itself, fixes the speaker under the power of its gaze. The hidalgo wordlessly insists upon its right to be recognized by the male figure in this section of the poem. *La vie* is experienced even if it is not fully comprehensible. It remains strange in its difference, transforming the quotidian as “the commonplace became a rumpling of blazons” (413). Stevens inverts the experience that was described by Emerson in his much-celebrated passage in *Nature* wherein he is “a part or particle of God” who “see[s] all” while “the currents of the Universal Being circulate through [him]” (32). Instead, Stevens’ poem suggests that it is the transcendent inscrutable, who remains strange and unknown, which sees all and takes the measure of the individual who is exposed before that gaze.

This canto suggests that reality that is sacramentally-known, however strange and unsettling it is, exerts an ethical force on the knower—it “watche[s] him, always, for unfaithful

thought.” The poet and poem must remain accountable to the real. Consequently, a poet’s choice of words is ethically charged. The poet must acknowledge the difference between the linguistic description and the thing described; “Description is revelation. It is not / The thing described, nor false facsimile” (*CPP* 301). To acknowledge the presence of that critical difference between the poem and the experience it describes is to admit to “[t]he little ignorance that is everything” (376), conceding to the limits of language. The poet writing the supreme fiction must also be aware of the fiction’s power to influence the experience of the real.

Stevens inquires into the power of words to influence the individual’s sense of reality in “Description Without Place” (1947), arguing that the nature of this relationship matters “because what we say of the future must portend” (*CPP* 302). In other words, the poem or description may be invested by the reader with the authority to predict or foretell the future, to shape the individual’s perception. “Description Without Place” betrays an uneasiness about the perception-shaping power of language, however, pointing out that this notion may all too easily lead to the belief that the world “is a world of words to the end of it” (301). Stevens plays with this possibility within the poem, suggesting at one point, for example, that “[t]hings are as they seemed” (298) to any given observer. However, the conditional nature of the poem’s many hypothetical statements—a series of nested “ifs” and “thens”—suggests that he was unwilling to finally commit to this vision of the meaning of poetic language. Indeed, almost in the exact centre of the poem, in the midst of a canto that toys with the notion of the world-making power of thought and description, the external world is seen resisting the supposed perception-shaping power of the mind and poetry. This canto depicts a figure, “Nietzsche in Basel,” whose “revery (*sic*) was the deepness of the pool, / The very pool, his thoughts the colored forms” (299). As the canto continues describing the world as it was “subjected to [Nietzsche’s] revery” (299), the

canto gathers speed, describing the all-absorbing mastery of the man's thoughts with shorter and shorter phrases culminating with the words: "The sun of Nietzsche gildering the pool, / Yes: gildering the swarm-like manias / In perpetual revolution, round and round" (299). Here is an image of a "world of words," where what-is is so because of human language. However, at this moment of the triumph of human thought, we find the simple phrase: "Lenin on a bench beside a lake disturbed / The swans" (299). Here, once again, is an image of the world beyond the human mind looking back, even with judgment: "He was not the man for swans" (299). Indeed, at almost the precise centre of this highly philosophic poem, Stevens' poetry returns to the "harsh reality" that exists apart from the poetry's "ideational ordering of reality in language through the work of the imagination" (Critchley, *Very* 232), even suggesting that this reality holds the thinking individual and the poet to a standard of correctness or ethical action. In light of this, the relative importance of "reality" in Stevens' philosophy of poetry increases. The poet's responsibility to write well is rooted in the power of the language of the supreme fiction over the individual's experience of reality: "[enabling] us to perceive the . . . opposite of chaos in chaos" (NA 153), but, at the same time, the supreme fiction bears a responsibility to the reality that it seeks to describe. It must not "[disturb] / The swans."

Stevens' body of work suggests that the demands of the experience of reality shape, at least in part, his vision of the role of the poet in society. Though frequently distrustful of the power of language, Stevens maintained a "faith in [the power of language] (and the poet's power) as a necessary, even redemptive force" (Brogan 83). He believed that both the artist and the artist's aesthetic product bore an increasingly important responsibility in a culture that was abandoning its religious traditions. In his *Adagia*, Stevens writes,

The relation of art to life is of the first importance especially in a skeptical age since, in the absence of a belief in God, the mind turns to its own creations and examines them, not only from the aesthetic point of view, but for what they reveal, for what they validate and invalidate, for the support that they give. (*OP* 186)

He argues that the human mind naturally looks beyond itself for direction. In a culture living “in the absence of belief in God,” art must “validate and invalidate,” in order to direct and sustain life. In “Two or Three Ideas,” a lecture delivered at Mount Holyoke in 1951, Stevens expands on his aphorisms in the *Adagia*. He writes, “[t]he philosopher, the artist, the teacher, the moralist and other figures, including the poet, find themselves, in such a time, to be figures of an importance greatly enhanced by the requirements both of the individual and of society” (*CPP* 842). The poet is responsible “to supply the satisfactions of belief, in his measure and in his style” (841). He or she “is the intermediary between people and the world in which they live and, also, between people as between themselves” (919). Consequently, the poet must examine his or her own artistic production and weigh it for its success in establishing these connections between people and the world.

Stevens frequently returns to the word “abstract” in order to describe this relationship between the poetry and the supreme fiction and the external, physical world.<sup>37</sup> Stevens exploits and combines nuances and connotations for the words “abstract” or “abstraction(s)”, using their associations to sketch the boundaries of his developing ideas. The possibilities of the idealized

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<sup>37</sup> Stevens uses the word “abstract” twelve times in his poetry and the related words “abstraction” or “abstractions” sixteen times (Walsh, 4).

form of the abstract can be seen in section X of the first part of “Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction” (1942), “It Must Be Abstract.” As he often does, Stevens uses the word to allude to entities which have no physical or concrete existence. More importantly, though, he uses the word to gesture toward the existence of an idea or thing which constitutes an ideal form or hypothetical perfect version but which is drawn out of the circumstances and realities of contemporary life—“abstracted” from the real. In section X, Stevens contrasts the “major man” with “the idea of man” (*CPP* 336):

The major abstraction is the idea of man

And major man is its exponent, abler

In the abstract than in his singular,

More fecund as principle than particle. (336)

Stevens elevates the ideal form to a place beyond the particular or specific. The idea of man, instead of man himself, is the first abstraction. The “major man” is the abstraction of the abstraction, twice removed from the reality of the human being, yet still somehow “the commonal, / The inanimate, difficult visage” (336). From the concept of “abstracting” in this fashion comes Stevens’ attempt to come to an ideal form of a hypothetical and perfect version by isolating the “abstract” from the peculiar properties of any specific instance or example. As “part, / Though an heroic part, of the commonal” (336), only this abstracted major man can bear the ethical weight of the supreme fiction. He is a “revelation” who is both responsible and able “to make, to confect / The final elegance, not to console / Nor sanctify, but plainly to propound” (336). By purporting that the supreme fiction must be abstract—drawn from the common life—Stevens also implies that the fiction itself must be drawn from the real. This is true even in the

case of the “commonal, / The inanimate” major man. In section IX of “It Must Be Abstract,” Stevens describes a being—“the origin of the major man” (335)—who is a presence that must not be sought as an object of rational knowledge: “Yet look not at his colored eyes. Give him / No names. Dismiss him from your images” (336). The major man of canto X is intimately related to this undefinable, incomprehensible presence. He is drawn forth from this thing which must not be named. Such abstraction is the ground of Stevens’ ongoing consideration of the relation between the supreme fiction and the reality of the physical world. The non-specificity and generality of the abstract makes room for a non-fixedness at the centre of the fiction while also remaining connected, though at a remove, from the specific, the concrete, and the physical.

There is an ethical component intrinsic to the poem’s acknowledgement of the difference between the ideal, abstracted major man and the non-rational, incomprehensible one who is the actual “object of / The hum of thoughts evaded in the mind, / Hidden from other thoughts” (335). Stevens draws on the essential properties of the real in order to create his fiction, while acknowledging that there exists a “hum of thoughts evaded in the mind,” an unknown “little ignorance” that is present but not incorporable into the fiction. The ideal major man stands as a place-holder for this “object of / The hum of thoughts,” prohibiting the gaze of the mind from moving towards acts of possessive naming or claims of comprehending this unknown. Such abstraction permits an ethical distancing, placing the *idea* of man and the major man in place of the one whom Stevens’ speaker insists “is and may be but oh! He is, he is!” (335). In this passage, one is reminded of the speaker’s almost-desperate affirmation in “The Auroras of Autumn”: “It is like a thing of ether that exists / Almost as predicate. But it exists, / It exists, it is visible, it is, it is” (361). In a fashion similar to the practiced endorsed by Blanchot and Levinas in their writing, Stevens resists the desire to transform the “physical reality of the thing . . . into

something ideal” (Haase 80). Instead, he retreats to an affirmation of being that avoids the grasping of intelligence. The major man, in fact, acts as a “vacancy inherent in linguistic description” (Brogan 83) which protects the real, even as the ethereal existent, present “Almost as predicate,” remains unknown, unnamed at the centre of the fiction.

This inexact relationship between the abstract and the particular, the transcendent and the ordinary, is central to Stevens’ poetics. For example, in “Contrary Theses (II),” Stevens writes of a man who went looking for “a final refuge, / From the bombadistic intimations of winter” (*CPP* 241). “The sun, the dog, the boy / Were contours” (242) of the abstract that the man seeks. In this poem, familiar objects are experienced as properties and characteristics of the abstract, yet they are also distinct from it. They are the “conclusions” of which the abstract is “the premiss” (242 *sic*). Stevens’ elaborates on his understanding of the relationship between the abstraction and the poem in “Imagination as Value” where he states that, “The true work of art, whatever it may be, is not the work of the individual artist. It is time and it is place, as these perfect themselves” (728). This is a statement which Bringhurst might applaud, except, perhaps, the idea of place “perfecting” itself, which hints at the teleological worldview or celebration of “progress” which Bringhurst critiques. Stevens argues earlier in this section of “Imagination as Value” that the problem is not so much that time and place must perfect themselves, but that it is humans who must work to achieve a “primacy of the intelligence” by throwing off all “thought-inhibition” (728). They must, in a sense, become the “major man,” “abler / In the abstract” (336). The human must throw off the “thought-inhibitions” of religion and other outmoded cultural norms. That which remains after this radical act of jettisoning is necessarily “abstract” from previous conceptions of reality; it is the real without all the characteristics and properties of the particular. The abstract is the product of the work of the poet responding to the experienced world with a

poetry which makes “the ever-failing attempt to see things as they are, in their porosity and denseness, in their earthiness and mineral quality” (Critchley, *Things* 86). But it is also the product of the endeavour to see through these particularities to the ideal form—the hypothetical and perfect version. In that sense, the work of abstracting attempts to reach “the existence of the poem” that is “seen and known in lesser poems” (*CPP* 378). “By means of a separate sense”—the acutest sense of the poet-as-mediator—it must abstract from that “huge, high harmony that sounds / A little and a little, suddenly” (378) and make the ideal visible to others.

The ethically responsive and responsible supreme fiction must be more than abstract, though; it must be transformative in its own being, both changeable and changing (336). Such change is at the heart of Stevens’ resistance to any “final” belief. In Stevens’ body of work, the word “final” can be understood “in the sense of a fixed, dogmatic conviction in theoretical principles” (Carroll 26). For example, the physical world in the concluding section of the last part of “Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction” is experienced, not in fixity, “revolving [only] in crystal” (*CPP* 351), but “in difference . . . / In a moving contour, a change not quite completed” (351). It is inherently moving and in flux, a notion suggested by the word contour’s etymological roots in the French *tourner*, to turn. In “A Primitive Like An Orb,” the universe—“the composition of the whole” (379)—becomes “the giant ever changing, living in change” (380). This commitment to the necessity of change is in line with the Protestant sacramental vision of the earth. The moment of participation is a moment which must be constantly renewed.

The need to allow for change in the supreme fiction seems initially to be at odds with the notion of the ideal or the perfect that is contained in Stevens’ idea of the abstract. The action of poet-as-mediator is integral to understanding the link between the abstracted ideal and the notion of change. The abstracted ideal is always encountered by a human individual in Stevens’ poetry.

Consequently, the account of the experience is always mediated and provisional. The figure in “Contrary Theses (II)” serves as one example: “He walked toward / An abstract of which the sun, the dog, the boy / Were contours. Cold was chilling the wide-moving swans. The leaves were falling like notes from a piano. / The abstract was suddenly there and gone again” (*CPP* 242). The man in this poem encounters “the abstract” in a flashing epiphany. The experience gives new, though fleeting, perspective to the entire scene. Phenomena are re-ordered as “conclusions” of which the abstract is the “premiss” (242). However, while the man has a perspective-altering moment, the poem does suggest that the others present at the scene are in any affected: “The flies / and the bees still sought the chrysanthemums’ odor,” and “the negroes were playing football in the park” as though nothing happened. Commenting on “moments of vision” such as this, Borroff writes, “. . . the highlight seen on an object, [the flash of light in Stevens’ writing] implies the inseparable unity of the perceiving consciousness and the world as perceived, since it appears to each man according to his position relative to the object and the source of life” (“World” 15). The moment of encounter with the ideal, the perfect, then, is private and, by its relation to the details of the moment, necessarily unrepeatable.

The volatility of perception and the variability that is part of personal perception affects the nature of the supreme fiction that Stevens tries to capture in his poetry. Though the “abstract” may not change, the individual’s perspective of it does. Mediated, as it is, through the individual in the ever-new moment, the revelation of what-is is better understood not as “the” truth, but as “a” truth, marked by the indefinite article. The sacramental experience of what-is is not one of encountering a “philosophical ‘truth,’ [nor] cubist perspectival ‘truths,’ [but] ‘a truth,’ something more personal and intimate” (Vendler, “Hypotheses” 115). Instead of dogmatic definition, the supreme fiction is a gesture toward an abstraction visible within the shifting, changing

perspectives of the poet-mediator. It is an always tentative and provisional answer to that most human of questions: “How To Live. What To Do” (*CPP* 102). An attempt to portray the changeable results of this encounter, for example, by means of a poem may “point the way toward some truth, but does not contain it” (Surette 108). Since the experience of what-is is always changing, Stevens could be more or less unconcerned with asking his readers to tolerate internal contradictions in his own supreme fiction as it mutated, a fact which allows his poetry to tolerate a great degree variation, to say both yes and no, as do poems such as “Description Without Place.”

