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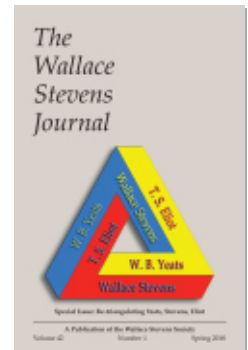
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Atlantic Triangle: Stevens, Yeats, Eliot in Time of War

LEE M. JENKINS

IN HIS REVIEW of the Faber and Faber *Selected Poems*, Donald Davie described Wallace Stevens as “a poet to be mentioned in the same breath as Eliot and Yeats and Pound. That is his place, and that is the company he must keep” (373).¹ Since Davie, however, Stevens has seldom kept company with Eliot and Yeats, or with Pound. Frank Lentricchia has placed Stevens in a modernist quartet with Eliot, Pound, and Frost, yet comparative analyses of Stevens and Eliot, as of Stevens and Yeats, remain rare.² It is rarer still to compose the three poets into a modernist trio: Stevens and Eliot, like Stevens and Yeats, may make an odd couple, but if two’s company, then three’s a crowd. And yet, this essay suggests, a three-way comparison of Stevens, Yeats, and Eliot collapses binaries that too often obtain between these major figures of poetic modernism, enabling us to identify common concerns, brought into sharp relief by “the violent reality of war,” with the relationship between poetry and public events, politics, and belief (CPP 251).

One triangulation point between Stevens, Yeats, and Eliot is triggered in the letters and literary criticism of the Irish poet Thomas McGreevy.³ A close acquaintance of Yeats’s family and author of the first monograph on Eliot, *T. S. Eliot: A Study* (1931), McGreevy would also become, between 1948 and 1955, “the best of all [Stevens’s] correspondents” (Stevens, Letter, 17 Apr. 1953). His letter of September 28, 1948, on the subject of Yeats’s funeral, prompted Stevens, in his reply, to consider the “contributions” of poetry to “the national spirit,” and to reflect, late in his life and not without anxiety as to his own posthumous reputation, on mortality and posterity, and on the poet as public figure (L 617).⁴ Stevens’s attenuated reception across the Atlantic at this date—Eliot’s Faber and Faber would belatedly bring out the *Selected Poems*, reviewed by Davie, in 1953—could hardly have convinced Stevens that he would attain Yeats’s “world-wide fame” or that on his death, he would receive “homage of a public character” of the kind accorded to Yeats (L 617). As Bart Eeckhout has remarked, the “difference in fame” between Stevens and Nobel Laureates Yeats and Eliot “is substantial” (176). Stevens himself acknowledged as much in relation to Eliot in his “Homage to T. S. Eliot” (1938): “I don’t know what

there is (any longer) to say about Eliot. His prodigious reputation is a great difficulty" (*CPP* 801).

In his comparative study of late Stevens and late Yeats, Edward Clarke contends that "neither poet seemed especially important to the other" (8). "Contrary Theses (I)" may be the exception that proves Clarke's rule, in Stevens's case at least. Antedating the letter to McGreevy but addressing, again by way of Yeats, comparable concerns about the relationship between poetry and the public sphere, "Contrary Theses (I)" appears in *Parts of a World*, the 1942 volume to which Stevens appended an untitled statement on poetry and war. If Stevens's title invokes Yeatsian antinomies, the scenario of the poem itself—the intrusion of the soldier upon the poet's domain—restages, in abbreviated form, that of "The Road at My Door" and "The Stare's Nest by My Window," parts V and VI of Yeats's "Meditations in Time of Civil War."⁵

