“The bread of life is better than any soufflé”:
Wallace Stevens’s Poetics and the Extraordinary Ordinary

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ABSTRACT

This essay begins with asking why the ‘studies of the everyday’—currently so popular in the humanities—have not yet taken pragmatism into consideration despite the fact that pragmatism has traditionally been concerned with the everyday, the common, and the ordinary. It then analyzes Wallace Stevens’s everyday poetics as part of the pragmatist tradition, especially as inspired by William James and John Dewey. This perspective helps to see the paradoxical doubleness involved when the ordinary is observed consciously and thus ceases to be ordinary, as it is turned into something extraordinary. Furthermore, it uncovers Stevens’s treatment of the ordinary as an expression of his political belief. Through this belief Stevens not only emphasizes democratic impulses but also the importance of becoming a part of an egalitarian collectivity.

Extraordinary simply means “out of the ordinary.”
And so it is, for we can make a world out of the ordinary.
Do not await salvation while the parade passes by.
Surprise and mystery lurk in our experiencing the obvious, the ordinary.
Salvation may be illusory, but salving experiences can occur day by day.

John J. McDermott, The Culture of Experience

Many scholars in the humanities are currently devoted to the everyday, both as a subject and as a conceptual problem.1 This heightened interest, originating at the turn of the century, can mainly be traced to two developments. First, the everyday is celebrated as an escape route from the rarified realm of esoteric knowledge and “against the abstractions of metaphysics” (Colebrook 689); second, many texts that now make up everyday life studies draw upon French theories (mainly by Henri Lefebvre, Michel de Certeau, and Roland Barthes) whose translations into English have come into existence after much delay. Despite the everyday’s definitional vastness, these new studies turn to the quotidian and its taken-for-grantedness, to what seems to happen without conscious awareness, to ordinary objects and mundane events. They try to rescue the everyday from oblivion (somewhat paradoxically) by transforming it: “the all too prosaic must be made to reveal its hidden subversive poetry” (Felski 609). In this they do not treat the everyday as simply an array of behaviors, but also as comprising distinctive forms of consciousness, even equating the everyday with a habitual or distracted mode of perception.

1 Major texts are Phillips; Olson, Modernism; Randall; Roberts; Sheringham; Highmore, ed., Reader; Highmore, Cultural Theory; Gardiner; Storey; the special journal issue of New Literary History; as well as numerous analyses of everyday objects in material culture studies.
It is true, as Liesl Olson claims, that by now the studies of the everyday have produced a canon (cf. “Everyday Life” 175). It is also true that pragmatism is not part of this canon. This is surprising given pragmatism’s deep investment in and critical reflection of the everyday, the ordinary, and the common. When we turn to a concrete example, namely the modernist poet Wallace Stevens, this absence becomes even more stunning. As a result of what Ben Highmore calls the quotidian turn, Stevens's poetic treatment of ordinary events and objects has received renewed interest. Yet not a single text explores Wallace Stevens's everyday poetics and his pragmatist notions in tandem—although it is well known that because of his studies at Harvard, Stevens was highly influenced by pragmatism.

For instance, he borrowed from William James's *The Will to Believe* when commenting in a letter that his “Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction” characterizes the spirit of the age as “the will to believe” (443). Moreover, scholarship already exists on Stevens's relation to pragmatism. Even Liesl Olson, whose *Modernism and the Ordinary* looks at intersections between modernist poetics and pragmatism, curiously leaves classical pragmatism out of sight when analyzing Stevens and his famous poem “An Ordinary Evening in New Haven,” only mentioning the neo-pragmatists Richard Rorty and Stanley Cavell in passing. Rather than looking at the implications of Stevens's everyday poetics, Olson is most interested in Stevens's correspondence and its display of Stevens’s curiosity about the ordinairiness in people’s lives. This article therefore analyzes the connection between Stevens’s pragmatism and what he calls the ordinary or the commonplace, aiming to present Stevens’s modernism and everyday poetics in a new light.