Pleasure is also intricately intertwined with the poet’s responsibility in a world wherein “the poet finds a sanction for life in poetry that satisfies the imagination” (*CPP* 668). In “The Figure of the Youth as Virile Poet,” Stevens writes, “[i]n philosophy we attempt to approach truth through the reason. Obviously this is a statement of convenience. If we say that in poetry we attempt to approach truth through the imagination, this, too, is a statement of convenience. We must conceive of poetry as at least the equal of philosophy” (668). Just prior to making this statement, Stevens also comments that “the nature of the truth changes, perhaps for no more significant reason than that philosophers live and die” (667). What is meant, then, when someone makes a claim that a philosophic or poetic idea is *true*? A feeling of pleasure in the imagination—of the reason, as relates to a philosophical proposition, or of the imagination as relates to a poetic idea—seems to be the litmus test: “Since we expect rational ideas to satisfy the reason and imaginative ideas to satisfy the imagination, it follows that if we are sceptical of rational ideas it is because they do not satisfy the reason and if we are sceptical of imaginative ideas it is because they do not satisfy the imagination” (668). Accordingly, it is not necessary for an imaginative idea to satisfy the reason, or vice versa, though, “we concede that it would be

complete, as an idea, if, in addition to satisfying the imagination, [an imaginative idea] also satisfied the reason” (668). Thus, an ultimately *satisfactory* idea is the one about which the reason “at best proposes” and the imagination “merely meditates” (668).

The supreme fiction, then, for Stevens, must be abstract, it must change and it must give satisfaction, or, as he summarizes it in the title of the third main section of “Notes,” “It must give pleasure.” Here is an echo of “Of Modern Poetry” (1942), wherein “the poem of the mind in the act of finding / What will suffice” is defined as “the finding of a satisfaction.” This satisfaction is found in response to “the real”—the events, language, and people “of the time” (219)—with which the satisfactory poem must exist in a kind of accord; the poem that “will suffice” is marked by the “sudden rightnesses” of the poem’s intersections with the real. But “Of Modern Poetry” also suggests that the “sudden rightness” is limited to the individual—“wholly / Containing the mind, below which it cannot descend, / Beyond which it has no will to rise” (219). “Truth” is revealed in the process of the individual mind’s “finding,” and, as such, it is singularly and categorically personal. It exists in the mind of the individual, “below which it cannot descend” to extend its claims over the meaning of experience, and “beyond which it has no will to rise” to see a divine or transcendent source for its existence. This is the mystical experience without dogma. So, while reality is the root and source of the truth, the construct that the poet builds—be it a poem or the supreme fiction—is always particular and deliberately eccentric, moving parallel with “the object of / The hum of thoughts evaded in the mind” (*CPP* 335) but never approaching that object.

The ephemeral, personal, and mutable nature of Stevens’ supreme fiction promotes a relativity that celebrates the perspectival nature of the encounter with the transcendent ideal and transcendent within the real. However, Stevens does not champion relativism itself. Instead,

Stevens' poetry and prose suggest that "the poet's fictions about the transcendent ought to be regarded as approximations of the truth, just like scientific hypotheses" (Surette 226). These hypotheses may be fictions, yes, but they are fictions constructed in the crucible of experience, in the intimacy of the sacramental experience of momentary union with what-is. Consequently, Stevens' poetry and the supreme fiction that is based in it sit at the intersection between "monastic, philosophic, and aesthetic" pursuits (Fisher 13). His sacramental imagination and the poetry which flows from it inhabits the place frequently occupied by mystical traditions, which are based in personal or communal experiences which transcend human understanding and, consequently, are resistant to systematization. Stevens turns away from the "dogma and duty" of organized religion (McCann 3); "if he has a dogma, it is the dogma of the shadowy, the ephemeral, the barely perceived, the iridescent" (Vendler, *Extended* 35). The supreme fiction and its poetry subordinate matters of belief to the supremacy of abstract, changing and pleasurable experiential revelation.

The personal and intimate nature of the truth of Stevens' fictions determines the limits of its authority—the "values and beliefs" of which the poet is "the appreciatory creator" (*LWS* 143). It takes its place amongst "the intricacy of new and local mythologies, political, economic, poetic, which are asserted with an ever-enlarging incoherence" (*CPP* 652). For Stevens, the near-mystical sacramental experience of the physical, material world is the basis for the authority of the supreme fiction. As personal experience, it cannot be denied—"I am the truth, since I am part of what is real, but neither more nor less than those around me" says the figure of the youth as virile poet in Stevens' essay of that same name (682). But, while the truth cannot be denied, neither can it be explained in terms of logic. Stevens writes, "The pleasure [of poetry] is the pleasure of powers that create a truth that cannot be arrived at by the reason alone, a truth that the

poet recognizes by sensation. The morality of the poet's radiant and productive atmosphere is the reality of the right sensation" (679). The "right sensation" must be intuited by each individual. It cannot be systematized or reduced to dogma.

The personal, revelatory, and ineffable nature of this experience describes an "intensity of experience which Bergson attributes to the founder of religion, the mystic, and the saint" (Morris 84). Stevens hints at this when describing the poet's experience of writing: "It must be this experience that makes him think of poetry as possibly a phase of metaphysics; and it must be this experience that teases him with that sense of the possibility of a remote, a mystical *vis* or *noeud vital*" (CPP 673). In this way, Stevens assumes the "virile poet" bears the responsibility of making "his own imagination that of those who have none, or little" (682); poets and poetry take on a hieratic function as they share these moments of vision with readers. However, within this system, all that the poet can do is offer the poem which "shares the transformation, not to say apotheosis" (673) which the poet experiences in the moment of vision. This is true even if the "consciousness of his function" weighs on "the virile poet" as he sees "the community growing day by day more and more colossal" (683). Furthermore, since it is personal, inexplicable and ineffable in nature, the sacramental poetic experience along with the supreme fiction which grows from it make claims on the "commonal" man. Stevens depicts the response of the "commonal" man to these demands in "The Figure of the Youth as Virile Poet." The poet offers the transformative poem to the people around. Men, "baffled by philosophic truth" can "turn to poetic truth" as a kind of "starting-point" (680). The poem, then, depicts the poet's moment of vision, which gestures toward the fact "beyond . . . perception" of the ordinary individual. This permits the reader to experience the poem as a kind of "incandescence of the intelligence" (680).

In “Imagination as Value,” Stevens makes a sharp distinction between the role of the Biblical imagination, the type of religious imagination with which he seemed most familiar, and the poetic imagination. He argues that the poetic imagination is something else entirely than the Biblical imagination. Stevens’ comments are worth quoting in their entirety:

A comparison between the Bible and poetry is relevant. . . .If poetry should address itself to the same needs and aspirations, the same hopes and fears, to which the Bible addresses itself, it might rival it in distribution. Poetry does not address itself to beliefs. Nor could it ever invent an ancient world full of figures that had been known and become endeared to its readers for centuries. Consequently, when critics of poetry call upon it to do some of the things that the Bible does, they overlook the certainty that the Biblical imagination is one thing and the poetic imagination, inevitably, something else. We cannot look at the past or the future except by means of the imagination but again the imagination of backward glances is one thing and the imagination of looks ahead something else.  
(*CPP* 731)

Here, Stevens distinguishes poetic imagination from the Biblical or religious imagination first on the basis of belief—for Stevens, poetry does concern itself with the mental conviction which is a critical part of religious faith. Indeed, mental conviction is not a part of the poetic experience that is a product of the mutable, personal experience toward which Stevens’ supreme fiction alludes. Since the experience of the real is always changing, the poetic imagination must be “the imagination of looks ahead,” not the historical, Biblical imagination which draws on history. For Stevens, poetic imagination concerns itself with the future, with the “unknown as yet” (*CPP* 463).

## II. Bringhurst's Backward Glance

Bringhurst's philosophy of poetry shares commonalities with Stevens'. Certainly, Bringhurst agrees with Stevens' notion of the importance of doing away with dogmatic religion, going

behind the symbols

To that which they symbolized, away

From the rumors of the speech-filled domes,

To the chatter that is then the true legend (*CPP* 464-65).

In his essay "The Relations Between Poetry and Painting," Stevens calls this true legend "a universal poetry that is reflected in everything . . . a fundamental aesthetic of which poetry and painting are related by dissimilar manifestations" (740), though he retreats from expounding on these "speculative" and "expansive" generalizations (740). In a similar vein, Bringhurst posits that human myth and poetry—even the myth and poetry of world religions—are in fact related to this underlying universal poetry. It is the "poetry of what-is" (*Everywhere* 10) which is expressed variously in mythology and in the songs, oral and written literature, and art that have evolved from those myths (*Story* 48). For Bringhurst, myth is itself part of and constitutive of the real; myth in its ideal form describes a world wherein humans are a part of universe, but not its centre ("Frye" 32).

Stevens does not offer insight into how he thinks the possible supreme fiction may be related to any underlying "true legend." In "The Relations between Poetry and Painting," Stevens states, "The greatest truth we could hope to discover . . . is that man's truth is the final resolution of everything" (*CPP* 750). However, this statement is not as much about hoping to

find that there is an agreement between “man’s truth” and some sort of absolute truth as it is about finding that “man’s truth” can offer ultimate satisfaction apart from any notion of the absolute. In contrast to this, Bringhurst’s poetry and prose indicates his belief that the religious imagination is likely related in some way to the underlying poetry of what-is that has inspired the “ancient stock of human stories,” (*Story* 45). This stock of stories, by “insistently [recurring]” (*Story* 48), bring about a continual “presencing” of the past and traditional beliefs as “a piece of timelessness caught like an eddy in narrative time” (*Story* 48). These timeless stories include the “shared feast of Roman or Greek or Jewish or Christian mythology” that fed European art for centuries (*Story* 46), a mythological system which is linked to other stories in cultures throughout time and space, “forming a timeless and temporal web” (*Story* 48). As the metaphor of the shared feast suggests, Bringhurst sees this communal heritage of story as a great wealth, producing a world literature that, while whole, is also “multilayered, multistranded . . . [and] echoed locally almost everywhere you look” (*Tree* 37). In this philosophy of poetry, all literature is “part of the human testament . . . the accumulating map of the human mind and the human experience” (*Everywhere* 86). The “ancient world full of figures” of the Biblical imagination that Stevens sees as unrelated to the world of poetry is, to Bringhurst, already and always “part of the map,” regardless of the manner in which “the authority of the church or the iron law of reason” have twisted or denied “the structures inherent in myth” (42-3). While assuming that there is some sort of genitive relationship between myth and the religious imagination, Bringhurst’s poetry and prose argues that the religious imagination becomes problematic when it becomes detached from the reality of what-is and becomes fixed in the rigid dogma of the monotheistic religions. Bringhurst calls adherents to these dogmas “the devotees of the number one—one empire, one history, one market, or one God—and who nowadays insist on the preeminence

(*sic*)of everyone for himself: the smallest number one of all” (*Tree* 41), although he also allows that, within the monotheist religions, there are traditions which reject the notion that “the world belongs to them,” acting in agreement with the pagan traditions which argue that humans “belong to the world” instead (40).

There are nuances in Bringhurst’s understanding of the connections between literature, myth, and the physical world that produce some areas of important differences between his and Stevens’ philosophies. For Bringhurst, the poem is place speaking through person, though this action is predicated on the individual ability to cultivate his or her attention to place. Bringhurst quotes Frye’s position that “language in a human mind is not a list of words with their customary meanings attached, but a single interlocking structure” (32). The language from which literature is created is one part of the natural world just as humans are another part of the natural world, regardless of whether individuals and cultures may try to avoid this fact: “What comes out of your mouth is not entirely up to you, because the mind, like the body, has an anatomy. The faculties of language and imagination have a nature because they are part of nature, like ears and eyes” (34). According to Bringhurst, then, language and literature are not the product of a mind operating separately from the reality of what-is; language and literature are themselves a part of the same reality, a kind of “thinking of things.” Language, myth, poetry, story—literature in general “are merely, like red squirrels and Douglas-fir trees, working parts of the world in which we live” (34), though some, it might be assumed, work better than others.

Where Stevens suggests that the poem is the poet’s gesture toward his or her moment of unfolding vision, Bringhurst’s writing indicates that he believes that the poem itself can be the instance of vision. For Bringhurst, the work and responsibility of poetry is to make present in contemporary space and time the reality of what-is, and more specifically, the wisdom of the past

in its multiplicity (*Everywhere* 46). The poem is itself the moment of “juxtaposition and interpenetration of timelessness and time” (*Story* 49). It is the place and time of revelation, the intersection of “mythtime and historical time” (48). For Bringhurst, a poem represents “rituals of space” and “rituals of time” (*Everywhere* 212). Bringhurst elaborates on this in his statements about the polyphonic “New World Suite N°3.” In his comments on “New World Suite N°3,” Bringhurst observes that “voices keep rescheduling themselves against each other . . . because they have to. . . . Whether they actually have to or not, the places in the poem keep remapping themselves too, taking their cues from one another” (212). The use of the word ritual, with its religious connotations, suggests the symbolic weight of the poem’s situated moment in addition to opening a door to meditate on the ethical implications that might accompany a participatory experience of a poem.

Bringhurst refers to this “rescheduling” and “remapping” as “a grossly simplified portrait of the land in which [he lives]” (213). More than a portrait, though, my reading of Bringhurst’s poetry suggests that his poetics would like to see the printed text itself as an “incarnation” of that land—a moment in space and time wherein the incorporeal becomes corporeal, taking a concrete form. The poem is an act of incarnation, though the embodiment it brings about in print or performance can “never be the final” the incarnation (214). As the poem takes form and shape on the page, it reincarnates places and people who are temporally or geographically distant. It embodies a “cultural layering and folding” (213) of times and places, making them present to the reader or auditor. Bringhurst claims that this folding of times, cultures, and places within the work of art “gives depth, humanity and something more than that—transhumanity, we could call it” to the subjects and contents of the poem as well as to the reader or listener (*Story* 48):“A

poem is most itself when it is spoken, as a life is most itself when it is lived, and a piece of music most itself when it is played” (*Everywhere* 214).