"Contrary Theses (I)" is "An abstraction blooded," a fleshing out of Stevens's statement, in the note on poetry and war, that "The immense poetry of war and the poetry of a work of the imagination are two different things" (*CPP* 333, 251). In the poem, these different poetries or contrary theses are embodied in the juxtaposed figures of the first-person speaker and the soldier, whose presence blights the poet's bower: "grapes are plump upon the vines" and "The hives are heavy with the combs" but "Blood smears the oaks." The redness of the Connecticut oak leaves in the fall is, in the "Now" of 1942—the first calendar year of the United States' engagement in World War Two—a signifier as much of global turmoil as of the turning of the seasonal cycle (*CPP* 239). In Stevens's World War One poem "The Death of a Soldier," the fallen soldier is conflated with the fall that is the "season of autumn" (*CPP* 81): the death of the soldier presages his resurrection, not as a Christ-like "three-days personage," but as "part of nature" (*CPP* 81, 116). In "Contrary Theses (I)," neither religion nor nature offers consolation in time of war. The poet's home is a sanctuary of sorts—"seraphs cluster on the domes"—but his oak tree bower is his prison, too, with the speaker placed under house arrest, as it were, by the soldier who, patrolling the perimeter of the poem, in the first couplet "walks" and in the final couplet more menacingly "stalks" "before my door" (*CPP* 239).⁶

By contrast, in "Meditations in Time of Civil War," Yeats passes the time of day with an "affable [Irish Republican Army] Irregular" and his company, who "Stand at my door," the poet confessing his "envy" for these men of action even as he "turn[s] towards my chamber." Yeats, like Stevens, figures the poet as the prisoner of history—"We are closed in, and the key is turned / On our uncertainty; somewhere / A man is killed, or a house burned"—but Yeats, who at the time of writing was a Senator of the nascent Irish Free State, is much more messily imbricated with the contingency of contemporary events than Stevens. For Yeats as for Stevens, nature symbolizes historical violence—"A pear tree [is] broken by the

storm" in Yeats's poem, and "Blood smears the oaks" in Stevens's—but with the difference that Yeats bears witness to actual blood-letting on the road at his door: "Last night they trundled down the road / That dead young soldier in his blood" (*Collected Works* 208–09).⁷ Moreover, for Yeats, the natural order, represented by the "honey-bees" on which he calls to "Come build in the empty house of the stare," represents a remedy for, as well as a refuge from, the external world. Bees cross-pollinate poems as well as plants, and Yeats's honeybees and Stevens's honeycombs have a common precursor in the *Georgics*. Yeats is closer than Stevens, however, to Virgil's version of pastoral in identifying, in the industry of the bees, a model for civic society in time of civil disorder. The honeybee hive in the *Georgics*, a text written in the latter stages of another civil war, presents

a spectacle
 To marvel at, a world in miniature,
 Gallant commanders and the institutions
 Of a whole nation, its character, pursuits,
 Communities and warfare.

(124)

Consonances and dissonances in the sound of words further differentiate Stevens's poem from Yeats's. There is a closer echo in Stevens's "obsessive repetitions" ("Before, before, before my door") of Poe's "The Raven" (in which "before" and "door" are also repeated rhyming words) than of Yeats's "The Stare's Nest by My Window," the identical internal rhyme in Stevens's poem working to very different ends than the varied rhyme (of "fantasies," "enmities," and "honey-bees") in Yeats's (Woodland 73; *CPP* 239; Yeats, *Collected Works* 209). The repetitions in "Contrary Theses (I)," like the unrhyming couplets in which the poem is composed, are prosodic reinforcements of the standoff between soldier and poet that is Stevens's theme, whereas Yeats's triple rhyme, as George Bornstein has pointed out, triggers an "extraordinary triangulation" (33). In the analysis of another Irish poet and Nobel Laureate, Seamus Heaney, Yeats's triplicate rhyme

satisfies the contradictory needs which consciousness experiences at times of extreme crisis, the need on the one hand for a truth-telling that will be hard and retributive, and on the other hand the need not to harden the mind to a point where it denies its own yearnings for sweetness and trust. . . . Yeats' work does what the necessary poetry always does, which is to touch the base of our sympathetic nature while taking in at the same time the unsympathetic reality of the world to which that nature is constantly exposed. (qtd. in Bornstein 33)

Stevens triggers his own triangulation in his 1942 poem-sequence “Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction,” not through rhyme, but in his projection of a three-point program for poetry in “times of extreme crisis”: “It Must Be Abstract,” “It Must Change,” “It Must Give Pleasure.” The issue of poetry’s relationship to war is a fourth term, and is annexed in the coda’s apostrophe to the universal soldier:

Soldier, there is a war between the mind
And sky, between thought and day and night. It is
For that the poet is always in the sun,

Patches the moon together in his room
To his Virgilian cadences, up down,
Up down.

