

*The shape of meaning in Wallace Stevens' "The Well Dressed Man with a Beard"*

Haj Ross  
 Department of Linguistics and Technical Communication  
 University of North Texas  
<http://www-personal.umich.edu/~jlawler/hajpapers.html>  
 haj@unt.edu

The Emerson-Wier Symposium, University of Science and Arts of Oklahoma,  
 April 8, 2010.

*The Well Dressed Man with a Beard*

<sup>1</sup>After the final no there comes a yes  
<sup>2</sup>And on that yes the future world depends.  
<sup>3</sup>No was the night. Yes is this present sun.  
<sup>4</sup>If the rejected things, the things denied,  
<sup>5</sup>Slid over the western cataract, yet one,  
<sup>6</sup>One only, one thing that was firm, even  
<sup>7</sup>No greater than a cricket's horn, no more  
<sup>8</sup>than a thought to be rehearsed all day, a speech  
<sup>9</sup>Of the self that must sustain itself on speech,  
<sup>10</sup>One thing remaining, infallible, would be  
<sup>11</sup>Enough. Ah! *douce campagna* of that thing!  
<sup>12</sup>Ah! *douce campagna*, honey in the heart,  
<sup>13</sup>Green in the body, out of a petty phrase,  
<sup>14</sup>Out of a thing believed, a thing affirmed:  
<sup>15</sup>The form on the pillow humming while one sleeps,  
<sup>16</sup>The aureole above the humming house...  
<sup>17</sup>It can never be satisfied, the mind, never.

Wallace Stevens  
*The Collected Poems* (1982), p. 247

*douce* = French for "sweet" or "soft"  
*campagna* = Italian for "landscape" or "campaign"  
*aureole* = "halo" [From Latin *aurum*, "gold"]



*The Well Dressed Man with a Beard*

<sup>1</sup>After the final **no** there comes a **yes**  
<sup>2</sup>And on that **yes** the future world depends.  
<sup>3</sup>**No** was the night. **Yes** is this present sun.  


---

<sup>4</sup>If the rejected **things**, the **things** denied,  
<sup>5</sup>Slid over the western cataract, yet **one**,  
<sup>6</sup>**One** only, **one thing** that was firm, even  
<sup>7</sup>**No** greater than a cricket's horn, **no** more  
<sup>8</sup>than a thought to be rehearsed all day, a **speech**  
<sup>9</sup>Of the **self** that must sustain itself on **speech**,  
<sup>10</sup>**One thing** remaining, infallible, would be  
<sup>11</sup>Enough. Ah! **douce campagna** of that **thing**!  
<sup>12</sup>Ah! **douce campagna**, honey in the heart,  
<sup>13</sup>Green in the body, out of a petty phrase,  
<sup>14</sup>Out of a **thing** believed, a **thing** affirmed:  


---

<sup>15</sup>The form on the pillow **humming** while one sleeps,  
<sup>16</sup>The aureole above the **humming** house...  
  
<sup>17</sup>It can never be satisfied, the mind, never.

## How this poem is built

1. To understand politics, we follow the money. To understand poetry, we follow the repetitions. In this poem, the most frequent content word is *thing* – there are **seven** occurrences of this almost empty word. Why did Stevens need to repeat so often? And **where** did he put the repetitions?

The first two occurrences of *thing* are in line 4 – four lines from the beginning of the poem. The last two occurrences are in line 14 – four lines from the end of the poem. In addition to these four *things*, there are two occurrences of *thing* on adjacent lines – one near the beginning of line 10, and one at the end of line 11. These six form an ellipse around the seventh, on line 6: *one thing that was firm*. I refer to such visually significant placings of repeated elements in a poem as *corridors*. I have found evidence for corridors in poems in Spanish and in Brazilian Portuguese, as well as in English. Corridoring is not something one finds in every poem, nor even in every poet. I am at the beginning of my search for such visual structures in poetry, even though I found fairly strong evidence for the first one, in Robert Frost's "Out, Out —." more than thirty years ago. The oval corridor in this poem is one which furnishes the strongest evidence I have seen to date for the existence of corridors that form closed curves.

2. We intuit that the firmness of things must be important, for we see *firm* repeated in its verbal form, modifying the last occurrence of *thing*, in line 14: *a thing affirmed*. And the words after line 10's *thing – remaining* and *infallible* – they bespeak the same urgency, the necessity of something dependable.

3. Looking back to the first line, we conclude from the word *final* that there must have been a (long?) sequence of *no*'s before the arrival of the much wished-for *yes*. And the second line says that everything depends on this *yes*; it is like the passage from night to bright sunlight, says line 3.