If this is so, then, in the world of Bringhurst’s poetic philosophy, an afterlife beyond the moment of composition and enactment could potentially be attributed to any given poem. It becomes an “eddy in narrative time” wherein myth “insistently recurs” (*Story* 48). Participation in that poem’s being, then, might be experienced—or at least potentially be able to be experienced—as a kind of ritual through which the poem can re-present to the participants a reality beyond the poem’s immediate presence. Engaging in the performance of the poem whether by reading, listening, or performing contains the possibility, in essence, of a kind of sacramental participation in being, an act which brings about an almost mystical reincarnation of the present’s others, whether they be past or distant. The participation in the performance—whether by reading or hearing—imitates a “presencing” of the reality of what is.

The communal nature of the poem in Bringhurst’s aesthetics distinguishes his concept of the poem-as-sacrament from the singularity of the poem as an icon of sacramental experience in Stevens’ philosophy. The ideal poem in Stevens’ aesthetics seeks to capture and describe what always a primarily personal experience. The reader or listener is a literary “eavesdropper” on the privacy of revelation. The poem itself, while alluding to and illuminating the poet’s experience, nevertheless stands between the reader and that experience. This is the case even though Stevens professed a desire to see poetry take a leading role as “compensation for what has been lost” in “an age in which disbelief is so profoundly prevalent or, if not disbelief, indifference to questions of belief, poetry, and painting, and the arts in general” (*CPP* 748). Stevens’ “congregation” can merely sit in front of “the vital, the never-failing genius” as *that individual* goes about “fulfilling his meditations, great and small” (363). The “vital genius,” the one who meditates, does so “as if

he lived all lives” (363). The poem attempts to capture the trace of this meditation, but it is not necessarily able to extend an invitation towards participation. The poet, then, must always function as the mediator, fulfilling the priestly, hieratic role for the community while remaining him or herself in public isolation. In contrast, my reading suggests that Bringhurst views the poem as containing the capability of “answer[ing] to that property of being” which Bringhurst calls both poetry and “the resonance of *what-is*” (*Everywhere* 125, italics in original). Bringhurst writes, “Literature lifts thought out of the human body: lifts it out and sets it on the ground, like rocks and trees” (123). Thus, the literary work becomes communal, like a walking path. Participation in reading or hearing the poem—or writing the poem for that matter—is a communal act by which the poet and reader participate in the unity of what-is. Unlike Stevens, for whom the poem is the gesture towards the portal through which reality may be glimpsed, Bringhurst suggests that a poem is the portal itself, the moment where the resonant what-is is made present. Consequently, any poem that manifests the resonance of being has the ability to offer sustenance to the reader.

The task that Bringhurst ascribes to poets follows from these aesthetics and poetics; it is to manifest this resonance of being, though the poem always remains connected to the individuality and personality of the artist. Bringhurst comments on this in his writing about oral literature and the Haida performer and storyteller Ghandl. He argues that the story “takes the form it takes because that is the form its author gave. . . . The images and themes of which it is made are largely materials he inherited—and along with these components, he inherited a narrative and visionary grammar for putting them together. He could, however, have built them into a vastly different structure . . . just as any fluent speaker of a language can assemble a cluster of words into sentences with very different values” (*Story* 58). However, the poetry of what-is is

not honoured only in the impersonal; the presence of the personality and individuality of the artist can co-exist with the resonance of being. As Bringhurst writes of such poems, “we can still attend the feast” of this kind of “meal for the mind” (63).

In contrast to the ultimate uncertainty and “gestural” nature of Stevens’ supreme fiction, Bringhurst’s poetry gains authority by its very rootedness in the poetry of what-is, which is part and parcel of the world. The roots of poetry in myth, of myth in the poetry of what-is and the physical world, give it a markedly different purchase on poetic authority. In Bringhurst’s estimation, poetry that resonates with being speaks with authority. It teaches “us . . . to find out where we live, and how to live there” (*Everywhere* 10). It has the authority to weigh myth and story of all kinds in order to determine whether or not they share in this being or help the individual to “[sit] down face to face with the world” (*SP* 210). Listening to multiple voices, hearing multiple stories that exist beyond the realm of the post-Enlightenment, Western narrative is the first step in learning how to identify this resonant poetry of what-is, as Bringhurst demonstrates.

The manner in which Stevens and Bringhurst each theorize about the relationship of the poem to sacramental experience has important implications for the way that each understands the role of the poet and poetry within broader culture. To write poetry which allows the reader to see the poet’s experience of the real, if only in glimpses through the poem’s words, was Stevens’ passion and the experience which he pursued with no less conviction than Bringhurst. For Stevens, the poem is a gesture towards the personal, unrepeatable, delight of this sacramental experience. Nevertheless, the experience remains, in the end, in the realm of the individual. This necessarily limits a poem’s and a poet’s authority; the “supreme fiction” that might guide and direct public life may, in the end, remain only a provisional signal toward a transcendent reality

that is unnamed and finally incomprehensible. For Bringhurst, in contrast, the relationship of the poem to the physical is central, creating the possibility of a poem-as-sacrament which is the root of poetry's authority and the source of its power. Bringhurst's belief in the poem's enacting of rituals of space and time leads him to prescribe definitions of ethics, even ethical mandates, in contrast to Stevens' concentration on pleasure—the pure satisfaction of the moment. These demands lead Bringhurst's poetics in a direction unique to Bringhurst, even while the two poets find their premises in the same concerns. As the next chapter will show, Bringhurst's own life experiences and opportunities in the Pacific Northwest have led his poetry into the realm of ethics in the desire to respond to the inequities of contemporary colonialism.

## Chapter Six

### “In Remembrance Of”: Bringhurst’s Polyphonic Poetry and the Colonial Past

At the end of “Breathing Through the Feet: An Autobiographical Meditation” (1985), Bringhurst coyly addresses and dismisses his readers in one rhetorical flourish: “I ignore you, reader, for something larger than you, which includes you or not, as you choose—though of course, in another sense, whatever you choose, it includes you. And you include it, and our fate rests not just on our own feet but in one another’s hands” (15). With the stealth of a Trojan horse and the heft of final words and last lectures, Bringhurst uses the autobiographical genre to engage and exploit the interest of his readers; under the guise of self-reflection and revelation, he exhorts them to subscribe to a belief in “something larger” in order to elicit his desired paradigmatic mandate. Concealed in the generic conventions of autobiography is Bringhurst’s ethical and moral agenda for his readers; taking advantage of his readers’ curiosity, he aims to conscript their ethical and moral agency in his canny project of preserving “salvageable wisdom” (“Breathing” 10).

The trajectory of Bringhurst’s career as a poet, typographer, and translator indicates that the myth, story, and the language itself of Indigenous culture is one type of “salvageable wisdom” that Bringhurst is ethically motivated to honour and preserve. Bringhurst’s translations from Haida myth and story for his trilogy of translations—*A Story as Sharp as a Knife* (1999), *Nine Visits to the Mythworld* (2000), and *Being in Being: The Collected Works of a master Haida Myhteller* (2001)—entitled *Masterworks of the Classical Haida Myhtellers*, is one monumental project that stems from Bringhurst’s ethics. Another project entitled *Voices in the Land*—an encyclopedia of North American oral literature and authors yet to be completed—continues this effort (Dickinson 44). These works, which, according to Bringhurst, represent

decades of work, demonstrate a commitment to learn from non-Western wisdom traditions and to make that learning available to readers within the colonial culture (41). Bringhurst's work was praised by some anthropologists and linguists and openly endorsed by some Haida as important cultural work (Glavin np; Sangáa 224), but he was also harshly criticized by others, Haida and non-Haida alike, for what seemed to some to be an act of cultural appropriation (Bradley "Remembering" 895). Bringhurst is certainly cognizant of the colonial history, in particular the history of salvage ethnography (Simpson 208), which troubles the theory and practice of cultural preservation. However, his writing indicates that he believes his translations rightfully belong in a different category of scholarly work. The first paragraph of the preface to the second edition of *A Story as Sharp as a Knife* (2011) begins to make this case, suggesting that the survival of these particular tellings of Haida myths were made possible by the willing Haida artists who chose to entrust them to a linguistic anthropologist whom they deemed was an appropriate listener (10). Furthermore, Bringhurst suggests that there is an ethical and cultural imperative to ensure the survival of literature. Bringhurst publicly defended his work—and his right to translate the Haida myths transcribed by John Swanton—long before the publication of the second edition of *A Story as Sharp as a Knife*, arguing "Stories are central to the life of every people. On the other hand, no people or community or nation, and especially no political authority, can have exclusive rights to interpret its own history" ("Genetics" R3). Moreover, he asserts, "I've translated and interpreted Haida texts without asking anyone's permission, and at times without any consultation. If doing so is a crime, then with all due respect, I promise to reoffend as often as possible" (Rigaud 11). While defending this right to read, translate, and interpret Indigenous oral literature such as that of the Haida mythtellers, Bringhurst's other prose writing, along with his poetry, advocates for his belief that learning the stories of the Indigenous cultures of North

America is one means by which the inheritors of colonialism can begin to establish new relationships of respect with Indigenous culture that acknowledge the injustices of the colonial past and work to remember Indigenous culture. He writes, “I’m a believer in translation, both as a craft and as a form of daily discipline. Some days I even believe in it as an agent of social cohesion” (*Everywhere* 11)—a force capable of drawing groups together and bridging difference. Bringhurst expresses this belief in his lengthy introduction to *The Masterworks of the Classical Haida Mythtellers* as well as in some of his polyphonic poetry, in particular his “New World Suite N°3” (2006) and his “Ursa Minor: *Monologues and Choruses from Ursa Major*” (2009), long poems to which the remainder of this chapter will be devoted.

It is arguable that Bringhurst’s view of the poem-as-sacrament undergirds his commitment to commemorate and remember the colonial past in his polyphonic poetry. “New World Suite N°3” and “Ursa Minor” recollect the inequities and injustices of colonialism—the “retreat of the civilizations of North American antiquity and the dispersal of their residential myth creatures before the deluge of European explorers and settlers” (39). However, these long poems also attempt to bring Indigenous myth and story into conversation with the inheritors of those justificatory colonial myths; they express a desire for communion and encounter that might enlarge the world of its readers by calling on them to inhabit and be inhabited by the places in which they live (Kearney 109). This chapter will show that “New World Suite N°3” initiates this striving toward communion through an act of mourning. In Bringhurst’s poetics, mourning is the ethical response to colonialism in North America and its mistreatment of Indigenous people and of the physical environment. By elegizing and mourning the dis-remembered history of North America in “New World Suite N°3,” Bringhurst’s work attempts a partial reconstruction of the cultures of the past by creating a sepulchre of textual and performative witness—a place of

mourning wherein the scattered, destroyed, or forgotten are gathered and made “grievable” (Butler 25). This movement toward remembering and inhabitation that “New World Suite N°3” initiates is further developed in Bringhurst’s “Ursa Minor,” where the polyphonic poem-as-sacrament both initiates moments of communion through mourning while gesturing beyond itself to a broader work of remembering and inhabiting that residents of North America must undertake.

### **I. The Work of Mourning and the Enactment of “Scriptural Sepulchre” in “New World Suite N°3”**

Bringhurst’s prose clearly demonstrates his strongly held belief that there exists a right—and ethical—way of living in the world. He defines this right way of living partly through critiquing the “wrong” way of living that is now associated with the hegemony of “industrialized economies and colonial regimes . . . [determined to] control and manage the planet” (*Tree* 269). In contrast to the lifestyle associated with this hegemony, the right way of living begins with fighting one’s way clear of the “cadaver of western culture” (“Breathing” 7) and discerning alternatives to the west’s emphasis on human supremacy and the right to endless consumption. Alternatives are found Indigenous cultures as well as cultures “in the tangled roots of the European tradition” that “speak of a wholeness,” a “moral and spiritual and intellectual integrity” (14) that Bringhurst suggests leads to total health—personal, spiritual, cultural, environmental. Finding the means to live this ethical way of life in an industrial society is both difficult and countercultural; an escape, a contradiction, the “fruitless task” of salvage and attempted preservation (10).

Bringhurst argues that seeking to engage in these alternative cultures involves not only a learning of traditions that stand opposed to colonial culture, but also an “unlearning” of the

patterns and ways of thinking ingrained in the “confident world of western historicism” (10). In order to either learn or unlearn, teachers are needed. Bringhurst’s poetry and prose attempt to meet at least part of that that need by applying his paradigm of sacramental attention to problems of ethical agency. Bringhurst’s interest in the local places forces him to identify a moral response to the injustices in this place as he sees them. Calling on the extended analogy of the web, he argues that these “moral fibres have been “cut or snarled” leading to the destruction of “the consciousness of relatedness and obligation” (*Tree* 193). In response to this situation, much of Bringhurst’s poetry and prose attempts to reconstruct a contemporary web of obligation and relatedness through cultivating an awareness of the other—“gods, plants, animals, strangers, stones” (193-4), an awareness that is also committed to “subjugating nothing” (193). This begins with an act of resistance to the *malaise* of global culture which “aims at the secular millennium” (58). Bringhurst argues that, when fully developed, it leads to an ethics that is a fully articulated “language of action and response . . . [and its] idioms of decisions”—which he sometimes calls “moralities” (*Everywhere* 187) based on “a fiber of respect . . . between realms” (*Tree* 192).

The philosophical and practical differences between contemporary, industrialized culture and those other cultures that emphasize such wholeness is immense. However, Bringhurst argues that the boundaries between the various cultures are porous: “none of these worlds . . . was ever wholly separate from the others, nor are they whole separate now. Power boats, float planes, and buses carry us to Neolithic villages. We walk, wearing steel-shanked boots and packing nylon tents with aluminum poles, into roadless, untilled valleys” (*Everywhere* 32). Indeed, as he writes in his introduction to *A Story as Sharp as a Knife*,

The Old World and the New are not two regions marked reliably on maps. The Old World is wherever indigenous traditions are permitted to exist and

acknowledged to have meaning. The New World is wherever such traditions are denied and a vision of human triumph is allowed to take their place. The Old World is the self-sustaining world—worldwide—to which we all owe our existence. The New World is the synthetic, self-absorbed and unsustainable one—now also worldwide—that we create.” (16)

Clearly, for Bringhurst, the “barrier of the present” (269) contemporary, colonial, industrialized culture, is a formidable one preventing the average person from engaging these alternative cultures. In North America, this situation is further complicated by the history of colonialism’s all-too-recent violent policies aimed at marginalizing, silencing, and dismembering Indigenous cultures. Bringhurst’s poetry turns directly toward the memory and effects of this history, suggesting his belief that the colonial past—and its present legacies—must be acknowledged and mourned before any other steps towards personal or cultural change are possible. In doing so, Bringhurst’s polyphonic poetry engages in a long tradition of elegy, undertaking a work of mourning aimed at opening doors for cultural renewal.