(CCP 351)

The soldier now marches to the poet’s measure, to “cadences” that, we presume, are closer to those of the *Aeneid* than of the *Georgics*. Stevens’s coda seems to contradict his statement that “A war is a military state of affairs, not a literary one,” notwithstanding that, in spite of his reconciliation with the soldier, the poet remains “in his room,” out of the line of fire (CPP 805). There is a formal allusion to epic, too, in the poem proper, in the tercets’ approximation of the *terza rima* of *La Divina Commedia*; likewise, the tripartite structure of “Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction” desacralizes the trinitarian schema of Dante’s Catholic epic. A near allusion to Dante in another tercet from another poem-sequence written in time of war, “Esthétique du Mal” (1945), may be read as a gloss on Stevens’s post-Christian credo that “our notions of heaven and hell are merely poetry not so called” (CPP 674):

His firm stanzas hang like hives in hell
Or what hell was, since now both heaven and hell
Are one, and here, O terra infidel.

(CPP 278)

Christopher Ricks argues in *Allusions to the Poets* that “to speak of an allusion is always to predicate a source,” although that source “may be scaffolding such as went to the building but does not constitute any part of the building” (3). In the case of formal allusion, however, it is rather that the same “building” (verse form, or poetic structure) is tenanted by successive generations of poets—renovators, like Yeats’s honeybees, who make over the building’s interior (the poem’s content or subject matter) according to the tastes and tempers of their own times. The trope of the hive—itself a kind of habitation—is a synecdoche for such poetic remodeling. As

Cristopher Hollingsworth suggests in *Poetics of the Hive*, “reformulations” of the beehive reflect “profound shifts in worldview”:

Dante—a Catholic who saw creation as complete and perfect and the beehive as an ideal for human society—embraced, elaborated, and placed in Heaven the picture of righteous souls as bees that appears in book 6 of Virgil’s *Aeneid*. In contrast, Puritan Milton knew this world to be Satan’s and thought the bee’s lack of free will made the beehive a poor model for human government. Milton’s bees are fallen angels . . . (xiii)

Like Yeats’s “Meditations in Time of Civil War,” Stevens’s World War Two poems are twentieth-century receptions and revisions of the hive. “Contrary Theses (I)” contains a miniature history of the hive, from the Virgilian pastoral of “heavy” “hives” through the “seraphs” that, like the seraphim-as-bees in Dante’s *Paradiso*, “cluster” in the Empyrean (CPP 239). Neither Virgil’s nor Dante’s worldview can fend off the “pressure” of contemporary “reality,” however (CPP 656), and, since “the great poems of heaven and hell have been written,” by Dante and by Milton, Stevens proceeds to reformulate the hive in “Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction,” his provisional attempt to write “the great poem of the earth” (CPP 730). Accordingly, the bee’s function, in the “Notes,” is merely “to be,” not “to be / Immortal,” as “The President”—or Dante or Virgil—“ordains” (CPP 337): according to Virgil, “though a narrow span of life awaits / Each individual [bee],” “yet the stock / Remains immortal, and for many years / The house survives in fortune, and its annals / Count generation upon generation” (131). In keeping with the principle that “It Must Change,” Stevens asks, “Why should the bee recapture a lost blague . . . ?” Stevens celebrates “beginning, not resuming,” insisting that his bee is not a “new hornsmen after old.” Inevitably, though, we hear the “murmuring” of “innumerable bees,” Tennyson’s and others’, in the “Booming and booming” of Stevens’s “new-come bee” (CPP 337–38; Tennyson 322). In “Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction,” as in “Contrary Theses (I)” and “Esthétique du Mal,” Stevens is contributing to the “annals” of the hive, refurbishing the “house” according to the precepts of a secular modernity.

