

There is no question that Stevens's references in "Like Decorations in a Nigger Cemetery" and other poems shock us today, and this affect can preempt any particular symbolic function of the images. But without denying the offense, we might study Stevens's symbolic intention, however problematic, as something more interesting than the crude racism of his time. For instance, we might see how often the image of the Negro in Stevens becomes part of a meditation on death. The suffering and subjugation of blacks may be a figure in Stevens for the inescapable subjugation of all humans to mortality. "Context," then, can mean the afterlife of Stevens's poems, including how we read them within the concerns of our own time, our own landscape. We are like the children in "A Postcard from the Volcano," picking up the bones of the modernist world that changed "The look of things," even as we weave "budded aureoles" for our contemporary world (*CPP* 128–29).

These essays were written individually and on siloed topics, but one of the pleasures for the reader of this volume is finding conversations among them. Galvin's essay on race is enhanced, and her argument perhaps complicated, by Murphy's revelation that Stevens's *Three Travelers* reflects tragically on a notorious lynching. Murphy's attention to Noh drama also adds to Ragg's study of "The Orient" in Stevens, and Galvin's focus on recent poets dovetails nicely with Filreis's attention to the avant-garde afterlife of Stevens's work. Nowhere is a conversation between essays more inevitable than in the two juxtaposed chapters called "The Everyday" and "The Exotic." Surely these modes form a binary in Stevens's poetry, and take on sharper definition if understood dialectically. Stevens will never be reduced to context. But in helping us see the ways he interacts with context, and in shifting lenses to gain a prismatic sense of this poet's range and complexity, *Stevens in Context* is indispensable.

Bonnie Costello
Boston University

Things as They Are.

A play by David Todd, directed by Anjanette Hall, with music by Ben Chasny.
Playwrights Local, Cleveland, OH, May 12–28, 2017.

How does one dramatize the ambitions, failures, and accomplishments in the life of Wallace Stevens into a central narrative arc with a compelling primary conflict? More complex still, how does one dramatically represent Stevens's famously difficult poetry? Taken together, these questions only begin to suggest the dramaturgical challenges facing *Things as They Are*, a bold new collage play by David Todd about Stevens's life and poetic vision. The ambitiousness of the play is twofold. First, the production, deftly directed by Anjanette Hall, contains a dizzying number of disparate elements. Produced by the theater company Playwrights Local in May 2017 at the Reinberger Auditorium in Cleveland's Gordon Square neighborhood, the play presents a series of non-linear moments from the poet's life that are interspersed with dance and *commedia dell'arte* scenes inspired by Stevens's poem "The Comedian as the Letter

C." The indie-music darling Ben Chasny of the band Six Organs of Admittance accompanies the entire play with live, original music. Throughout, an overlay of kaleidoscopic projections by T. Paul Lowry on a mosaic background of six differently sized rectangular screens enlivens the production. There are also occasional voiceovers of the poet's personal correspondence and selections from his work by either voiceover or actors, such as "Mozart, 1935" and "The Man with the Blue Guitar." In addition to this array of elements, the play features nine actors playing nineteen different roles, ranging from young Wally to old Stevens, Elsie, Holly Stevens, William Carlos Williams, and many others.