Through the influence of Freud, the idea of mourning as “work” has passed into the poetics of twentieth century North American elegiac poets. Freud described the work of mourning as the process of detaching the affections from the lost person or object then reattaching them to a living or present substitute (Freud 254). The critic Kathleen Woodward explains this as the “psychic work which has a precise purpose and goal: to ‘free’ ourselves from the emotional bonds which have tied us to the person we loved so that we may ‘invest’ that energy elsewhere, to ‘detach’ ourselves so that we may be ‘uninhibited.’ Mourning is ‘necessary.’ It denotes a process which takes place over a long period of time. It is slow, infinitesimally so, as we simultaneously psychically cling to what has been lost” (85).

Bringhurst's work of mourning relates to the losses of attachment that Freud's theory is concerned with, but —contra Freud's "tireless advance toward mental health"—Bringhurst insists both on acknowledging the "present and persistent" experience of grief while also posing possibilities of reattachment to place rather than substitution of it (Tanner 93). While Freud and others following his lead have described the work of mourning as a work of release or detachment, later twentieth-century theorists have reconsidered the structural connotations of movement implied in his theory, adopting instead an emphasis of the "interminable, monotonous tempo" of mourning which "flattens the singularity of the object and renders its historical circumstances irrelevant" (Ricciardi 43). Resisting the psycho-spatial connotations implied by moving past or away from grief, Canadian elegists indicate their desire to embrace the space of mourning in hopes of maintaining a sense of connection with the lost (Uppal 13).

Uppal has argued that mourning poetry in Canada has become even more important as the consolations offered by the rituals and theology associated with organized religions have become less central to cultural life. Bringhurst's poetry also suggests that he deliberately turns away from traditional religious consolation as a response to the justificatory role played by Euramerican monotheistic religious traditions in the history of colonial violence on the continent. Bringhurst's years of residence on the West Coast, coupled with his decades of work translating Haida oral literature, have made him familiar with the cultural losses that have been caused by Euramerican colonial practice. In his study of the work of the Haida poet Skaay, Bringhurst compares the destruction of Indigenous cultures in the Pacific Northwest by colonists to the slaughter of European Jewish communities in the Holocaust. His analogy suggests his belief that the impact of colonialism is a similar kind of ethical limit event. As an event, it certainly calls into question any certainty of generational or cultural continuity and inheritance, permanently

disrupting cultural inheritance in the same way that the Holocaust permanently disrupted those in European Jewish communities (Gubar 252). Bringhurst's poetry specifically responds to this by mourning the losses engendered by colonialism and its attendant environmental degradation and impending catastrophes. In "New World Suite N°3," Bringhurst undertakes a work of mourning as a means of acknowledging the colonialism's racist, androcentric beliefs and policies while recognizing that these beliefs have caused the irreparable and permanent loss of some Indigenous language and culture. Bringhurst's writing mourns in response to the "unnatural" (*Tree* 317): corrupt violence and abuse that follow from the logic of capitalism, the unending, ever-expanding drive for profit and progress that is the twin of the Darwinian notion of the survival of the fittest. For Bringhurst, this devastation results from a self-destructive North American culture rooted in Western, post-Enlightenment philosophy. In the end, however, Bringhurst turns away from the hopelessness of totalizing loss; for him, the landscape becomes a "metaphysical entity capable of protecting and uncovering private and public histories" (Uppal 14). Significantly, the poem itself also becomes a means of accessing elements of the lost past.

Bringhurst's penultimate polyphonic poem "New World Suite N°3"—with its ostensible contrapuntal allusions to Dvořák's "New World Symphony," all the more significant because Dvořák's work celebrates European immigration to North America—is a definitive work of mourning in Bringhurst's poetic corpus. In the poem, Bringhurst attempts to revise theories of musical counterpoint for a trinity of speaking voices. The intermingling of the voices in this poem imitates the multiple, independent melodic lines of musical polyphony.<sup>38</sup> Bringhurst

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<sup>38</sup> The three voices sometimes speak simultaneously and sometimes in sequence. Sometimes each voice speaks its own thought while at other times the various voices complete each other's thoughts.

experiments with polyphonic poetry as a powerful expression of resistance to the monolithic voice of Euramerican culture. By writing poetry that weaves multiple voices and perspectives, Bringhurst creates a tapestry of reality comprised of a plurality of coexisting, sometimes mutually contradictory, positions (*Everywhere* 24).

The title of the poem's first movement, "All the Desanctified Places," immediately signals a possible concern with place, spirituality or religion, and secularization. However, the movement begins with a review and questioning of the Hegelian philosophical perspective on time and history, cause and effect and not, as the title might make one expect, with a litany of lament over contemporary environmental abuses. Speaking from the authoritative position of the single speaker while voices two and three are silent, the first voice mirrors back to the reader concepts of linear history and a related notion of endless progress: "What is is what has happened, Hegel says, / and what has happened is what is." (*SP* 203, I. 1). However, the third voice interrupts the oracle-like statement of the solo voice by demanding "Who cares? / what Hegel says? What happens is what is." (I.1). The second voice's question contests the authority of the ideologies built upon Hegel's philosophy and destabilizes the notion of Hegelian necessity. The third voice's challenge opens a door to the possibility of alternative points of view, daring both the first voice and the poem's readers to consider why anyone must draw from Hegelian thinking in order to understand or interpret the world.

Beginning with this précis and questioning of Hegelian thinking, the poem's three voices explore some of the many cultural and ecological abuses justified by this same post-Enlightenment European philosophy. The movement makes connections between the Judeo-Christian religious tradition, the Hegelian logic of historical necessity and the migration of individuals and groups from the old world to the new, arguing that the influx of people into the

“New World” has also led to the arrival on the continent of systemic “Old world” class violence along with its patriarchal system. As a part of this analysis, the movement comments on the symbolic violence done to both genders. Combining a patriarchal system with capitalist development, both men and women are objectified as tools for expansion and settlement. Male immigrants silence and instrumentalize women, treating them as possessions to be used to accomplish male goals. Bringhurst describes this action as “Beating the tongues / of their women out into wagon sprags” (203-4, I.5-6). However, the poem also insists that male immigrants to North America did violence against their own bodies by “beating their own ears / into ploughshares” (203-4, I.7-8). In pursuit of profit, men objectify their own bodies as well as the bodies of women, turning their ears away from their intended function of hearing and listening in a self-mutilating process that makes them deaf to all that is around them.

The poem describes the descendants of the original immigrants in a similar fashion. Like the first immigrants, the descendants deserve censure because they perpetuate the patterns of personal and environmental degradation and destruction that were initiated by their forbears. However, they are also objects of the poem’s pity because they are starving for “the sight of the bright knife of the world” (209, I.58), an image taken from a proverb common to some of the Indigenous cultures of the Northwest Coast of North America (*Story* 496, n.3). The poem returns to this image of severing of person from place, evocatively describing it as “a blade / sliding between the earth and our shoes” (*SP* 207, I.40-41). Impotent and sedated, the residents of this teleological, history-worshipping, apocalyptic culture are cut off from the nurture they are meant to receive from attachment to their homeland.

The movement also describes the newcomers’ subsequent devaluation and destruction of Indigenous culture, arguing that this violence was sanctioned by the dominant culture’s

philosophy and religion. After a choral litany of Aboriginal place names written to include all three voices, voice three takes the role of critique and lament. In lines twenty-one to twenty-seven the third voice states:

Visitors gnaw at the moth-eaten light

With mechanical eyes.

Whole towns are trussed up in the webs

of our fences and parking lots,

guardrails, turnstiles, interpretive signs (205-6, I.23-5).

The “squatting” churches suggest unlawful occupation of places once belonging to Indigenous groups while the description of the visitor’s “gnawing” and “mechanical” eyes suggests that the newcomers’ appetite for Indigenous culture is at once unnatural and carnivorous, an extension of consumer culture that confirms the dominant culture’s own narrative of progress. The dominant Euramerican civilization determinedly ignores any indication of the vitality of Indigenous culture, reassigning it the identity of a relic. This re-assignment is signified in the poem by the confining of once vital Indigenous settlements behind guardrails and fences, in a manner evocative of both a zoo and a prison. The degradation and destruction of the non-human environment goes hand in hand with the dominant culture’s treatment of North America’s Indigenous peoples.

“New World Suite” challenges any notion that the described violence and current catastrophe were inevitable. As the poem will make clear, Bringhurst’s speakers have no doubt that the present environmental and cultural crises are the effect of the perspectives and ideology

brought to North America during centuries of immigration and results from decisions made in light of those ideologies. Of course, one irony in this poem is that Bringhurst's voices look to the past to explain the present, drawing on the same Hegelian logic which is being critiqued by the multiple voices. Nevertheless, the speakers in "New World Suite" clearly contend that Euramericans spun the net in which they are now caught.<sup>39</sup> Euramericans subscribed to the notions of historical necessity, the superiority of Western culture, and the superiority of men above all else, justifying by these beliefs their oppression of others and their greed to accumulate ever more land and resources. In light of Bringhurst's castigation of naive participation in Western ideology, the poem makes a case that the work of mourning must begin with an individual repentance of an almost Biblical order for the manner in which each person has been implicated in this history.<sup>40</sup>

The work of mourning enacted in Bringhurst's suite and into which the reader is invited does not end with repentance and grief. The movement argues that satisfaction, sustenance, and even a salvific experience are all found in a return to the local. Further amplifying the suite's theme of sustenance and consumption, the first voice observes that people eat food which "has

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<sup>39</sup> One is reminded here of Jeffers' "The Seine Purse." In this poem, Jeffers compares humans living within the margins of Western civilization to sardines caught in a net. "We have geared the machines and locked all together into interdependence; we have built the great cities; now / There is no escape. We have gathered vast populations incapable of free survival, insulated / From the strong earth, each person in himself helpless, on all dependent" (*Wild God* 157).

<sup>40</sup> This relationship between repentance and mourning calls upon the Biblical Jeremiad tradition, a tradition which others among Bringhurst's fellow writers also draw on in their elegiac writing. Dennis Lee's *Civil Elegies* is one such Jeremiad. Tim Lilburn's *Assiniboia* arguably also carries on that tradition.

come 2000 miles in bottles and cans” (*SP* 210, I.65) The indirect criticism leveled at the inhabitants of the place named by the poem, in addition to the poem’s speakers and readers, is that few know how to live on what the land itself provides. Imported bread made of nothing more than “eggwhite and sugar” (211, I.73) is a synecdoche for the figurative—even Eucharistic bread—of the stories of the mythologies of the monotheistic religions of the Middle East which “have been brought in a book / from a place without caribous, moose, wolf, lynx” (211 I.68-9). The poem argues that only the local can sustain life, both physical and spiritual. This is a conversion to a poetic attention to place which enables the individual to attend, in the full sense of the word, even the French sense of *attendre*, to wait, to attend to what is present. One sees here how Bringhamurst inverts Freud’s and Lacan’s theories of mourning by making *reattachment* to the lost the primary means of healing instead of finding alternative, substitutionary attachments.

According to “All the Desanctified Places,” the life which proceeds from a belief in human superiority that was held by the colonizing mythologies of monotheistic religions produces persons who are unable to perceive their connection to the world around them because they have never attended to it. They fail to observe that “We are one, even though / we are many,” as the second voice of the poem’s trio claims in lines 91 and 92. Inhabitants of this kind are indeed both non-present and non-presences. Their blind detachment from the place where they live makes them culpably predatory, not unlike a cancerous cell growing and mutating in the body of its host. Those committed to human superiority are unable to perceive that the rampant misuse and consumption of the supposedly other is a form of self-harm.

The latter three movements, following the musical form of the fugue, imagine and capture participatory attention to place. The second, third and fourth movements take up the theme of living rightly in place that is introduced in the first movement. In order to do so, they

incorporate elements of wisdom traditions that, according to Bringhurst's other writings, are central to his personal philosophical and ethical system. Bringhurst incorporates Indigenous mythology into the second movement; Daoist philosophy and mythology into the third; and Greek, Iranian and Indian mythology into the fourth and final movement. In these three movements, Bringhurst stages an act of cultural preservation of elements of these traditions. Significantly, he also re-situates these myths in the landscape of North America, making his poem a new, blended mythology, itself a space wherein the individual might meaningfully encounter the stories. Ultimately, the poem becomes a synecdoche of the reattachment that is a necessary part of the work of mourning.

In the final movement of "New World Suite N<sup>o</sup>3," "IV: Winter Solstice, Cariboo Mountains," Bringhurst melds elements from Greek, Iranian and Indian astronomy, creating an assemblage of multiple places, times, and figures; he fuses manifold traditions in the symbolic bodies of two characters, Orion and Aldebaran: "Orion, the old god, disguised as a deer, is out / stalking Aldebaran, the doe, his daughter, forever" (*SP* 228, IV.3-4).<sup>41</sup> Bringhurst's poem layers

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<sup>41</sup> Bringhurst draws on astrological and astronomical notions that are shared between cultures to enact this multi-cultural fusion. Orion is the name used in Greek mythology for one of the giants, the great hunter. In this mythological system, Orion is not a shape changer would not be pictured as a deer. In traditional Iranian astronomy, the constellation Azesar, "Antelope's Head," is the equivalent to the Greek astronomical constellation of Orion. In Indian mythology, Aldebaran is part of a constellation representing a celestial doe, "the Red One." In the Indian narrative associated with this constellation, Aldebaran is raped by her father, the creator god Prajāpati, whose lunar body corresponds with the constellation Orion. The name Aldebran is also found in Arabic astronomy. In Arabic astronomy, Aldebran is also part of the Greco-Roman Taurus, but in the Arabic astronomical taxonomy, Aldebaran is a bull being hunted by Orion. As punishment, Prajāpati is slain by an arrow, the three stars which in the Greek tradition comprise Orion's belt (see Aruz, Joan, Ann Farkas, Elisabetta Waltz Fino. *The Golden Deer of Eurasia:*

multiple identities on the symbolic figure of Orion. The name Orion in this line of poetry stands in for elements of the Greek, Roman, Arabic, and Indian traditions. Bringhurst draws on these various traditions, but glosses over their differences in order to portray an image of cultural synthesis in the new world. Bringhurst's choice here is somewhat troubling. In this way, Bringhurst remythologizes these elements for the poem's own place and time. Bringhurst exploits the resonances, conjunctions, overlappings, and crossings between these multiple traditions, creating a polyvocal, resonating web of interrelation.