Given what Paul Fussell identifies as “The failure of *terza rima* to establish a tradition in English” (*Poetic Meter* 132), the hive-like tercets of “Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction” invite comparison with the “approximation to the *terza rima* without rhyming” in another meditation in time of world war, Eliot’s “Little Gidding” (Eliot, “Dante and ‘Little Gidding’” 50). The fourth of Eliot’s *Four Quartets*, “Little Gidding” was published, like “Notes,” in 1942. The Dantean passage that concludes part II of “Little Gidding,” which was written during the London Blitz, is set “In the uncertain hour before the morning / Near the ending of interminable night”

when the poet-speaker meets a “stranger in the waning dusk,” in whose “down-turned face”

I caught the sudden look of some dead master
Whom I had known, forgotten, half recalled
Both one and many; in the brown baked features
The eyes of a familiar compound ghost.
(*Complete Poems* 193)⁸

Eliot’s approximate *terza rima* reinforces the “parallel” the passage presents between Eliot’s “dead patrol” through the streets of London in the company of the “familiar compound ghost” and Dante’s descent into the *Inferno* with Virgil as his guide (Eliot, “Dante and ‘Little Gidding’” 50; *Complete Poems* 194). Eliot is Dante to his ghost’s Virgil, and although that ghost is a “compound,” Neil Corcoran is surely right to suggest that there is more of Yeats than of any other “dead master” in the mix.⁹

In his essay on Dante, Eliot emphasizes the “difference” between “philosophical *belief*” and “poetic *assent*”: while “you cannot afford to *ignore* Dante’s philosophical and theological beliefs,” Eliot explains, “you are not called upon to believe them yourself” (221). The same may be said of *Four Quartets*, albeit that it is Eliot’s Anglo-Catholic faith that most radically differentiates his poem-sequence in time of war from “Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction,” with its animation of Stevens’s adage that “The theory of poetry is the life of poetry. Christianity is an exhausted culture” (*CPP* 914). Eliot’s instruction in the second of his *Four Quartets*, “East Coker,” that “In order to come at what you do not know / You must go by a way which is the way of ignorance” (*Complete Poems* 181), echoing the words of the sixteenth-century Spanish mystic St. John of the Cross, is different in kind from Stevens’s injunction to the “ephebe,” in “It Must Be Abstract,” that “You must become an ignorant man again / And see the sun again with an ignorant eye / And see it clearly in the idea of it” (*CPP* 329). As A. Alvarez suggests, Eliot is “a meditative poet” but not “a poet who deals in abstractions” (240). Eliot’s first cause and Stevens’s “first idea” are contrary theses: what Stevens’s friend James Johnson Sweeney defines as Eliot’s penitential poetics means that the worldview of *Four Quartets* is at a radical remove from that of the “Notes,” the third precept of which is that “It Must Give Pleasure.”¹⁰ Where Eliot discriminates between “the sudden illumination” and “the sense of well-being” one has from “a very good dinner” (*Complete Poems* 186), Stevens confesses that “I like Rhine wine, blue grapes, good cheese, endive . . . as much as I like supreme fiction” (*L* 431). In contradistinction to the Anglo-Catholic evocation of the Eucharist in “East Coker,” Stevens turns transubstantiation into a trope in the coda to the “Notes,” proving his point that “After one has abandoned a belief in god, poetry is that essence which takes its place as life’s redemption” (*CPP* 901):

How gladly with proper words the soldier dies,
If he must, or lives on the bread of faithful speech.
(*CPP* 352)¹¹

Defending poetry's frontline position in a time of war, Stevens analogizes the *métier* of the poet to that of the combatant, telling the soldier that, unlike the poet's "war between the mind / And sky," or between imagination and reality, which is "a war that never ends,"

your war ends. And after it you return

With six meats and twelve wines or else without . . .
(*CPP* 351–52)

With or without his imported *viands* and *vins*—quintessentially Stevensian spoils of war—"The soldier is poor without the poet's lines" (*CPP* 352).