One can agree with—and further complicate—Olson’s claim that modernist literature proceeds the (currently en vogue) theories of everyday life and that when using these theories “upon modernist literature, there is a dangerous proclivity for causal reversal and historical distortion” (“Everyday Life” 176). However, my argument runs along different lines. Stevens’s critics have perpetually discussed the relationship between the ‘real’ and the ‘imagination,’ accusing him of being apolitical or failing in his poetry. Some of these tensions and points of criticism can be resolved or contradicted if reevaluated in the context of Stevens’s

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2 Surprisingly there is little notice of the fact that the French theorists, seen as the foundation themselves, have been highly influenced by the history of mentalities associated with the Annales School.

3 I would like to thank Anne Salter, librarian at Oglethorpe University in Atlanta, for her thorough research on this issue.

4 Joan Richardson, Stevens scholar and biographer, not only points to the close connection between Stevens and Harvard’s pragmatist George Santayana but also emphasizes: “Although Stevens had not studied with James at Harvard, interest in the concerns established by James’s work in psychology as it stretched itself into America’s defining philosophy of pragmatism continued to charge the Cambridge air during the young poet’s years as a student” (11).

5 Among the neo-pragmatists, three should be highlighted for turning to the ordinary: Richard Rorty explores ordinary language philosophy in *The Quest of the Ordinary*, Stanley Cavell apprehends the ordinary as a performative rather than a constative act, and John J. McDermott’s *Culture of Experience* celebrates things of ordinary experience, exploring the possibility of a renewed faith in human community and amelioration.

6 For a discussion of this line of criticism observing failure in Stevens, see Mahoney 225-26.
pragmatic everyday poetics. In what follows, I therefore first sketch how notions of the ordinary operate in classical pragmatism, then place Stevens’s poem “Not Ideas About the Thing But the Thing Itself” within the context of his everyday poetics, and finally explore the implications of Stevens’s poetic pragmatism. What will emerge from such a perspective is his nuanced conception of the relationship between poetics and social as well as democratic impulses.

I. At the Feet of the Familiar: Classical Pragmatism and the Ordinary

Scholars are in general agreement about Ralph Waldo Emerson’s importance as a protopragmatist. This is certainly true in respect of pragmatism’s notion of the ordinary. In his seminal essay “The American Scholar,” Emerson writes: “I explore and sit at the feet of the familiar, the low. Give me insight into to-day, and you may have the antique and future worlds” (57). It is the common, the ordinary, the present without antecedence that is at the core of his egalitarian thinking. Emerson, of course, was still searching for transcendence. Nevertheless, it is important to emphasize that transcendence for Emerson does not indicate an escape from the everyday but rather an enhancement of it; to find the extraordinary or transcendent in the ordinary, Emerson claims in “Self-Reliance,” man must “know his worth, and keep things under his feet” (140).

William James turned to the ordinary as well, if in a different way. For him, everyday life is characterized by practical interests that supersede sensations. According to James, we conduct everyday activities “utterly without mental reference to pleasure and pain” or even have handed them over “to the effortless custody of automatism” (Psychology 443, 160). James’s Principles of Psychology further analyzes the automatism of our habits. Habit, James observes, “diminishes the conscious attention with which our acts are performed” (114). He is careful to balance the consequences, on the one hand being aware of how the automatism of habit reconciles the dispossessed with their fate, thus preventing their uprising, and on the other hand believing that “no one is more unhappy than the person permanently racked by indecision” and thus unable to hand over any aspects of