While Bringhurst's language is reverent in its treatment of these various traditions, his fusion does tend to minimize the differences existing between them. This effect might expose him to the charge of cultural appropriation, even a kind of ethnocentrism through which he justifies the adoption and use of the other's cultural traditions for his own purpose. While elements of this critique may find their mark, the poem diverges from total naiveté. The nature of the integrative enactment resists this charge, however. By the manner in which he combines these traditions, Bringhurst subverts any perceived hierarchies between the systems and their relationships to each other. The Greek narratives, despite their obvious influence on the history of Euramerican mythologies and self-understanding, are neither primary nor fundamental. Bringhurst's alchemy acts in the mind of the unschooled reader so as to preclude judgment and inaugurate new orders of relationships between disparate cosmologies. By challenging established cultural hierarchies, Bringhurst's poem defies the hegemony of Euramerican rule. His work of mourning involves a deliberate remembering, a reassembly and drawing together of

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*Perspectives on the Steppe Nomads of the Ancient World*. New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, 2006. Web. 26 April 2016).

wisdom and histories from a wide-ranging “preindustrial, antiimperialist tradition . . . [which] is as long and rich in the west as it is in the east, though for centuries it has lain deep underground” (*Pieces* 120).

The final movement amalgamates these mythologies as symbols of the continuity of generations. The eternal relevance of ancient wisdom is made analogous to the circuits of the stars themselves. The stars’ slow movement symbolizes the perpetual rebirth of wisdom that takes place in the language and meaning of the stories. In this fourth movement, verbs are predominantly conjugated in the present tense, emphasizing the immediacy of the ancient stories to the present time of the movement: “The sun burns” (*SP* 228, IV.1); “Orion . . . is out stalking” (IV.3-4); “Arcturus . . . sees / in her eyes. . . The stars and the darkness glide at one speed” (IV.5-7). Moreover, the movement makes frequent use of words and phrases that underscore the ongoing and, in that sense, timeless nature of the actions. The movement uses the word “forever” four times (IV.4, 5, 17, 18), the phrase “now and always” four times (IV.6, 19), and the phrase “year after year” six times (IV.11, 23, 24). Those who are willing to set aside the words for which they “have traded their voices,” and “year after year . . . / circle back to the pool” (II1-12) are rewarded by the wisdom of the stories whose ongoing relevance to the ever-new present is made manifest in the silence though the “alkaline” nature of the pool calls into question the pool’s ability to quench thirst. A nature thus permanently altered, to humanity’s great loss, may be the ultimate legacy of this colonial history.

“IV: Winter Solstice, Cariboo Mountains” is situated in the interstices of diverse ecological systems in Eastern British Columbia, a geographical setting that mirrors the assembly of unique and divergent cultural traditions that Bringhurst imagines in this final movement. The Cariboo region is a conjunction of diverse landscapes. Represented in this region are the far-

eastern edges of the coastal, temperate climate of British Columbia's west, alpine peaks and tundra, the beginnings of the continentally-influenced ecosystem of the eastern edge of the North American Cordillera, and the rainshadow climate of the eastern slopes of the western mountains (*British Columbia Wildlife Viewing*). Mimicking this ecological diversity, difference and distance are made irrelevant in the world of the poem: "The stars and the darkness glide at one speed, / going nowhere to everywhere, or the reverse, and returning" (*SP* 228-9, IV.7-8). The geography of the movement is meant to demonstrate the same gathering that Bringhurst intends to perform in the entire poem showing the possibility of existing in awareness of rich diversity within the ecosystem of the interior of British Columbia.

A rejection of the structural connotations of movement implied in Freud's theory of the work of mourning is a corollary of Bringhurst's revisioning of the work of mourning. Countering the linear trajectory of the Freudian work of mourning, Bringhurst revives a cyclical paradigm. This paradigm rejects the notion of the final release of the loved and lost detected in the accounts of the elegiac and mourning traditions in American and British literature. There is no "moving through" or ultimate release from the loss of something which is both perennially present, but also permanently lost. Nor can there be a final moving through the nightmare of the violence and injustice of the past when the environmental consequences of colonialism are only becoming clearer. As Bringhurst's colleague, Don McKay writes, "There is no ritual imaginable which would, right now, set in balance our relation to Pacific atolls blown up in hydrogen bomb tests, or to clear-cut forests, or to the ecosphere itself" ("Baler Twine"). Bringhurst's poetry proposes a revivification of the past whereby the existence and influence of that which has been and is no more is persistently invoked. In Bringhurst's poetics, ultimately, nothing is lost but is instead perpetually present, accreting in layer upon layer of history.

## II. Mourning and Remembering: Bringhurst's "Ursa Minor"

Bringhurst's most recently polyphonic work, "Ursa Minor: *Monologues and Choruses from Ursa Major*," extends this work of mourning and attempt at remembering, turning to metaphors of translation and even transubstantiation to further the possibilities of intercultural learning and attention. "Ursa Minor" is a long poem comprised of monologues alternating with polyphonic choruses that is a revision of one of Bringhurst's earlier works entitled *Ursa Major*. The earlier poem, or masque as Bringhurst calls it, is script for an experimental multimedia performance that was commissioned by a dance company in Regina in 2002. It was arranged simultaneously as an art installation, a choreographed dance, a musical performance, and Bringhurst's polyphonic and polylinguistic retelling of the Mediterranean and Amerindian myths of the Great Bear, a "worldwide motif" (Wood 232) relating to the constellations Ursa Major and Ursa Minor (*Major* n.p.).<sup>42</sup> Bringhurst revised *Ursa Major* for inclusion in his 2009 *Selected Poems*, interspersing monologues from *Ursa Major* with polyphonic choruses comprised of new material as well as lines taken from the earlier work. "Ursa Minor" continues the work of mourning the effects of colonialism and attempting to remember Indigenous culture that was begun in *Ursa Major*. "Ursa Minor" creates and recreates its own new poetic space and time beyond the specific

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<sup>42</sup> *Ursa Major*'s performers were accompanied by a musical score composed by Chiyoko Szlavnic, which Bringhurst called "a soundwork to move through and rest in" (*Major* n.p.). The sculptor John Noestheden designed the set, which Bringhurst describes as "a kinetic work of visual art for the verbal score" (*Major* n.p.). The set included "a model of the Big Dipper fastened to a wall twenty feet high, set to the angle at which the constellation is visible from the prairies" (Wood 235). The dancer Robin Poitras, who played Callisto in the performance of *Ursa Major*, spent the performance climbing slowly and silently from star to star across the model (235).

moment of *Ursa Major*'s performance, continuing to emphasize intercultural resonances and challenging its readers to question the narratives that have governed life in Canada.

Even prior to the introduction of speaking voices in the poem, Bringhurst situates the poem in a place of multiple intersecting histories. Bringhurst sets the scene in the "Saskatchewan prairie, in the country of the Sweetgrass Cree" (*SP* 234). The first descriptor of setting, "Saskatchewan prairie," gestures towards contemporary political structures with all their accompanying power relationships as well as the history of colonial settlement and expansion across the western half of North America which took place in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The name "Saskatchewan" comes from the Cree language and means "swift flowing river" but it has been separated from its original meaning by its application to the geopolitical body of the province created in 1905. Adopted into Euramerican structures of power, the name is no longer primarily a means of "connecting . . . to that land" but also serves as a "record [of] the means by which its former inhabitants were evicted [and/or marginalized] and their long-lived cultures destroyed" (Bringhurst "Fast" 122). Consequently, the setting gestures toward the imposition of Euramerican colonial names and structures onto conquered territory, a language-act by which the colonizers "derived their arrogated authority" (Windsor 160, n. 9). However, Bringhurst qualifies the "Saskatchewan prairie" by adding "in the country of the Sweetgrass Cree." Bringhurst concretizes the setting by referring to a specific place within the geopolitical body of Saskatchewan. The Sweetgrass Cree First Nation is located approximately 200 kilometres northwest of Saskatoon. This reserve is also the place wherein a Cree man dictated the story of the bear-woman in Cree to a linguistic anthropologist in 1925 (*Major* 81, 85). Bringhurst re-transcribes this story in both Cree and an accompanying English translation in *Ursa Major*.

By making no definitive statement about whether the Saskatchewan prairie is “in” the country of the Sweetgrass Cree or *vice versa*, Bringhurst introduces a productive ambiguity into the setting. Like a 3D puzzle of perceptual rivalry, Bringhurst’s description of the setting gestures toward the place’s conflicting identities. On the one hand, the setting prioritizes the Saskatchewan prairie as a greater reality while simultaneously limiting and subordinating “the country of the Sweetgrass Cree” within the name and identity imposed by the Euramerican settlers. Seen from this angle, Bringhurst’s setting re-enacts part of the history of Canadian government—First Nations relations. Like the colonial government’s creation of “Indian Reserves,” the setting mirrors the Euramerican appropriation of Indigenous land while simultaneously segregating Indigenous reality (*Canadian Encyclopedia*). On the other hand, Bringhurst introduces a perceptual rival to this vision by referring to the land of the Sweetgrass Cree as a “country.” This rival identity combats the Euramerican mapping of the space by reminding readers of the priority of the names and identity already given to the contested space of the prairie. Bringhurst’s alternative perception draws attention to the history of Indigenous nationhood and their right to their land that persists despite the willful ignorance of Euramerican settlers. Balanced between these simultaneous and contradictory identities, the poem initiates a movement toward the decolonization of memory (Windsor 160, n. 9). The ambivalence in “Ursa Minor’s” setting is *unsettling*. The contested space of the setting challenges the Euramerican vision of *terra nullius*, the idea held by colonizers that the spaces of North America were empty of established culture and therefore open for seizure and settlement. The poem makes the seemingly familiar prairie strange by alluding to its existing unexpected and unfamiliar identities, identities that do not fit neatly inside the Euramerican narrative of appropriation and settlement. Through the complexity of the setting, Bringhurst establishes the scene of “Ursa

Minor” as a place of intercultural meeting and translation which makes communion possible, an idea that will be developed throughout the poem.

Bringhurst’s exclusion of the Cree myth and language from “Ursa Minor” may serve as a further comment on Euramerican colonial injustices. After stating that the poem is set “in Saskatchewan, in the country of the Sweetgrass Cree,” Bringhurst’s comments on “Ursa Minor’s” setting include, “The principal speaker is Arcturus, the son of Callisto and Zeus.” One might reasonably have expected the principal speakers of a poetic suite set in “Saskatchewan prairie, in the country of the Sweetgrass Cree” to be a member of the Cree First Nation or, at least, a Euramerican colonial living in Saskatchewan. Indeed, the Cree myth was prominent in *Ursa Major*,<sup>43</sup> which is defined by its polyphonic and polylinguistic intertextuality. In this earlier poem, Bringhurst’s writing comprised only a small part of the original score of the poem (Wood 231). The script of *Ursa Major* calls on actors to deliver their lines in four languages: Cree, Latin, Greek and English. The lines of scenes two and four of *Ursa Major* are drawn from the Cree myth of the bear-woman as told by Ka-Kisikaw-pihtokew (anglicized as Coming Day) to the linguistic anthropologist Leonard Bloomfield in the summer of 1925 (*Major* 81, 85). The simultaneous English translation of this text is the source of the script for another one the voices in these scenes. In “Ursa Minor,” by contrast, it is the Greco-Roman myths which form the libretto of the poem. Read in light of Bringhurst’s history of challenging the dominant Euramerican culture’s ignorance of Indigenous language and culture, the absence of the Cree

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<sup>43</sup> Bringhurst also draws on Ovid’s *Metamorphoses* for the Graeco-Roman source of the myth. Scenes One, Three, and Five of *Ursa Major* are formed of fragments of Ovid’s text. Monologues by the characters of Hera, Arcturus, Ovid’s Daughter, and “the Celestial Janitor,” who was played by Bringhurst in the origin performance, are delivered in simultaneous polyphony with this “two-headed storytelling” (Wood 234).

myth “in the country of the Sweetgrass Cree” is surely deliberate and speaks loudly in the space of the poem.

Indeed, the difference between *Ursa Major*'s extreme polylingualism and *Ursa Minor*'s monolingualism is intriguing. Bringhurst's writing does not generally shrink back from challenging the dominant Euramerican culture's ignorance of Indigenous language and culture, demonstrating a commitment instead to honouring “the variety and complexity of human language, thought and identity, instead of homogenizing or hiding it” (*Elements* 89). He gives preference to Indigenous place names in his writing, arguing that, even if “most readers . . . find the native names harder to spell, remember and pronounce” than current English names, “acknowledging these names seems to be nonetheless an essential gesture of respect and recognition” (*Story* 17). In Bringhurst's worldview, using Indigenous place names and learning Indigenous language is a means of “resisting the historical and economic forces that have conditioned the present” (Bradley, “Land's End” 206). He demonstrates this by his work with Andrew Steeves to typeset the Cree myth in the Canadian Syllabic type *Uaqmmaq* for the 2003 Gaspereau Press edition of *Ursa Major* (*Major* colophon).