As Adalaide Kirby Morris notes, another of Stevens's World War Two poems, "Flyer's Fall," is "a prayer to the absence of God" (26):

Darkness, nothingness of human after-death,
Receive and keep him in the deepnesses of space—

Profundum, physical thunder, dimension in which
We believe without belief, beyond belief.
(*CPP* 295)

To believe without belief: this is the paradox identified by the High Anglican English poet Geoffrey Hill, when he talks of Stevens's "magnificent agnostic faith" (16). Likewise, for the Welsh poet-clergyman R. S. Thomas, Stevens is a "high-priest" "celebrating the sacrament / of the imagination" (266), albeit that Thomas also resacralizes Stevens when he includes "Common Soldier," from the "Lettres d'un Soldat" sequence, in the *Penguin Book of Religious Verse* (1963).¹² His choice suggests Thomas may be taking or mistaking the soldier's piety for the poet's: as Leon Surette has shown, Stevens "mocks the notion of redemptive sacrifice" in another poem from the "Lettres," "The Death of a Soldier" (121). As an anthologizer, Thomas "converts" Stevens, as Thomas McGreevy may also have done, if "it is safe to speculate," as Mary Joan Egan does, that McGreevy played a part in Stevens's deathbed conversion to Catholicism (142)—and not to what McGreevy judged to be "the bastard, schismatic and provincial if genteel kind of Catholicism" to which Eliot had turned in 1927 (*T. S. Eliot* 16).¹³

In his study of Eliot, which appeared a year after the publication of *Ash-Wednesday* (1930), McGreevy notes that "Since *The Waste Land* (1922) Mr. Eliot has been mainly consolidating his spiritual gains" and predicts

that “he is now ready to make a July 1918-ish drive that will end in a lasting victory” (59). McGreevy deploys the discourse of the Great War here with a bitter irony, given that for McGreevy, a poet-veteran of World War One, Eliot is the epitome of the civilian poet in time of war. In his monographs on Eliot and Aldington, McGreevy makes a discrimination that is both aesthetic and experiential between the civilian and combatant poetries of World War One and its aftermath, setting up a binary that would be reinforced by Paul Fussell, who was himself a veteran of World War Two, in his classic study *The Great War and Modern Memory* (1975).¹⁴ One of McGreevy’s own war poems, “De Civitate Hominem,” splices the poetry of immediate witness—the “shell-holes are new”—with meditations on the experiential gap, in what Eliot calls “the years of *l’entre deux guerres*,” between “Those who live between wars” and “we who die between peaces / Whether we die or not” (McGreevy, *Collected Poems* 2; Eliot, *Complete Poems* 182).¹⁵ At the end of the poem, that state of betweenness is axiomatic of the crisis of faith triggered by the war, even for so devout a Catholic as McGreevy: when “an airman” is shot down,

My sergeant says, very low, “Holy God!
‘Tis a fearful death.”

Holy God makes no reply
Yet.

(*Collected Poems* 3)

Lensing’s point that “Stevens’ birth as a modernist poet coincides almost directly with the beginning of World War I” pertains to Eliot, too (112).¹⁶ Stevens’s “war” sequences, “Phases” (1914) and “Lettres d’un Soldat” (1918), both published in *Poetry* magazine, bookend the Great War.¹⁷ Surette says of “Phases” that “as a non-combatant living in a country not participating in the war, Stevens had little hope of saying anything of interest about something as unprecedented as the slaughter of trench warfare” (112). But, turning to “Lettres d’un Soldat,” Surette also observes that Stevens’s sequence “is much more intimately connected to the soldier’s combat experience than anything Eliot wrote” (119). Nonetheless, the “Lettres” are a non-combatant’s translations of a soldier-poet’s—Eugène Emmanuel Lemerrier’s—words from the front: the product of a two-fold mediation, the poems violate twice over the principle of immediacy that, for McGreevy and for Fussell, authenticates the war poem, distinguishing the real thing from its inauthentic civilian counterpart.