4. I suggest that Stevens is using his huge intelligence to convey to us what it is like to be a writer – he is telling us that intelligence is not enough. What was necessary is, precisely, one thing that was firm. This thing can be "no greater / than a cricket's horn," a phrase it is hard to know the meaning of, because of the large number of meanings of the noun *horn*. One of them in the *Oxford English Dictionary* is "the antennæ or feelers of insects and crustaceans" – I will not try to go further than this here. Who are we to say that some part of a small creature might not be enough to launch the creative process of the great poet? The next line says, "no more / than a thought to be rehearsed all day" – can we imagine the poet's immense difficulty in finding the words to match the thought?

5. We see, too, in line 4-5, that it is not the case that just any thing will do: "the rejected things, the things denied / slid over the western cataract." We note here a passage from one past participle of a negative verb to another one – the first verb, *reject*, denoting a conceptual negation, the second verb, *deny*, coding a verb of speaking negatively. This passing from *thought* to *speech*, so criterial for the writer, is precisely what we find in the two most abstract nouns of line 8.

6. Intersecting with the change from thinking to saying is the overarching change from negative to positive, which was commented on in §3 above. And the most striking structural correlate of this negative to positive change is found in the comparison of the two "double-*thing* lines" – the fourth lines in. In line 4 down, we have the two negative past participles *rejected* and *denied*; in the fourth line up, we

have the two corresponding positive participles *believed* and *affirmed*, where both pairs dance again the change from concept to word.

7. Thus it is not too simplistic to say that this poem lets us visit the life of a writer – lets us share the frustration of not finding the right word (what the great French novelist Gustave Flaubert famously called “le mot juste”) and the joy and the release that arises when the writing (finally) begins to flow.

8. Now let us look in some detail at the structure of the poem’s first long sentence – the one starting with *If* – the first word of line 4 – and ending with *Enough* – the first word of line 11 (note that both of these words start with a high front vowel and end with the sound [f]). The *if*-clause of this complex sentence is only 12 words long – it ends in line 5 with the puzzling phrase *the western cataract*. But the main clause (a *then*-less *then*-clause) of this sentence goes on for 44 words, ending six lines later in line 11. This long clause pantomimes the search of the poet for the right word – it offers five tries at a subject. Here they are:

Try 1: *yet one, /*

Try 2: *one only,*

Try 3: *one thing that was firm,*

[NB: after Try 3, Stevens inserts two parallel compared (adjectival?) phrases – *even / no greater than a cricket’s horn* and *no more / than a thought to be rehearsed all day*, both of which I take to be appositive modifiers of Try 3 – *one thing that was firm*.]

Try 4: *a speech / of the self that must sustain itself on speech,*

Try 5: *one thing*

All of these are candidate subjects for the gerund *remaining* of line 10, which itself is the subject of the tensed verb phrase *would be / enough*. We note that four of these five are the same – they all mean “one thing.” This is explicit in Try 3 and Try 5, and implicit in Try 1 (*yet one thing*) and Try 2 (*one-thing only*).

[Astonishingly, Stevens, in a feat of lexical legerdemain, arranges the words at the end of line 5 and beginning of line 6 in such a way that the morpheme *one* repeats three times in succession: *one / one on-* (for the adverb *only* derives historically from the number *one* and the suffix *-ly*).]

So it is Try 4 which “stands out like a sore thumb.” We shall presently return to ask why Stevens may have wanted to sore-thumb this phrase.

9. But first, let us look at what follows the end of this long sentence. It is a sequence of noun phrases (NP’s), separated by the colon at the end of line 15 into a first group of five, followed by two more noun phrases, one in line 15, and one in line 16. Let us start by examining the first set of five NP’s.

NP 1: *Ab! douce campagna of that thing!*

NP 2: *Ab! douce campagna,*

NP 3: *honey in the heart, /*

NP 4: *Green in the body,*

[Here, Stevens inserts, in a way that recalls the insertion of the two adjectival phrases that follow and modify Try 3 (in §8 above), two prepositional phrases, each of which starting with the compound preposition *out of*. They suggest the emergence of something (namely, NP 5), without however being more explicit about what it is out of which NP 5 has emerged than saying that it came from a petty phrase and from something that was believed. My guess is that this is an oblique reference to our central firm thing.]

NP 5: *a thing affirmed*:

Here, Stevens is chasing his etymological tail – only if a thing is firm can it be af-firmed.

Note too that here, we have a distribution antisymmetric to that of Try 1-Try 5, where there were four “tries” centered on *thing*, and one – Try 4 – that was different. In this list (from line 11 to line 14) of five NP’s, we have **one** NP based on *thing*, and four different ones.