Arguably, “*Ursa Minor*'s” monolingualism and emphasis on Greco-Roman myths at the expense of Indigenous local Indigenous myth re-stages the “‘missed encounter’ between North American First Nations and European colonial culture” (Wood 232).<sup>44</sup> Though the poem begins

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<sup>44</sup> Of course, there may be a number of reasons for Bringhurst's decision to treat the Cree myth differently in “*Ursa Minor*.” The simplest explanation would be that the elements of *Ursa Major* that Bringhurst included in his *Selected Poems* represent those parts of *Ursa Major* that were his own original writing, though this would fail to take into account the fact that Bringhurst has included other translations in his *Selected Poem*. Based on this precedent, one might expect Bringhurst's translations from the Cree to be included. Others might propose the submersion of the

by acknowledging the presence of Indigenous people through reference to “the country of the Sweetgrass Cree,” “Ursa Minor” brackets the Cree language and myth in the poem, seemingly re-enacting the colonial effort to impose its own language and culture over the peoples of North America, ignoring the vibrant aesthetic traditions of the local languages and cultures (*Everywhere* 87). The imposition of European language and story was another means of converting the territory of North America from its former status to a new European identity (Windsor 160 n. 9). Setting the Greco-Roman myths in the country of the Sweetgrass Cree raises the spectre of those colonial policies which sought to “replace the [Indigenous] culture “with a history, culture, language and romance of its own” (*Everywhere* 87), as Bringhurst writes elsewhere.<sup>45</sup> Indeed, in restaging this exclusion, Bringhurst’s bracketing of the Cree culture steps dangerously close to enacting the same colonial violence of the original colonization of North America. By foregrounding the Greco-Roman myths, the Euramerican culture once again seems to look past and through the Cree First Nation.

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Cree and Latin could be a product of a relatively small Cree readership. Looking at Bringhurst’s literary corpus, however, it seems unlikely that a potentially small qualified readership would stop Bringhurst from including the Cree if he desired to do so. Where possible, Bringhurst has published his translations side by side with the source poetry, as he did in *Ursa Major, The Old in Their Knowing* (2005), and his translations of the fragments of Parmenides (*Fragments* 2004). It is also possible that Bringhurst wanted to avoid re-opening the debate about cultural appropriation that might follow from his inclusion of such translations in his 2009 *Selected Poems*. Even a determined cultural translator like Bringhurst might tire of defending his work. This, of course, remains speculation.

<sup>45</sup> Bringhurst’s poem repeats the witlessness of poets like the Californian Robinson Jeffers in the 1920s who, though looking at a hybrid amalgam of Indigenous, Mexican, and European cultures in the Monterey Coast mountains interpreted these cultures in terms of “the Idyls and the Sagas . . . [of] Homer’s Ithaca” (*Selected* 715).

However, “Ursa Minor” interrogates the Euramerican act of linguistic and mythological colonialism, destabilizing any notion of Euramerican superiority or moral right. It insists on turning toward the Indigenous peoples of Saskatchewan instead of away. First, by identifying Euramerican culture with the naïve and immature figure of Arcturus, the poem argues that, as technological power has increased, so has the risk that accompanies Euramerican use of it.<sup>46</sup> In the Greco-Roman myths, Arcturus, in his ignorance of his relationship to her, attempts to murder his own mother. The poem suggests that there is a comparably dangerous naiveté attached to the Euramerican settler’s ignorance and abuse of power. For example, the sixth chorus of “Ursa Minor” rereads a scene from the Cree myth that was central to *Ursa Major* where the human hunter and the bear-woman in the Cree myth prepare a feast for the bear-woman’s family. The scene in the Cree myth is one of intimacy between mortal and immortal—humanity’s ultimate other. Though “Ursa Minor” employs the extended imagery of the feast, with its fire, guests, and hosts, it diverges from the Cree myth significantly. The sixth chorus of “Ursa Minor” demonstrates how the place of gathering and feasting—a reference to the plentiful land and resources of North America—becomes fraught with peril. Technology gives the individual “the wherewithal / to cook the feast, the guest, the host, / the dining hall, the whole shebang” (*SP* 241). Fire, the poem’s symbol for technology, quickly grows out of control, turning what should be a scene of feasting and celebration into one of devastation. The chorus in section six ends with the observation, “How long till done, it seems that no one / knows. Nor who might be here to digest / that last, long supper when it’s served” (*SP* 241). Through this ominous prophecy and its apocalyptic imagery, “Ursa Minor” raises the looming specter of contemporary environmental

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<sup>46</sup> See section V: “Biting what then / was the point of the spear. Chewing what now / is the radar screen, / bombsight/ and crosshair” (*SP* 240).

crises caused by our “reckless burning of fossil fuels” (Wood 241). The poem challenges Euramerican confidence in unending cultural progress through technology.

By telling and re-telling the Greco-Roman myths and alluding to the Cree myths, which are present as intertextual references in “Ursa Minor,” Bringhurst’s poem attempts to model a return, a movement toward contact with the world as it was and is. As he has written elsewhere, “[t]he telling of myth is centred on the myth, and on the subject of the myth, which is the deep, recurrent world. The myth is told in order to draw its listeners back into contact with that world and out of the trap of daily concerns and current affairs. It is ‘the music of humanity at peace with time’” (*Everywhere* 250). In light of the contemporary environmental and technological morass, the poem argues that the inheritances of Euramerican thinking do not teach the wisdom that is required to live well in this place. In doing so, the polyphonic space of the poem further subverts Euramerican dominance by adopting a posture and attitude of humility toward the Indigenous cultures of the place. Attempting to “make space from pieces of time . . . time out of pieces of space,” Bringhurst’s “Ursa Minor” seeks to make a true homecoming possible (*First ¶5*). Speaking in sustained polyphony against Arcturus’s voice as he retells the myth of Calisto and Zeus, the chorus appeals *en masse* to Indigenous culture for assistance and even deliverance from the peril of the dominant culture’s hubris (Wood 241). The chorus draws on the diction and syntactical configurations of North American Indigenous oral narratives in the context of seeking wisdom for how to be “at home” in this place (247). The chorus calls upon “[g]randmother earth, / grandfather fire, / grandmother water, / and grandfather air” (*SP* 236), appealing to the grandparents or elders to instruct them. The chorus repeats that “[w]e are at home only so long / as we are inhabited, / alive only so long as we are lived in / by the places where we are” (*SP* 236). The chorus also indicates a desire to be cleansed of the hubris of their European cosmology

and ontology, expressing a deeply felt need for a new and more expansive understanding of place that is entirely at odds with the history of Euramerican attitudes and ontology. The chorus's pleas take on a quasi-religious tone as they beseech the elements of place and figures from Indigenous mythology to effect a cleansing sanctification. The words "Earth, water, fire, air, / coyote, raven, bathe us. / Clean our bones" (*SP* 241) enact a type of New World baptism or rebirth to a new life. The chorus's pleas express a desire for the intervention of Indigenous wisdom prompted by a belief that, without it, those who live in North America will remain perpetual "aliens in the land" (*Everywhere* 86-7), "uninhabited" by the polyphonic cultural multiplicity of North America.

The position occupied by the chorus is based on a posture of humility towards the wisdom of colonialism's "other," an openness to the face of the other and a recognition of his/her power to deny the cleansing and communion that the chorus requests. This posture hopes for a personal and corporate metamorphosis, a communal transubstantiation and even a translation of the one to the other that retains, by its very definition as translation, a mindfulness of the differences that exist between people and cultures. While bearing these differences in mind, though, "Ursa Minor" expresses a hope that our shared humanity, our mutual participation in what-is, might make such cultural translation possible. The poem suggests that the Greco-Roman Arcturus and the First Nations of the Canadian prairie mutually participate in and express "what is." Being is a type of metamorphosis, a transubstantiation from one to the other:

In the aspens and the spruces,  
  
the larches and birches,  
  
earth is climbing a ladder of water

and water a ladder of air,  
  
 and air is climbing a ladder of fire,  
  
 and fire descending a stair  
  
 of air and water into the earth  
  
 that is reaching and climbing with tiny hands  
  
 a ladder knotted of water, fire, and air. (*SP* 242)

This is a type of translation which is an expression of the fundamental relationship of the one to the other—“If there is nothing that can be translated perfectly,” still “there is nothing that cannot be translated” (Engler 313). Translation, metamorphosis, even the notion of the metaphor itself—each seeks to capture the idea that each is related to the other, that difference is still somehow expressive of likeness, of connection.

In this complex web of interrelation, Bringhurst proposes the importance of participatory, sacramental attention to inter-personal, inter-cultural encounters to help the one give shape to the other. The tone of the poem takes on something bordering on reverent watchfulness. Using elemental language, the poem attempts to teach this shared participation in being: “air transforming into air and earth to earth/ and fire to fire and water to water / and blood to water and blood to snow/ and hunter to hunted and breath to air” (*SP* 242). Though “Ursa Minor” certainly cannot reply on behalf of Indigenous persons or speak on their behalf about the experience of injustices that have taken place in North America, the poem expresses a hope that our shared being, expressed through communal acts of attention to what-is, can be the source of a new unity in diversity. In this hope, the poem reimagines cultural transformation, or the rewriting

of the self in the idiom of the place, as coming face to face with self in the other, and the other in the self. In Section VII, the chorus says, the self “is the face assumed by one / to face what seems to be another.” Or, as Bringhurst writes later in the poem, “the self is neither element nor recipe. / The self is just what is as it splits and turns” (243). Mutual participation in the being of the earth means that there is no cultural or personal difference so great that it cannot be translated, however imperfectly. The fundamental union, recognized in acts of attention, between all things make metamorphosis of all kinds, including cultural translation and inhabitation, possible.

### **III. The Ethics of Mourning**

The work of mourning undertaken by Bringhurst suggests there may be a felt desire to include the specific legacies of colonialism in elegiac responses to place amongst Canadian poets. What is at issue in this history, whether remembered or forgotten, is the question of the relationship of one to the other, and, in this particular case, the relationship between persons who have experienced relative safety and privilege in comparison to persons, groups and cultures who have suffered as a result of power imbalances. Mourning, in this context, “resists a purely emotional or affective feeling of grief that lends itself to settlers simply ‘feeling bad’ for colonial violence. Rather, [it] must be understood as a political resource that calls for an agenda of decolonising structural justice” (Park 274). In other words, mourning may present the beginning of openness to the consideration of the change that might be required of members of the Euramerican civilization—however disenfranchised those members might be—by non-Euramerican cultures in order to make possible the learning and alliances Bringhurst imagines.

As “New World Suite N°3” and “Ursa Minor” demonstrate, Bringhurst’s writing insists on acknowledging a depth of violence to non-Western cultures at the hands of the West. Indeed, Bringhurst’s mourning affirms that avoiding a truthful retelling of history is another form of

violence, invading the past and disavowing what should rightfully be mourned.<sup>47</sup> In doing so, Bringhurst's poetry addresses one of the concerns Silko had about Caucasian poets like Gary Snyder whom she argued demonstrated the desire to "obliterate (one's) white, middle-class ancestry and origins" (Silko 213) in order to claim a new identity and inheritance. The direct criticism of Euramerican colonial culture and history in "New World Suite N° 3" and "Ursa Minor" counters the tendency to amnesia about the violence of colonialism in Euramerican cultural remembering. But more than that, Bringhurst's poetry invites the reader to participate in a work of mourning which is, in part, a place of discerning his or her own implication in the colonial violation of North American spaces and Indigenous cultures. By inviting the reader to occupy a posture of mourning for the violent nature of the interaction between the colonial culture and the original spaces and peoples of the continent, the poems initiate a change in the colonial culture's assumed relationship of hierarchy between settler cultures and Indigenous peoples and the non-human elements of the environment. Bringhurst's poetry and prose suggests that this act is prerequisite for any possibility of gaining from non-Western ideology and practice.

Furthermore, Bringhurst's suite acknowledges the present's debt to the past, a prerequisite to any kind of claim applied towards inheritance. The work of poetic mourning presents a literal place and time wherein disremembered or marginalized traditions are given welcome by the mourners to once again speak, creating a space whereby their influence can once

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<sup>47</sup> Perhaps influenced by his residence in a geographical area that is home to what he labels a genocide against Indigenous inhabitants over the past centuries, Bringhurst is unable to take comfort in any easy belief that generations and generational transmission of wisdom go undisturbed.

again be felt. The sepulchre in Bringhurst's movement and its work of mourning offers, in a way, a kind of "soil and a tomb to the dead of the past" (Ricoeur 369). A sepulchre is an edifice gesturing to the absence and grief over loss. It symbolizes the separation between the past and the present. The act of "scriptural sepulchre" which Bringhurst's suite enacts allows the creation of a space of mourning that recognizes that the dead of the past are, in fact, dead, irrespective of the conservation of matter and the integral unity of everything that exists. Importantly, a poem like "New World Suite N°3" also acknowledges that many of the dead of the past have died violently, adding a different kind of weight to the grief invoked by their deaths and demands that a different kind of care and consideration be given to the manner of their remembrance.

The poem's act of scriptural sepulchre also depends upon a recognition that each described and mourned-for environment alluded to within the poem "carries with it its having been" because "each carries within itself the traces of its provenance, in form of debt and heritage" (Ricoeur 377). This is true whether the poem is speaking of people, wisdom, story, or networks of ecological relationships. Bringhurst's poem is a kind of imaginative remembering, a kind of planting of the kernels of the past's existence as the suite acknowledges the present's debt to the past and welcomes, even beseeches, the influence of Euramerica's others. The sepulcher is the place where the mourner acknowledges we are not "merely bounded beings, for the primary others who are past for me not only live in the fiber of the boundary that contains me (one meaning of 'incorporation'), but they also haunt the way I am, as it were, periodically undone and open to becoming unbounded" (Butler 17). Mourning around the work of sepulcher acknowledges that "we are, from the start and by virtue of being a bodily being, already given over, beyond ourselves, implicated in lives that are not our own" (Butler 17). The replaying of these elements of the past – the act of sepulchre – provides a place around which the living may

gather, and in which they may find, in the process of mourning, a place of belonging in the worldviews of other wisdoms.

The act of mourning enacted by Bringhurst is one possible step in the attempt to create new places of belonging. It may seem paradoxical to those who long for the preservation of the wisdom of the past, but this preservation demands recognition that there are ways in which the past has been definitely separated from the present. To ignore the loss of the past – to ignore, for example, the genocidal policy of North American settler governments towards the Indigenous peoples of North America – in favor of arguing that nothing that is gone is truly lost is a deliberate forgetting which denies the real losses of the past, which seeks to deny the losses of the past and establishes a new foundation for the future that refuses the responsibility to acknowledge and mourn wrongdoing. This kind of future rests upon another form of violence, an invasion of the past which disavows what must truly be mourned. It is also the kind of future where ethical action is made impossible. It is here where Bringhurst's mourning enacts a remembering, a truth-telling that, at least in part, allows for a future which can hold open its arms to the past and can accept the past within the cycles of its remembering, even while it directs its attention to that which still remains. Then, the remains of what has been gathered and mourned allow the possibility of transformation when the seeds of the wisdom of the past, which return to the lap of the earth, may grow again.