In McGreevy’s judgment, “The effect of the war” on writers like Aldington who did go through it “has been to bring their work closer to objective reality” (*Richard Aldington* 32). McGreevy stresses that this does not mean a return to realism, but neither can poetry return, he insists, to the pre-war aesthetic of imagism, a movement with which Aldington had

been closely associated and of which, in McGreevy's view, "Mr. Yeats" was "an unofficially recognised chief" (10).¹⁸ The gulf between Aldington's volume *Images*, published in 1915, the year before he joined up, and a poem like "A Village," from his 1919 collection *Images of War*, proves McGreevy's point: "But when you've pondered / Hour upon chilly hour in those damned trenches / You get at the significance of things" (*Complete Poems* 90). Aldington's use of the word "damned," McGreevy says, "kept him clear of Byzantinism, kept him out of the Mallarmean ivory tower. No poet who went through the war can go back to that" (*Richard Aldington* 31). As for the Eliot of *The Waste Land*, who didn't go through the war, "his ghosts were not the ghosts of the war generation. And ghosts matter" (7). Ghosts matter in "Little Gidding," too, of course, principally the ghost of Yeats, who, in his introduction to *The Oxford Book of English Verse* (1936) controversially excluded the work of the soldier-poets of World War One on the grounds that "passive suffering is not a theme for poetry" (199).

In his World War Two poem-sequence "Little Gidding," however, rather than retreating to an ivory tower, the poet descends from a watchtower: Eliot makes his way down to the pavements of Kensington from the rooftop on which he has kept his overnight vigil as a fire marshal and air raid warden during the Blitz. Yeats's tower—made not of Mallarmean ivory but of County Galway limestone—is likewise set in a "tumultuous spot" (*Collected Works* I: 206), in a landscape ravaged by civil war—the bridge at Ballylee, just six feet from Yeats's tower, was blown up by the IRA on July 19, 1922 (see Foster 214). Of the three poets, it is Stevens who identifies the "romantic poet now-a-days"—he is writing in 1934, during the Great Depression—as "one who still dwells in an ivory tower," qualifying his remark with the rider that "life there would be intolerable except for the fact that one has, from the top, such an exceptional view of the public dump" (*CPP* 770). Stevens reverts to the ivory tower in his post-World War Two essay "Effects of Analogy" (1948), where, having noted that "Recently, a very great deal has been said about the relation of the poet to his community and to other people," he insists that

The ivory tower was offensive if the man who lived in it wrote, there, of himself for himself. It was not offensive if he used it because he could do nothing without concentration, as no one can, and because, there, he could most effectively struggle to get at his subject, even if his subject happened to be the community and other people, and nothing else. (*CPP* 718)

For Stevens as for Yeats, the tower is a trope for poetry itself—"I declare this tower is my symbol," Yeats tells us in "Blood and the Moon," from *The Winding Stair and Other Poems* (1933) (*Collected Works* I: 241). Yeats's declaration is what David Lloyd defines as "a performative speech act," a "despairing exultation in the poet's own loss of any sense of organic

connection with the nation that was founded by Easter 1916" and a defiant confirmation of the Anglo-Irish Yeats's "marginalization as a poet of cultural nationalism" in the Catholic Irish Free State (64, 79). By contrast, when Stevens shouts from the rooftops in his early poem "Architecture" (1919), he reveals what Heaney disparages as his disengaged romanticism: "Let us build the building" and "Push up the towers / To the cock-tops. / These are the pointings of our edifice" that "Shall tuft the commonplace" (*CPP* 66–67). "Architecture," which, as Fiona Green says, tests "whether form can be founded on tonal elevation, or structure built on finishing touch" (35), is an early iteration of the defensive defense of poetic artifice that Stevens would still be mounting in his post-World War Two essay "Imagination as Value" (1949): "It is commonplace to realize the extent of artifice in the external world and to say that Florence is more imaginative than Dublin" but "What is engaging us at the moment has nothing to do with the external world. We are concerned with the extent of artifice within us and, almost parenthetically, with the question of its value" (*CPP* 729). In "Meditations in Time of Civil War," Yeats, too, reflects on the relation between poetry ("artifice") and the public sphere ("the external world"): as Edna Longley points out, "The Yeatsian eclogue [in 'The Road at My Door'] is not an artificial refuge from war or Nature, but an arena where its own investment in artifice is challenged by both" (120).