7 See Richardson; West; Poirier; Levin; as well as the work of Herwig Friedl.
8 In his ordinary language philosophy—exemplified in The Senses of Walden—neo-pragmatist Stanley Cavell rediscovers the writings of Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau, describing their sense of the ordinary and the common as rich sources of American philosophy, as philosophy that “underwrites” ordinary language philosophy (48). According to Cavell, the main task of ordinary language philosophy is to return language to its ordinary contexts, to forms of life.
9 Although a discussion of Lisi Schoenbach’s observation is beyond the scope of this article, it should be pointed out: “For James, the roots of habit are physiological. He argues that ‘the nervous system’ follows old impulses and paths more easily than new ones. But habit also provides a conceptual apparatus through which he links individual nerve endings to social and institutional structures. Habit connects the specific to the abstract and the body to the body politic, in more than a merely metaphorical sense. While it links conceptually the mindless motions of the body to the social mores that determine human values, beliefs, and actions, it also signals an organic conception of history, temporally connecting past behaviors to future impulses” (241).
his or her life to habits. When trying to balance habit, he juggles respect for constructive habits with skepticism for mindless practices. It is important to stress, though, that within this delicate arrangement everyday activities often dismissed by philosophers (and others) are judged as useful: daydreams, reveries, dispersed attention in everyday life, often rejected as unproductive, passive, or effeminate (cf. Randall 39), are seen as important, as revealing something of the world. Here, James gives credit to what happens the moment we wake up, not the moment we get up. Similary, he is interested in random associations of consciousness, for example when asking, “why, some day, walking in the street with our attention miles away from that quest, does the answer saunter into our mind as carelessly as if it had never been called for—suggested, possibly, by the flowers on the bonnet of the lady in front of us, or possibly by nothing that we can discover?” (Psychology 263).

Throughout his work, James chooses examples from such scenes of everyday life. This is much more than a stylistic device. Following Emersonian pragmatism, James employs a philosophical approach that uses the language of ordinary experience, which also uncovers a central feature of his pragmatism: “the reinstatement of the vague and inarticulate to its proper place in our mental life which I am so anxious to press on the attention” (179).

As in James’s pragmatism, habit plays an important role in the work of John Dewey, where habit is not seen as merely harmful or limited to behaviors with negative connotations, i.e., so-called bad habits. Dewey conceptualizes habits in a more general way and also includes patterns of verbal behavior and shared inherited customs. Thus, habits are intersubjective, at least to a certain degree, as they are both to be attributed to acts of persons and determined by an environment full of social meaning.

Much like James, Dewey is aware of habits’ precarious doubleness. In Human Nature and Conduct Dewey writes: “Without habit there is only irritation and confused hesitation. With habit alone there is a machine-like repetition, duplicating recurrence of old acts. With conflict of habits and release of impulse there is conscious search” (126). Thus, while habits are necessary, the moment before and after the habitual mode is of heightened interest as well. Additionally, for Dewey and James there is no outside of habits. Both believe that old habits are followed by new habits, by “reorganization of custom and institutions” coming out of a process of deliberate reconstruction initiated by a conflict (72). For better or for worse, pragmatist philosophy does not aim at a mode outside the ordinary, nor does it aim at overcoming habits or shattering institutions. It is rather, as Lisi Schoenbach phrases it, the “reintegration or recontextualization of released ener-

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10 Metaphors, David Granger observes, hold an “especially prominent position among Emersonian pragmatists as a vehicle for acknowledging the infinite meaning potential of the everyday” (n.p.).

11 As such, James’s notion of pragmatism puts emphasis on the procedural, cautioning against relying uncritically on fixed truths. Indeed, James introduces “uncertainty into the domain of legitimate intellectual inquiry” (Croce 224). Richard Poirier thus concludes that “we must learn to surrender on occasion to vagueness” and assume a “relaxed but vigilant receptivity toward the everyday in all of its precariousness and uncertainty” (42).
gies back into the social fabric that distinguishes pragmatism from other critical modes of thought” (242).

Nevertheless, there is a critical impetus in the pragmatic treatment of habit. Since habits can be stifling machine-like repetitions, it is important to be conscious of habits. As a consequence of conscious attention, new habits can replace old habits. As Dewey puts it, habit is an ability, an art formed through past experiences, yet not limited to the repetition of past acts, but also available for new emergencies “more intelligent, more sensitively perceptive, more informed with foresight, more aware of what they are about, more direct and sincere, more flexibly responsive than those now current” (Human Nature 128). Thus, habits can be both mindless and enabling, to be resisted and embraced. As a result, looking at habits—seeing the ordinary, not taking it for granted but noticing it (although noticing it as ordinary)—reveals it as a prevalent thread in the weave of life. This seeing the ordinary includes an extraordinary (i.e., conscious, unhabitutal, detached) seeing.