Bringhurst's polyphonic long poems, then, become an invitation to mutual participation that is extended toward the reader and toward disremembered cultures and ideologies, initiating "an Indigenous ethics of hospitality, homelessness, and homecoming" (Emberley 149). Turning toward the past with sorrow and longing, the poem encourages the reader to participate in welcoming a kind of return of disremembered pasts and peoples by incorporating and combining

the lost into the present in a way that goes beyond merely reviving the memory of the subject but is in itself an invitation extended from the reader toward the lost to speak and live again. “New World Suite N°3” and “Ursa Minor” call the individual to inhabit and be inhabited by his or her own place. This is an act of learning to speak and be spoken by the idiom of North America that involves learning from the wisdom of the past and present in order to cultivate responsible thought and practice. The reader is asked to extend to his or her life beyond the poem a similar attention to the union of all things: to respect and learn from Indigenous wisdom and to care for “the wounded mother” of the physical earth that is “configured” in Bringhurst’s text (Kearney 109). Through the “gaps and indeterminacies of an open [polyphonic] text,” the poem attempts a “moment of retrieval” from the disavowed wisdom of the past (Kearney 109). In the process, the poems themselves embody possible moments of recognition, of epiphany, wherein Bringhurst attempts to challenge his readers to recognize the danger of the inequities arising from colonialism and its effects and to begin or continue the process of translating themselves into the idiom of the place and time of the poem. Enacting Bringhurst’s belief that “poetry is the breathing hole in the ice of our identity” (*Tree* 312), these polyphonic poems attempt to enlarge the world of their readers (Kearney 109) by taking their readers back to a world that existed before colonialism’s violences foreclosed on difference. The poems’ numerous intertextual references—to the Cree, Indian, Chinese, Iranian, Greco-Roman and Euramerican culture as well as to the geopolitical spaces of Canada’s history—open these texts to the *extratextual* world (128). Through their attention to difference and multiple perspectives, the poems call the reader to question received narratives and to “complete the narrative arc [begun in the poem] by serving as a . . . witness who ‘refigures’ the world of the text in his return to lived experience” (109).

## Conclusion

Two opposing forces have been at work in this study. One is of a centripetal nature, pulling my attention toward a consideration of the sacramental core around which elements of both Stevens' and Bringhurst's poetry and poetics revolve. I have argued that their revision of Protestant sacramentalism fulfils an important function in their poetry, giving each poet metaphors with which articulate visions and experiences of personally renewing and even spiritual encounters between persons and places. Stevens' reprise of Protestant sacramentalism allows him to describe writing as a means of renewal not only of form—of “choice of subjects,” or “rhythm, diction, and manner”—but also of self.<sup>48</sup> He writes in “John Crowe Ransom: Tennessean” (1948) that:

One turns with something like ferocity toward a land that one loves, to which one is really and essentially native, to demand that it surrender, reveal, that in itself which one loves. This is a vital affair, not an affair of the heart (as it may be in one's first poems), but an affair of the whole being (as in one's last poems), a fundamental affair of life, or, rather, an affair of fundamental life . . . (*CPP* 820)

Here, the experience of place is an essential, definitive moment in life. It begins with the observer's demand for the surrender of “the land one loves” and ends with that same observer's

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<sup>48</sup> In this passage in “The Irrational Element in Poetry” (1936), Stevens writes that “As a man becomes familiar with his own poetry, it becomes as obsolete for himself as for anyone else. From this it follows that one of the motives in writing is renewal. This undoubtedly affects the choice of subjects as definitely as it affects changes in rhythm, diction, and manner” (*CPP* 820).

felicitous undoing by those “trivial things” of place that “have an emotional power over us that for a moment is more than we can control” (820).

Bringhurst’s poetry likewise involves a communion between self and not-self, between person and the fullness of place. For Bringhurst, this communion is a natural product of the body’s physicality, part and parcel of being, breathing, eating. The title of his “Gloria, Credo, Sanctus et Oreamnos Deorum” (1995) revises the designation of the Catholic Mass, replacing the expected “Agnus Dei,” or sacrificial “Lamb of God,” with the mountain goat, *Oreamnos americanus* (Wood 113). While the poem draws on a central part of the Christian tradition, the communion it describes is pagan:

Killing and eating  
 the four-footed gods  
 and the winged and the rooted,  
 the footless and one-footed

gods: making flesh  
 of their flesh, thought  
 from their thought in the form  
 of the traces they leave,

words from their voices  
 music and jewellery  
 out of their bones,  
 dreams from their dances (*SP* 161)

The poem suggests that there is a physical and cultural enmeshment between all that exists. Attention to enmeshment in Bringhurst's poem also leads to a type of confession and the expression of an almost primal need that is akin to the similar confession and need expressed in Stevens' "John Crowe Ransom: Tennessean." Bringhurst's poem concludes with the lines:

begging forgiveness  
 begging continuance  
 begging continuance and forgiveness  
 from the stones (161)

Such transformational experiences are crucial to many of Bringhurst's poems. They inscribe a personal metamorphosis that is not quite transcendence but that nevertheless calls the individual to exceed the limits of Cartesian dualism. For Bringhurst's poetry as for Stevens', the sacramental experience of place is an essential aspect of their depiction of the importance of place.

The second force that has governed my study moves away from the sacramental core to ask questions about the aesthetic and ethical implications of this sacramentalism within their contemporary cultures, mid-century American for Stevens and late-twentieth-century Canadian for Bringhurst. As the above lines of "Gloria, Credo, Sanctus, Oremus Deorum" imply, experience leads to transformation, but this personal transformation can become communal. The ritual of the mass that Bringhurst's poem engages assumes at least two participants (Whelan 430). It is also commonly taught that the devotional aspect of the mass extends outward from the individual. This notion is tied to the Latin closing of the Mass: "*Ite, missa est.*" This is the "dismissal of the faithful" (Metzger 3) that follows the ritual of communion. While the word

*missio* can be translated as “dismissal,” this meaning has been sublimated amongst some adherents in favour of one of the alternative definitions of *missio*: “mission” (3). According to the implications of this definition, the congregation is sent out in a manner analogous to the Biblical story of Jesus Christ’s sending of his disciples. Both Bringhurst and Stevens exploit the evangelical undercurrent of sacramental metaphor and teaching; they make personal renewal a means of corporate renewal, although, as my previous chapters have shown, they imagine different possibilities for the nature and extent of a corporate renewal. “Gloria, Credo, Sanctus, et Oreamnos Deorum” makes a corporate offering on behalf its readers, including them in the poem’s actions through its pronouns: “This is our offering: hunger, not anger, / wonder, not terror, / desire, not greed.” Presumably the confession with which the poem ends would also include its readers, although the personal pronouns are scant. Other poems by Bringhurst contain a more overt evangelical zeal. The sixth Chorus of “Ursa Minor” ends on a note of confession and plea for absolution that includes all of “us” in its appeal (*SP* 241). Similarly, the ninth chorus takes on a didactic tone, instructing its readers that “We are at home only so long as we are inhabited, / alive only so long as we are lived in / by the places where we are” (*SP* 243). Like the grandfather instructing his grandson in the third movement of “New World Suite N°3,” Bringhurst’s poetry does not shy away from the responsibility to teach and train.

Stevens’ sacramentalism also looks outward. In “Extracts from Addresses to the Academy of Fine Ideas” (1942), he returns to the notion of the universal priesthood that was a central part of the Protestant Reformation. Martin Luther challenged the Catholic belief in an infallible and hierarchical church structure which “dispenses salvation through the sacraments” (Berkhof 619), emphasizing instead the “priesthood of all believers” alluded to in 1 Peter 2:5: “You also, like living stones, are being built into a spiritual house to be a holy priesthood,

offering spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ.” Stevens expands Luther’s critique of church hierarchy to include the entire Christian tradition—not only Catholicism—in the purview of his assessment and rejection. Likewise, Stevens goes farther than Luther by expanding his priesthood to include not only adherents to the Protestant tradition, but “all men”:

The lean cats of the arches of the churches,  
 That's the old world. In the new, all men are priests.

They preach and they are preaching in a land  
 To be described. They are preaching in a time  
 To be described. Evangelists of what? (*CPP* 229)

This preaching is prompted by individual experience—a “communion” of the eye as the previous canto calls it (228)—that is enthralling and compelling and that makes “all men” priests. However, they are not only priests but evangelists—originally those who “bring or tell good tidings”—“zealous advocates of a cause,” or “promoters of a doctrine” (*OED*), although the precise nature of their good tidings is uncertain; “Evangelists of what?” the poem asks. The doctrine they seek to spread is ineffable; it cannot be described in the present. It suggests a “participatory vision” that valorizes “nonconceptual aspects of perception and language” (Raine 107), a vision to which Stevens’ poetry invites its readers. The men Stevens describes are prophets of a time and place to come, a new reality just beyond the threshold, “a land / To be described,” and “a time / To be described” (*CPP* 229).

Bringhurst's and Stevens' differing perspectives on the relation between the poem and the sacramental experience that is inscribed within it influence their individual visions for the ethical responsibility of poetry—its “evangelical” imperative. Stevens places limits on poetry's authority; the “good news” that it brings mutely points to another time, another place. In limiting poetry thus, Stevens was perhaps influenced by, on the one hand, a belief in the power of words and, on the other, a simultaneous skepticism about “big, hallowed words and the social uses to which they could be put” (Minter 75). This cultural context helps explain, at least in part, Stevens' efforts to create a “supreme fiction” that would be able “to supply the satisfactions of belief” (841) and his contrary labours to destabilize and dismantle those same “fictions” through his mode of qualified assertion and his frequent recourse to the palinode, the almost ritual retraction of positive assertions (Jenkins 127). It is possible that the semantic and grammatical uncertainty in Stevens' poetry that undermines its own assertions also explains some of its evocative power and ongoing influence.

By contrast, Bringhurst posits that a more fundamental relationship exists between poetry and “what-is.” On the basis of the relationship, the poet has the obligation to seek to free him or herself from “the itch to manipulation” (*Everywhere* 17) as much as possible in order to “come to nothing” (*SP* 59) in the face of the poetry that is “a constituent or property of being” (*Everywhere* 10). By doing so, the poet and poetry reclaim a moral and ethical authority within culture. Consequently, some of Bringhurst's poems speak in a prophetic voice that is more or less absent from Stevens' poetry, calling out for the revival of practices that promote wholeness and unity between humans and their environment. Bringhurst revives traditions that “[interweave] the emotional and ethical with the imaginative and intellectual,” adapting them to his contemporary time and place to preach on matters global and local—considering everything

from colonialism and industrialization to the ethically upright response to roadkill in the process (*Tree* 300). Bringhurst rebukes his readers in “New World Suite N°3” and his fellow-poets in poems such as “Hachadura” or “Stopping By,” where he reproves Robert Frost for the concept of land ownership that goes unquestioned in his “Stopping By Woods on a Snowy Evening” (1923) (“Stopping By” 144). Certainly, Stevens and Bringhurst differ widely in the manner in which they respond to their contemporary cultures.

This difference, I believe, provides an answer to the question that Bringhurst posed in his introduction to “Hachadura”:

What, nevertheless, it is fair to ask, does the ghost of Wallace Stevens, in his comfortable apartments, have to do with the bitter fate of human beings in a village in Ahuachapán? *Lend no part to any humanity that suffuses / you in its own light*, he counselled himself one day. And on the same page, addressing the words themselves and the universe:

*Shine alone, shine nakedly shine like bronze,*

*that reflects neither my face nor any inner part*

*of my being, shine like fire, that mirrors nothing.* (*Beauty* 73, italics in original)

“Hachadura” critiques what Bringhurst seemed to believe at the time to be Stevens’ essential aesthetics and ethics, taking aim in particular at his supposedly “inwardly directed irony” (Whatley 111), which may be itself a form of self-aggrandizement. “Hachadura” suggests that Stevens’ poetry is another example of the autotelic and closed poetry prized by modernist poets and the New Critics, a poetics that is the product of a “hedonist, corrupted imagination” (Jenkins 131). Yet, as my study has shown, the sacramentalism in Stevens’ poetry allows for a closer

association of Stevens and Bringhurst. While it does not operate in every poem, it creates openings, where it is present, from the poem into the world of embodied experience. This is a poetics that celebrates communion with a physical world that can be encountered in its strangeness and otherness—Stevens argues that it should “[reflect] neither [the poet’s face] nor any inner part / of [his] being” (*CPP* 15). The “communion of the eye” which is enacted in his poetry is an anti-anthropocentric one by means of which “the abstraction would / Be broken” (230). In breaking through “abstraction,” the autotelic poem ensconced in the poet’s subjectivity, the seclusion of self from the worldly or sensual is transformed into encounter with reality—including “the bitter fate of human beings in a village in Ahuachapán” (*Beauty* 73). But all of this begins with a recognition of the importance of place to individual being. As Stevens writes in the fourth canto of “Extracts from Addresses,” it is “that difference between the and an” (230) that makes the individual, personal experience of the place in which the person exists here and now—transformative. “Stevens, in his comfortable apartments,” may have occasionally pontificated about poetic self-sufficiency in poems such as the pithy “Description without Place”: “It is a world of words to the end of it” (*CPP* 301).<sup>49</sup> He may not have used poetry as an overt vehicle for social critique in the same way that Bringhurst sometimes does.<sup>50</sup> Nevertheless, he turns to place—the “land one loves, to which one is really and essentially native” (820)—with a “ferocity” of desire that is simultaneously a surrender. It is this theme that, I believe, compels Bringhurst’s long engagement with Stevens’ poetics.

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<sup>49</sup> Though, as the analysis of “Description without Place” in Chapter Five shows, the physical irrupts in the heart of the poem.

<sup>50</sup> It is interesting to note that Stevens did protest in the jacket copy for *Ideas of Order* that poetry approaches questions of social order in poetic terms (Longenbach, *Plain* 152).