The second reason for the play's ambitiousness provides at once the most enterprising and perhaps the most problematic aspects of the play: *Things as They Are* makes an audacious attempt to both identify and dramatize the central conflict of Stevens's life in one storyline, and it seeks to show how this conflict characterizes the primary subject matter of his poetic oeuvre in a second plot. As we know, classical dramaturgy demands an *agon*: a central conflict between two sparring dramatic personas through which the machinery of the play can run its course. Despite its experimentation, *Things as They Are* is no exception, and indeed is structured by a central conflict between the material and socially conservative expectations of Wally's father, his unhappy wife, and his demanding professional life (metonymically invoked by his unflappable secretary), and his great yearning for life as a poet. Here, more or less realistic scenes pit Wallace against these forces. Sometimes he bends to them, while at other times he defiantly works against them. This conflict is evident in scenes depicting his first meeting with Elsie Kachel (whom he eventually marries) at a party in Reading, an emotional blowout between the married couple after a debauched night with Marcel Duchamp, Marianne Moore, and others at Walter Arensberg's New York City salon, and later arguments and rapprochements with his daughter Holly. Another explosive scene—though less central dramatically—details the infamous Key West brawl between an aging Stevens and Hemingway in his prime. In these scenes, the acting is strong, particularly from Robert Hawkes as a vacillating older Stevens, Jason Markouc as an ambitious younger Stevens, Robert Branch as a ludic William Carlos Williams, and Laura Starnik, who enterprisingly plays (albeit sometimes to awkward pairings) both a younger and older Elsie.

Things as They Are presents this conflict in turn as the primary field of antagonistic position-taking in which Stevens's poetry moves. At this level, the play implies that Stevens's poetic discourse exists in the constant tension between his material reality and his poetic imagination. Or, as the character of the Host puts it at the top of the play: "Mr. Stevens's work is concerned with a single great subject: the relation of human imagination to the real world." Indeed, a poem like "The Man with the Blue Guitar" seems to yield this reading, bifurcated as it is between the viewpoints of the titular artistic Man and his antagonists, who beg to differ over the perception of "things as they are," and how to construe them (CPP 135). In the play, Wallace's poetic struggles appear in two theatrically heightened storylines. The first features the stock characters, exaggerated movements, and stylized masks and costumes of *commedia*

dell'arte. These scenes, which intersperse nearly every biographical scene, build from simple scenery rearrangements in the first few instances to intricate stories of their own right. At certain key moments, the two overlap—for instance, in a moving scene when Crispin adorns Stevens with a cape, troubadour hat, and sword, readying the poet for his own adventure of the mind. Another such moment occurs when the merry masked types boisterously attempt to impersonate Stevens and undermine the humdrum quality of his office life at the Hartford Accident and Indemnity Company. It is during the first rudimentary *commedia* scenes when the otherwise exceptional play fails to connect, arguably, because the scenes build too slowly, and the stock *commedia* characters require exacting precision that generally comes from years of specialized training in physical theater on the part of the actor. However, these first scenes are relatively short, and once the *commedia* begins to interact more directly with the “realistic” narrative, the bond is reestablished with the audience, who gain a firmer understanding of Stevens’s life and work. The second “imaginary” storyline features two voiceless, young, muse-like dancing women who stylistically recreate moments from well-known poems, such as “The Dwarf,” while Stevens looks on, collects notes, and attempts not to get caught up in their antics. Though a gentle nod to Stevens’s moments of creation, these short scenes have relatively low dramatic stakes and their underdeveloped execution makes them weak points in an otherwise strong show.

Despite these rare issues, there are many commendable aspects to this new play, demonstrating that the creative team behind it is up to many of the challenges facing such a daunting enterprise. Especially impressive is Todd’s ability to take copious amounts of information—poems, biographies, the dense theses and counter-theses of Stevens’s work—and synthesize them into an orchestrated whole. The play supports an argument that the poet’s life and work both revolve around the conflict between prosaic and imaginative expectations and desires that provides ample fodder for debate among Stevensians and the general public alike. Interested readers of this journal who wish to make up their own minds about the Cleveland production may view one of the performances in full on HowlRound TV (see <http://howlround.com/livestreaming-things-as-they-are-by-playwrights-local-in-cleveland-friday-26>).

Les Hunter
Baldwin Wallace University

The Poet’s Voice in the Making of Mind.

By Russell Meares. London: Routledge, 2016.

As its title might suggest, *The Poet’s Voice in the Making of Mind* takes us on a search for origins—not simply of “mind,” but of the self and of language, each of which requires further musing into the origin of the symbol. Steeped in both evolutionary and clinical psychology, it nevertheless foregoes either positivism or any suggestion that scientific precision will do away with the