Classical pragmatists do not find this kind of seeing in traditional philosophy, whose language and mentality they consider fundamentally antagonistic toward the everyday. Therefore, Dewey concludes, philosophy only recovers itself “when it ceases to be a device for dealing with the problems of philosophers and becomes a method cultivated by philosophers, for dealing with the problems of men” (“Need” 46). If this is achieved, philosophy “accepts life and experience in all its uncertainty, mystery, doubt, and half-knowledge and turns that experience upon itself to deepen and intensify its own qualities—to imagination and art” (Art 35).

Yet, again, it is not the widespread elitist notion of art that Dewey is contemplating. Two aspects are of great importance to him: art is a means of communication, of making common what had been singular, thereby potentially “open[ing] us up to the experience of others” (Campbell 35); and seeing art as “celebrations, recognized as such, of things of ordinary experience. Even a crude experience, if authentically an experience, is more fit to give a clue to the intrinsic nature of esthetic experience than is an objective already set apart from any other mode of expression” (Dewey, Art 9). The ordinary, thus, is highly important in what it has to say about the world and in its capacity to possibly enhance intersubjective relations.

12 Richard Shusterman therefore emphasizes Dewey’s “realization that stability, consensus, and unity can come in various and flexible forms and that they represent values too essential for good living and effective socio-political action to be demonized as necessarily equivalent to stagnating rigidity, monotonous uniformity, and oppressive totalization” (31).

13 Thus, Judith Green sums up: “Dewey and the classical pragmatists learn from and value the history of philosophy, but they focus on the diverse experiences of problem-focused struggles of ordinary men and women (historical and contemporary) in framing issues for transformative philosophical inquiry, clarifying and amplifying the actual, multiple meanings of concepts instead of offering stipulative definitions, and progressively building up an ideal-directed general theory as a resource or tool for guiding contextually differing courses of future experience” (266).

14 In comparison, James’s judgment on art is not as unambiguously positive because he sees it as a potential diversion, producing the habit of feeling emotion without acting on it, thus, in James’ psychic economy, a waste of energy. As he writes about the Rousseauiansentimentalist and dreamer, “the habit of excessive novel-reading and theatre-going will produce true monsters in this line” (Principles of Psychology 163).
II. Making Poetry out of the Commonplaces: Wallace Stevens’s Everyday Poetics

“I have never studied systematic philosophy and should be bored to death at the mere thought of doing so,” Stevens wrote in a letter (Letters 636). Nonetheless, Stevens’s poetry reveals a deep interest in philosophical inquiry. In order to explore Stevens’s philosophy, I will not simply present a close reading, but rather bring four overlapping facets into dialogue: 1) a contextualization of the poem “Not Ideas” in his poetry of the everyday, 2) Stevens’s poetological remarks, 3) Stevens criticism, and 4) intersections between Stevens’s poetics and pragmatist thinking. Indeed, pragmatism runs through Stevens’s work, as he, like James, was Janus-faced. James placed himself on the borderlines “between poetry and philosophy, between his fascination with the irrational and his need to put it under the control of reason and of habit: He always looks into both directions: toward the margins and the center, intending to bring out form and yet conceiving of form as something temporary, ‘worked’ out of fluid experience” (Ickstadt 49). Stevens, too, occupied such a position. When contemplating the relationship between philosophy and poetry, he called philosophy the “official view of being” and poetry the “unofficial view of being” (“Figure” 40). Following pragmatism, this view turns to fluid experiences, the everyday, ordinary objects and situations. Indeed, Stevens pondered the everyday as both a subject for poetry and as a conceptual problem. Referring to the “vulgate of experience” (Collected 397), he asserts the value of ordinary, daily experiences and objects and warns against the dangers of overlooking the common and the low. First, he asserts this value through turning to ordinary objects, “composing ‘still life’ poems—works that take as their central focus the representation of particular, familiar objects” (Epstein 49). Second, he calls attention to everyday moments. From early poems such as “The Man Whose Pharynx Was Bad,” in which the ordinary is the “malady of the quotidian” (Collected 81), to the complex treatment of the commonplace in “World Without Peculiarity,” “The Ordinary Woman,” and especially “An Ordinary Evening in New Haven,” to the ‘still life’ poems such as “Study of Two Pears,” Stevens circles

A number of studies have been devoted to Stevens’s philosophical worldview. Siobhan Phillips explores notions of Nietzsche and Heidegger, Brendan Mahoney and Edward Ragg analyze concepts of phenomenology, Simon Critchley finds Stevens “philosophically significant because his verse recasts the basic problem of epistemology in a way that perhaps allows this problem to be cast away” (30), and Bart Eeckhout places Stevens in a Kantian tradition (cf. 110).