It seems clear to me that there is a strong connection between the two appositional inserts in the main clause of the long sentence, and the two *out of*-phrases here. The appositive phrases both deny (the importance of) size/extent (*no greater, no more*) and the first *out of*-phrase is modified by *petty* (etymologically from *petit*, the French word for “small”). I think, thus, that we may be able to say that the source for the *thing affirmed* is either the *thing*-encircled, and conceptually central words in the NP *one thing that was firm*, or whatever object (cricket’s horn or whatever else) those words refer to.

In other words, the fiveness of the set of Tries and the fiveness of the list of NP’s in lines 11-15 are two sides of one coin. They are inseparably interpenetrated. This means that there is the tightest imaginable connection between the two sore-thumbed elements:

*a speech / of the self that must sustain itself on speech*

and

*a thing affirmed*

10. Let us recapitulate briefly. We find, in this poem, which we take to convey in part to the reader what it is like to give birth to a poem, a visual structure – an arraying of the most frequently repeated lexical item of the poem in the shape of an ellipse, or oval. Furthermore, this oval is centered in the poem – it is exactly the same distance from each end of the poem. At the bottom of the oval we find that which is the treasure sought by every writer – something believed and affirmed. And what is it that we find in the center of the oval?

At the end of line 8, continuing in line 9, we find a noun phrase containing a relative clause whose verb is the poem’s only transitive verb followed by its object:

*a speech / of the self that must sustain itself on speech*

We note that this NP is multiply ambiguous, for the following reasons:

- a. In a phrase like *a speech of X*, the X can be the agent of the underlying verb *speaks*, as in *a speech of Abraham Lincoln*. Thus in such a phrase, we could replace the *of* with *by*.

- b. But the *of*-phrase after *speech* can also denote the topic of the speech, as in *a speech of the possibilities of algae-produced electricity*. In this case the preposition *of* could be replaced by *about*.
- c. The next source of ambiguity involves the *that*-clause, which is a restrictive relative clause. There are two possible parses for this sentence: on one, it is the noun *self* that is being modified. That is the relative clause is based on a sentence like

the self must sustain itself on speech.

- d. But on the other parse, the relative clause is modifying the abstract NP *a speech of the self*. On this reading, the relative clause would be based on a sentence like

a speech of the self must sustain itself on speech

- e. As if this were not bad enough, there is another parsing ambiguity, one concerning the *on*-phrase. The most likely parse is that in which *sustain* has two objects – a direct object and an *on*-phrase object (as in a sentence like *The she-wolf sustained her pups on rabbits*). But there is another possibility, in which the *on*-phrase is modifying *speech*, giving the topic of the speech, as in *a speech on muffins*. Under this parsing, the relative clause's meaning can be suggested by the following paraphrase:

a speech on the self by the self that must sustain itself

I am not sure exactly how many ways ambiguous this sentence is. I suspect that it is at least five ways ambiguous. However, the exact number is not a matter that requires resolution. What does is a seemingly innocent question: why did Stevens want to center his poem around such a complex and iridescent semantic object (or better, a set of such objects)?

My hunch is that this shimmering conceptual lattice of meaning is as close as he could get to the fluidity of what his own thinking feels like to him. I believe his hope to be that what he says of his own interior process can represent not merely that of one American modernist, but can rather be a stand-in for any writer anywhere. The poet is at the center of every poem.

II. I note in passing that this central noun phrase whose meanings we have been adumbrating is also syntactically and phonetically blazed as unique. In its syntax, it not only exhibits the only verb + direct object combination, but also the only reflexive pronoun, and the only modal verb (*must*). Phonetically, this central NP is the only constituent of the poem whose first and last lexical elements are the same [spiytʃ] (which thus provides for the possibility of a rhyme, spang in the middle of the poem), Note also that there is no other word in the poem whose phonetic structure is almost a mirror (there is not even any other word that begins and ends with an obstruent cluster):

[s + p + iy + t + ʃ]



the poem's seven occurrences of *thing* in such a way as to provide our eyes with the endlessness of the circle, a universal archetypal symbol for the soul.

There is much more that could be said, but I will content myself with but one final observation – the despair implicit in the last line. We read through the first sixteen lines, we see how a successful discovery of *one thing that was firm* can quench the poet's thirst for something that is not merely intellectual, can lead to the pure joy of *Ab! douce campagna!* But alas, the conceptual mind, pushed back, held in abeyance for the briefest of times, springs back, like Boppo the Clown, who is never sated, never permanently satisfied – no, Mind will bedevil the hapless poet again, and again, forever.

The Sisyphean nature of the poet's quest is given in capsule form in a phrase from another Stevens poem, from 1949: "Man Carrying Thing":

"The poem must resist the intelligence / Almost successfully"