WALLACE STEVENS’ POETRY OF RESISTANCE

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One of the most frequently quoted aphorisms from Wallace Stevens’ seductive “Adagia” proclaims that “Poetry must resist the intelligence almost successfully”.1 Although most critics seem to agree that this remark constitutes a crucial poetic credo for Stevens, it has seldom received the careful attention it deserves. Only Eleanor Cook has sufficiently lingered over it to observe that

We do not always give enough emphasis to the word ‘almost’. (As if Stevens ever supposed the intelligence did not have a vital role in reading poetry.) Nor do we give enough thought to the word ‘intelligence’. For it is not the intelligence alone that gives meaning to poems, any more than the intelligence alone gives meaning in general.2

Interestingly, Stevens seems to have grappled more with the formulation of his tenet than Cook was able to know at the time of her observations in the late nineteen-eighties. As an editorial endnote in the revised edition of Opus Posthumous shows, what Stevens originally jotted down in his “Adagia” – pace Cook’s parenthetical disclaimer – ran quite simply: “Poetry must resist the intelligence successfully.”3 This, no doubt, was the easier, comfortably provocative and dogmatic statement to make. But, being an inveterate qualifier, Stevens apparently thought better of his first impulse and inserted that treacherous little modifier “almost”. Cook is right, then,

3 Stevens, Opus Posthumous, 326.
to emphasize the importance of Stevens’ inconspicuous little adverb, though not to deny the process of doubt leading up to it.

The importance of the little insertion increases even as we look at the second occurrence of Stevens’ premise – for he was sufficiently charmed with his epigram to recycle it – in the first two lines of “Man Carrying Thing”. A remarkable poem in its own right, “Man Carrying Thing” is, nevertheless, almost invariably referred to only because of its eye-catching opening statement, which tends to be simply wrenched from its context. Yet one should not fail to observe how the opening lines function within the overall narrative of the text. After all, Stevens wrote the poem, in 1945, in direct response to his Ceylon correspondent Leonard van Geyzel’s request that he explain “the genuine difficulty that arises out of the enigmatic quality that is so essential a part of the satisfaction that a good poem gives”.

After stating, in a delicately timed enjambment, that “The poem must resist the intelligence / Almost successfully”, Stevens proceeds by first giving us an “Illustration” of a “brune figure” at dusk and “The thing he carries”, both of them too vague to identify – as if resisting the intelligence were merely the natural corollary of mimetically recording semi-obscure sense impressions. He then swerves in an extended, almost self-hypnotizing parenthesis about the relation between “parts not quite perceived” and “the obvious whole” or between “the primary free from doubt” and “a storm of secondary things”, until he winds up shocking with:

A horror of thoughts that suddenly are real.

We must endure our thoughts all night, until
The bright obvious stands motionless in cold.

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7 Stevens, *Collected Poems*, 351.