Analyzing Stevens’s ‘still life’ poems, Bonnie Costello even claims that in the 1930s and 1940s, Stevens does not turn to the ordinary as a retreat from war and poverty, but as a “means of contemplating and resisting it” (444). Costello further explores how the “depiction of everyday, household objects, and its removal of these objects from human agency, satisfies a longing for decorative order and plenitude, a utopian image of material culture. As such, still life has always been ranked lowest among the genres of painting. The genre was particularly appealing for modernist experimentation in the first decades of the century, precisely because these objects are empty of historical significance and can be experienced as pure form; [...] Stevens’s still life meditations tell a story less of mastery and appropriation than of imaginative and emotional connection to a world from which they are apart but also a part; a world heterogeneous, dynamic, and perishable” (446).
back to the notion of the everyday over and over again. One poem generally left out of the discussion of Stevens’s everyday poetics is “Not Ideas About the Thing But the Thing Itself.” While it does not turn to the ordinary and the quotidian in an obvious way, it nevertheless continues Stevens’s treatment of this topic. Since it was the poem with which Stevens decided to close his *Collected Poems*, its features of everyday poetics gain even more importance; and even if it does not function quite as Stevens’s “final statement” that Robert Harrison claims it to be (cf. 664), it has—in the Jamesian sense—a “central resting place” (*Principles* 243).

Let us turn to this poem and take a close look at how pragmatism functions in it.

Not Ideas About the Thing But the Thing Itself

At the earliest ending of winter,
In March, a scrawny cry from outside
Seemed like a sound in his mind.

He knew that he heard it,
A bird’s cry, at daylight or before,
In the early March wind.

The sun was rising at six,
No longer a battered panache above snow …
It would have been outside.

It was not from the vast ventriloquism
Of sleep’s faded papier-mâché …
The sun was coming from outside.

That scrawny cry—it was
A chorister whose c preceded the choir.
It was part of the colossal sun,

Surrounded by its choral rings,
Still far away. It was like
A new knowledge of reality. (*Collected* 451-52)

From its opening, the poem refuses to be exact. This Jamesian reinstatement of the vague can be seen in the speaker’s refusal to pin down the season. Rather, the moment described is placed in a transitional and ambiguous phase. First of all, it is “At the earliest ending of winter.” Winter, a recurring trope in Stevens’s oeuvre, is usually associated with a nullification of the mind, which in “The Plain Sense of Things” is described “as if / We had come to an end of the imagination” (*Collected* 428). While this state of mind is important for clarity—or as the opening line of “Snow Man” puts it, sometimes “One must have a mind of winter” (*Collected* 8)—the beginning of “Not Ideas” instead dwells on vagueness and ambiguity.¹⁹

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¹⁷ Stevens, *Collected Poetry and Prose* 451-52. Many have looked at similarities and differences between Stevens and Williams; see, for instance, Albert Gelpi’s analysis.

¹⁸ However, clarity is not the only quality of wintertime, which also “cajoles a stark self-analysis, reflected by a barren world” (Olson, *Modernism* 139). In contrast to winter, Frank Kermode defines summer as “the season of the physical paradise, the full human satisfaction” (32), when the world apprehends “in the full blaze of what Stevens calls imagination” (Gardner 327).