Both Yeats's and Stevens's investments in artifice are challenged by the contemporary Northern Irish poet Derek Mahon, whose poem "Rage for Order" appeared in 1972, the year of Bloody Sunday, when the shooting of twenty-six unarmed civilians by British soldiers in Derry's Bogside triggered the Troubles, the Northern Ireland conflict that would persist until the signing of the Good Friday Agreement in 1998. "Somewhere beyond / The scorched gable end / And the burnt-out / Buses," Mahon writes, "there is a poet indulging his / Wretched rage for order—" The poet who is practicing his "dying art" as people die around him is another "compound ghost," a composite of the "Grandiloquent" Yeats of "Meditations in Time of Civil War" and the Stevens of "The Idea of Order at Key West," whose "Blessed rage for order" is made "Wretched" by a civil disorder that poetry is powerless to redress. Stevens's art, his "maker's rage to order words of the sea," is, for Mahon, merely "An eddy of semantic scruple / In an unstructurable sea"—a sea of Troubles (*CPP* 106; Mahon 47).¹⁹ Mahon's "poet"

is far
 From his people,
 And the fitful glare
 Of his high window is as
 Nothing to our scattered glass.
 (47)

In the words of W. H. Auden's "In Memory of W. B. Yeats," "poetry makes nothing happen" (242). Mahon nonetheless challenges his reader to

watch me
As I make history,
Watch as I tear down

To build up
With a desperate love,
Knowing it cannot be
Long now till I have need of his
Terminal ironies.

(48)

Hugh Haughton argues that "the desperate contradictions the poem embodies, make Mahon's self-questioning meditation on the role of a poet in time of civil war comparable to the 'grandiloquent' Yeats." As for Stevens, Haughton notes that Mahon's poem "simultaneously portrays the poet's 'Semantic scruple' as a mandarin luxury . . . and a potential resource for the future" (80). In its first published version, Mahon's poem concludes with ironies that are "Germinal" rather than "Terminal," implying that to "tear down" the poet's tower may also be "To build up." Mahon's mission is to revive the "dying art" of Stevens and Yeats—who are the manifestation, in Mahon's poem, of Eliot's "compound ghost"—as an art *for* the dying (see Haughton 79).

Like the correspondence and criticism of his countryman, Thomas McGreevy, Mahon's meditation in time of war triggers a triangulation between Stevens, Yeats, and Eliot—three poets who, from different angles and notwithstanding their differences (poetic, political, religious), approached modern poetry as an art that "has to think about war" and "find what will suffice" (CPP 219). Mahon's "compound" or composite "poet" is the late product of a circumAtlantic matrix, of a modernist trio in which, confirming Davie's judgment, Stevens keeps company with Yeats and with Eliot.

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Notes

¹Davie reviewed the Faber and Faber edition of Stevens's *Selected Poems* (1953) together with the withdrawn Fortune Press edition.

²See Lentricchia, *Modernist Quartet*. For comparative studies of Stevens and Eliot and Stevens and Yeats, see Surette and Clarke. The final chapter of my own *Wallace Stevens: Rage for Order* likewise reads the late poetry of Stevens in comparison with that of Yeats.

³In an unpublished letter to Stevens, McGreevy explained that his name is registered as "McGreevy" but that he "let the people who prefer Mac, which obviously is more correct, use Mac" (8 Mar. 1950). Susan Schreibman uses "Mac" in her edition of McGreevy's poems, but to remain consistent with Stevens's spelling, I have used "McGreevy" throughout.