Stevens' and Bringhurst's revisions of Protestant sacramentalism reply to the sense of alienation from place that is a common theme in twentieth-century poetry (McClintock 112). Although they are not religious poets in the usual sense, their poetry has religious importance by virtue of its description of an "experiential faith in a numinous nature" (Gatta 5). I believe that this theme is one of the reasons that their writing matters. The questions that they pose about the meaning of human existence and humanity's relation to the nonhuman have an urgent relevance. Indeed, they are questions that poets who follow them take up. To consider one example, Stevens' influence can be discerned in the work of the emerging poet Richard Kelly Kemick. *Caribou Run* (2016) ends with the poem "Caribou's Shadow." It echoes elements of Stevens' "Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird," adopting his evocative imagery and suggestive, but cryptic, statements. Stevens' whistling blackbird becomes Kemick's crow who is "all throat in her call," but many of the other features of Stevens' poem—snow, light, moving shadows—are transplanted directly into Kemick's, wherein they are considered in a Stevensian, meditative tone. A koan-like statement—"There is hardly anything to be said / for something that is hardly there at all" (Kemick 86)—is reminiscent of Stevens' similarly succinct and enigmatic claim:

I know noble accents

And lucid, inescapable rhythms;

But I know, too,

That the blackbird is involved

In what I know. (*CPP* 75)

In both poems, mysterious statements create a sense of the interpenetration of the local and specific with the global and general. Stevens' whirling blackbird "was a small part of the

pantomime” (*CPP* 75) in a relation that borders on that of cause and effect: “The river is moving / The blackbird must be flying” (76). In a similar fashion, a “shadow is absorbed into larger things” (85) in “Caribou’s Shadow.” The crow’s body “collects the full spectrum of light, and. . . she will show / the nocturnal earth to do the same” (85).

Kemick’s poem also imitates Stevens’ use of the theme of the threshold to contemplate being. “Caribou’s Shadow” is set in a liminal place and time of multiple thresholds. It is dusk—the moment where day becomes evening—on a day at the boundary between fall and winter, a day on which “it both rained and snowed – / the thermometer quivering at zero” (86). The poem also considers the boundaries between sound and silence, presence and absence. Like Stevens’ poem, “Caribou’s Shadow” is one of “inflection and innuendo . . . the heard melodies . . . and what is left out” (Vendler, *Extended* 75). Kemick writes,

I can never  
  
decide which is more beautiful: the boulder  
  
in pure light or the shape of the shadow  
  
spilt across it; the song or the echo (86).<sup>51</sup>

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<sup>51</sup> The poem also plays with the boundaries between senses. The observer experiences the crow in a synaesthetic fashion. Kemick writes, “Listen—you can hear the deep colour of her body” (85). This collapsing of boundaries is reminiscent of similar moments in Stevens’ poetry. For example in “Domination of Black” (1923), the sensations of sight and sound blur in a “loud fire” that is “full of the cry of peacocks” (*CPP* 7). Similarly, the female interlocutor in “Sunday Morning” is imagined to experience an almost synaesthetic identification between self and the physical world (53).

Thresholds of union and disaggregation at the boundaries between the senses and between self and not-self lie at the core of the poem, just as they do in “Thirteen Ways.” For both poets, the consideration of being is critical, not only in their attention to the “the commonsense possibility of the union of flesh, love, knowledge, social life, and being within the semantic paradox of ‘one’ being two” (Maeder 70), but also in their inclusion of the non-human other in that union. The non-human is shown to be integral to human existence: “Between the man and the woman is the blackbird, one with them; between the man’s mood and his environment is the blackbird . . . It is, finally, the principle of our final relation to the universe . . . though only a small part, it is the determining focus of relation” (Vendler, *Extended* 77). Through blackbird, crow, caribou and the rivers and snowy hills of these poems, Stevens and Kemick turn with a mixture of fear, illumination and resignation to the human participation in the entirety of being.

Kemick’s volume is a densely intertextual poetic reflection on the Porcupine Caribou Herd, the migrations of which take place over a 250,000 km<sup>2</sup> region in the Yukon and Northwest Territories of Canada. The collection draws on Indigenous knowledge, scientific studies, and travel writing and poetry from a variety of authors, including Al Purdy and Don McKay, who edited the volume and from whose poem “Here” Kemick draws one of the volume’s numerous epigraphs (colophon, 57). Although Kemick does not draw directly from Bringhurst’s poetry, Bringhurst and his peers, including McKay, have for decades written poems like those in Kemick’s volume that serve as “systems of references, pointing . . . to persons, places, things, and texts outside themselves” (Bringhurst and Ricou 95). Kemick follows these older poets in demonstrating in his poetry an intense curiosity about the “granular, fecund detail” (96), meditating in one poem on the *rumen*, *reticulum*, *omasum*, and *abomasum* of the caribou stomach (14-15). In another example, “Caribou Moss, *Cladonia rangiferina*” (63), an important

part of caribou diet, becomes the subject of contemplation conducted in language not unlike that of Bringhurst's "Poem about Crystal" (1975) or "Some Ciphers." Kemick's poem shares Bringhurst's cautious description, as well as his habit in these poems of directly addressing his readers in the manner of an instructor. Careful observation and attention to detail in Kemick's poem also lead to revelation about the unity of all things. The moss is celebrated for

the offering of its entire self  
 into the vast mouth of sky,  
 its pronged reach growing  
 into a million small antlers. (63)

In finding this connection between the part and the whole, Kemick celebrates the place of humanity within the world, a motif which is also frequently present in Bringhurst's poetry. Even without further evidence of influence, it could be said that Bringhurst's poetry has helped to create a sub-climate within Canadian poetics in which attention to details is valued as a gesture of respect—bordering even on duty—and is a prerequisite for meaningful encounter with place.

The poetic aesthetic of attention easily moves into the realm of ethics. Previous chapters analyzed the ethics of mourning and truth-telling in which Bringhurst's poetry engages, but the concern with ethics is found beyond the borders of his poetry. As a typographer, he propounds an inclusive, humanist vision for typography, arguing that typographers have the obligation and privilege to "honor the variety and complexity of human language, thought and identity, instead of homogenizing or hiding it" (*Elements* 89). Bringhurst argues that the treatment of something even as seemingly simple as a hyphen is of great importance: "Douglas-fir, balsam fir, Oregon ash, mountain-ash, redcedar, yellowcedar, Atlas cedar, white pine, yellow pine, blue spruce. All

these names are correct as they stand. They would be less so if an eager but ignorant editor, or a typographer obsessed with graphic hygiene, tried to standardize the hyphens” (89). The hyphen is important because it preserves the trace of these words connection to being itself. “The terms are written differently because some are made from nouns that are only borrowed, others from nouns that are generic. The balsam fir is what it claims to be: a fir; the Douglas-fir is not; it is a separate genus waiting for a proper English name” (89). Bringhurst’s concern with the ethical use of language also prompts his determination to use Indigenous place names as a “gesture of respect and recognition” (*Story* 17), making his readers participate in that gesture even if they might struggle to pronounce, remember, or even read the place names.

The history of the response to Bringhurst’s translations indicates that his efforts to attend to Indigenous culture have not always been understood or well-received, but he has nevertheless persevered. His poetry argues that attention to Indigenous languages and stories is part of the broader ethics of attention that is critical to transformative encounter with place. “Stopping By” indirectly suggests that residents of Canada must acknowledge that the history of Indigenous people and the injustices of colonialism are part of “the story / of each place that is a place and every / thing that is a thing” here (146). Consequently, there can be no meaningful encounter with North America’s “woods, fields, seascapes, and open air” (Gatta 7) that does not acknowledge the history of colonialism and honour Indigenous culture. In light of the findings of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, it is arguable that the patterns of inclusion and contemplation of Indigenous culture that Bringhurst undertakes in his poetry will become increasingly important within the field. Indeed, acknowledgement, mourning, and efforts to promote reconciliation between colonists and Indigenous peoples have expanded during the decades of Bringhurst’s residence on the West Coast, with increased cultural openness to engage

in public dialogue about the genocide against Indigenous people (Truth and Reconciliation Commission 250). Bringham's poetry, prose, and translations demonstrate a prescient awareness of the importance of challenging the view that "Canada's historical development . . . is accurate and beneficent" (183). It has actively questioned the national narrative of benevolent expansion and progress through poetry that actively remembers the nation's unjust and violent past. It is interesting to note the expansion of this remembering in the writing of other non-Indigenous Canadian poets. These include some authors that are frequently mentioned together with Bringham, like Jan Zwicky, Tim Lilburn, Dennis Lee, and Don McKay,<sup>52</sup> as well as others who are less closely associated with Bringham. For example, Gary Geddes' most recent volume, *The Resumption of Play* (2016) begins with a long title poem whose speaker narrates his experience as a Coast Salish boy who is taken and placed in a residential school on Penelakut Island—formerly known as Kuper Island and referred to by the school's residents as "Alcatraz"—a small

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<sup>52</sup> For example, an awareness of the changes wrought on Indigenous culture in Northern Alberta as settlement pushed west is a recurring theme in Zwicky's exploration of the place and landscape and her own family's history of immigration and settlement in her poem "Robinson's Crossing" (2004) (*Robinson's* 34-41). Similarly, Lilburn's *Assiniboia* (2012) is a poetic response to his argument that "the shape, or spirit of the age we're living in, will next move . . . to compunction, to apology, tears, sorrow . . . for all of the imperialisms we have engaged in. This foolish sense that we were and are entitled in an unlimited way" (Whetter n.p.). Similarly, Lee's *Civil Elegies* (1972) initiates a work of mourning for the inability to escape the identity of "Indian-swindlers, / stewards of unclaimed earth and rootless" (34). His more recent poetry continues to relate ecological crises to the destructive patterns wreaked upon Indigenous peoples and traditions. Lee's poetry suggests that this destruction makes finding a means of belonging in North America difficult. For example, the speaker of "Blue Psalm (Hush hush, little wanderer)" (1996) summarizes the Euramerican way of life as a combination of "unclean" and "weird abstract superstitions" that lead to alienation (*Nightwatch* 179).

island near Nanaimo, British Columbia. The poem is preceded by an epigraph from Nietzsche: “We have art in order not to die of the truth” (11) and, indeed, the “truth” in the poem is as devastating as those familiar with the history of residential schools in Canada might expect. It acknowledges the disturbing and violent physical abuse and sexual assault that were prevalent at the school and the policies of cultural genocide which undergirded many educational practices (28, 31, 17).<sup>53</sup> While its act of truth-telling is valuable, there are elements of the poem which are troubling and point to the ongoing challenges of navigating the troubled waters of settler-colonial/Indigenous relations. Geddes’ occupation of an Indigenous voice might be seen as the kind of appropriation of which Bringham was accused. Furthermore, the healing and recovery that are imagined within the poem must certainly simplify what is doubtless a complex and difficult process. Nevertheless, this effort is itself noteworthy. The acknowledgement of injustice and historical wrongs is an important response to the history. It serves as one kind of “learning resources on . . . the history and legacy of residential schools” (Truth and Reconciliation Commission 238) that is a necessary part of reconciliation.

It is likely that the need to come to terms with Canada’s colonial history will become even more pronounced in years to come. If this is so, Bringham’s work may continue to speak into the debate surrounding increasingly common calls to colonialism’s inheritors in North America to “re-indigenize” by finding ways of becoming “native” to place. Proponents of re-

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<sup>53</sup> The sexual abuse of children which took place at the school even came to the notice of British Columbia police officers in 1939. To their credit, the police refused to return two runaway boys to the school and launched an investigation into the allegations of sexual abuse taking place at the school. The department of Indian Affairs responded to the investigation by advising the suspected abusers to leave the province. No charges were laid. (Truth and Reconciliation Commission 105-6)

indigenization argue that it must begin with questioning Western philosophical assumptions, rejecting its latent dualism and its mechanistic understanding of nature as well as its related narrative of perpetual progress. In place of this philosophical system, Bringhurst, along with other advocates of re-indigenization such as Gary Snyder, urge North Americans to “[normalize] Aboriginal reality as our reality in the ways we organize and conduct . . . society [and] . . . to reflect more intently on the extent to which our stories and practices respectfully acknowledge and enable the continuance of the life forces that underlie our dwelling” (Kerber 16). The vitriolic criticism which Bringhurst has faced for some of his efforts to promote re-indigenization indicates the depth of complexity surrounding these vexed issues as well as the difficulty of challenging contemporary colonialist political structures. Indeed, critics of the call to re-indigenize accuse its supporters of desiring, at best, a “naïve return to the land . . . in which settler culture plays out fantasies of ecological primitivism” (Kerber 16), or, perhaps worse, cultural appropriation (Silko 211). Without wanting to sound overly optimistic, my reading of Bringhurst’s poetry suggests that sacramental metaphors may help to preclude this kind of naïve return. They are predicated upon an approach to the other characterized by desire, certainly, but a desire for an encounter which necessarily maintains the distinction between self and other, where the communicant occupies a posture of humility as a prerequisite to any act of participation. Similar ethics of attention and respect that are part of Bringhurst’s poetics might conceivably play a critical role in efforts to redress past wrongs and find a path forward.

Stevens’ poetry does not address, or even anticipate, Bringhurst’s concerns with indigeneity and Indigenous culture, with environmental degradation and industrialization, yet in their mutual desire to encounter place with their “whole being” (*CPP* 820), their poetry is in accord. It demonstrates a belief that “the nature of the land is part . . . of ourselves” (895), where

“we breathe in with every breath the joy of having ourselves been created by what has been endured and mastered in the past” (895). This wonder at and even reverence for the particularity of the present endures in both Stevens’ and Bringham’s poetry. It persists even in the midst of the doubt and “interpretive contingency” (Jenkins 121) that characterizes Stevens’ writing at various points in his career, particularly in his poems in *The Rock*. It also underlies Bringham’s poetry and prose, where even

pebble, boulder, bedrock,

podzol and hardpan, lava and sand,

copper, potash, gabbro, feldspar, clay,

obsidian, schist, dust (*SP* 253)

are solace in the midst of mourning for “the kidnapped earth, imprisoned water, / cut and packaged fire” (*SP* 255). Bringham’s and Stevens’ attentiveness to the physical and their desire to be transformed by means of encounter with it have produced a poetic legacy that is both beautiful and compelling.

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