⁴W. B. Yeats died in Rocquebrune, in the south of France, in January 1939; his remains were conveyed to Ireland on a government corvette and reinterred in Drumcliff churchyard in County Sligo in September 1948. McGreevy traveled with the poet's brother, the painter Jack B. Yeats, in the funeral cortege from Galway to Sligo; a military guard of honor accompanied the coffin in its final journey to the cemetery at Drumcliff. Anne Yeats would remember that at the bidding of her mother, McGreevy tried to limit details of the repatriation of Yeats's remains from reaching the papers. The clippings from the Irish press that McGreevy enclosed in his letter to Stevens show that he was unsuccessful in his attempt to keep private what became a public event. I would like to thank Margaret Mills Harper for bringing McGreevy's efforts on behalf of the Yeats family to my attention.

⁵"Meditations in Time of Civil War" was first published in *The Dial* in January 1923, and would subsequently appear in the Cuala Press collection *The Cat and the Moon & Certain Poems* (1924), and in the volume *The Tower* (1928).

⁶Charles Berger reads Stevens's Spanish Civil War poem "The Men That Are Falling" (1936) as a "confession on the part of the poet that war abroad has invaded the comfortable space of his civilian room" (260), an analysis that may also be applied to "Contrary Theses (I)."

⁷Seamus Heaney's comparison and contrast between Stevens and Yeats is instructive here: "Unlike Wallace Stevens . . . that other great apologist of the imagination, Yeats bore the implications of his romanticism into action" (100).

⁸Eliot's ARP (Air-Raid Precautions) duties involved "watching 'firecrackers' from a rooftop in South Kensington" (Gordon 375).

⁹According to Corcoran, "the drafts of *Four Quartets* published by Helen Gardner in *The Composition of 'Four Quartets'* clearly indicate that it was Yeats . . . who was uppermost in Eliot's mind as he wrote the poem" (38).

¹⁰James Johnson Sweeney's "'East Coker': A Reading" was published in *The Southern Review* in 1941.

¹¹Patricia Ranft explains that Anglo-Catholicism preserves the "intimate relationship between the Eucharist and the doctrine of Incarnation" (103).

¹²I am indebted to George Lensing for bringing Thomas's poem and anthology to my attention.

¹³McGreevy had a tendency to desecularize the writers with whom he was associated. For instance, his contribution to the defense of Joyce's *Work in Progress* collected in *Our Exagmination Round His Factification for Incamination of Work in Progress* (1929) is titled "The Catholic Element in *Work in Progress*." McGreevy's poem "For an Irish Book, 1929" again acts to "Catholicize" Joyce, as the pun in the poem's typescript title, "Re Joyce," makes apparent (see McGreevy, *Collected Poems* 61, 157). McGreevy does much the same with Richard Aldington, rescuing him from Hellenic paganism by christening him the "child of St. Francis, a heretical child, but a Franciscan child none the less" (*Richard Aldington* 18-19).

¹⁴There is a connection, via McGreevy, between Stevens and Aldington. "Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction" is dedicated to Henry Church, editor and patron of the arts, and a mutual friend of Stevens's and McGreevy's. McGreevy had been introduced to Church in Paris in the late 1920s by Aldington. Church died in 1947, and McGreevy sent his first letter to Stevens on 12 April 1948 in the hope of corroborating Church's widow Barbara's recollection that Stevens "had spoken to him [Henry] appreciatively of my work."

¹⁵As an *Irish* poet, McGreevy would again be consigned to “a position intermediate” or “no-man’s-land” between the opposed camps of the “antiquarians” (camp followers of Yeats, like Austin Clarke) and a younger vanguard of experimentalists (like Denis Devlin and Brian Coffey) (Beckett 74, 70).

¹⁶“The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock” appeared in *Poetry* in June 1915, although Eliot’s modernism predates the outbreak of World War One. I would like to thank George Lensing for allowing me to quote from the typescript of his forthcoming monograph.

¹⁷Four of the eleven “Phases” poems were printed in *Poetry* magazine’s “Poems of War” special issue in November 1914; an abbreviated version of “Lettres d’un Soldat” appeared in *Poetry* in May 1918.

¹⁸McGreevy’s remarks on World War One and reality anticipate Stevens’s statement, in his World War Two note on poetry and war, that “consciousness of an immense war is a consciousness of fact” (CPP 251).

¹⁹“Rage for Order” is included in Mahon’s 1972 collection, *Lives*.

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