¹⁹ Mahoney astutely observes: “Stevens’s poem does not follow an either / or scheme. The phrase ‘At the earliest ending of winter’ (*Collected* 451) explicitly speaks of the season of endings (i.e., winter), but it does so using a type of double negation: the ending of ending. Through
This can also be seen in the second part of the moment’s description: “at daylight or before.” Again a transitional moment, important for the preconsciousness of a daydream or half-sleep when just waking up, the speaker—like the pragmatist—does not discharge this moment as unproductive. Yet this preconscious state, this moment of waking up, is also infused with what Dewey calls the “conflict of habits” and “release of impulse” towards conscious search (Middle 14: 126). This release of impulse is triggered by the bird’s cry, “a scrawny cry from outside / Seemed like a sound in his mind.” With this opposition between outside and inside, the poem sets up one of Stevens’s central topics: the role of reality and imagination. Early Stevens scholarship—largely through Harold Bloom’s influential 1976 The Poems of Our Climate—tended to interpret Stevens’s enthusiasm for the power of the imagination as evidence of a subjective idealism. However, to highlight only the pole of the imagination and consciousness attends to just half of Stevens’s worldview. After the historicist turn in Stevens scholarship, critics like Milton Bates, Alan Filreis, and James Longenbach strongly criticized Bloomian interpretations, instead arguing for a reading that positions Stevens as directly responding to the sociopolitical currents of his time. Additionally, current scholarship, especially Olson’s and Phillips’s work, has addressed this relationship by looking at Stevens’s everyday poetics, noticing that in the “broad lineage of everyday aesthetics in innovative twentieth- and twenty-first-century literature and art […] Stevens is rarely mentioned. […] This occlusion of Stevens is perhaps due to the lingering misperception that his work evades the daily in favor of ‘pure imagination’” (Epstein 53). Responding to this perceived lack, Olson therefore calls attention to “Stevens’s lifelong interest in the commonplace, not the abstract, as the most defining feature of his finest work” (Modernism 116).

In contrast, what I hope to reveal with my reading of Stevens is that his pragmatism does not see the abstract and the commonplace as an opposition. Indeed, the very opposition is inept, as in his poetry considerations of the abstract are directly connected to the concrete and common. After all, the speaker’s inquiry is not set off by a philosophical problem but by an ordinary bird. Moreover, it is not even the melody or the singing of a bird but a cry, and (as the speaker mentions twice) a scrawny one at that. It is thus a common noise that initiates the inquiry; both the adjective scrawny and the noun cry underline the ordinary, the everyday, and the prelexical, which “Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction” sees more generally in connection to the auditory when it describes music as falling “on the silence like a sense, / A passion that we feel, not understand” (Collected 339). Furthermore, as in “The Course of the Particular,” “It 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” (Collected 460). With this ordinariness, Stevens wants to return to what might be called the mereness of things (cf. Critchley 88). Things simply are; an ordinary cry simply is a part of nature that “provides possible starting points and opportunities rather than final ends,” as Dewey writes in The Quest for Certainty (81).

Indeed, in “Not Ideas” the scrawny cry serves as the starting point: it is there, is part of reality. Stevens’s poetry does not deny the existence of a reality apart from human thought. He writes in his notebook Materia Poetica that the “real is only the base. But it is the base” (Collected 917). What is already indicated with the phrase “only the base” is Stevens’s awareness that description and aestheticization of this very base will inescapably follow. In the poem “An Ordinary Evening in New Haven,” he writes: “What was real turned into something most unreal” (413). With this view Stevens demonstrates the pragmatic worldview. James, too, believes in the existence of a reality, yet (in contrast to idealism) he insists that truth about the real is always bound to human experiences. Consequently, the function of thought is to organize experience. However, organization and order are always in the making, as individuals, through their thinking and acting, participate in that making. This also points to what James calls “the human serpent” (Pragmatism 46) or humanism. In one of James’s most famous declarations in Pragmatism—namely that the “human serpent is over everything” (46)—he expresses the entanglement of any cognitive assertion about reality with the network of conceptual, empirical, and biological factors that together make up the activities of the human mind. A concept connected to this is his notion that doubt, belief, and knowledge grow out of social interests and out of experiences and transactions with the environment. Therefore, truths are always situational and contextual and thus always open to revision.

Stevens, too, acknowledges the “human serpent” when it comes to describing reality. As “Description Without Place” makes clear, description is always “A little different from reality / The difference that we make in what we see […]. Description is revelation. It is not / The thing described, nor false facsimile” (Collected 344). Thus, language always is an obstruction of reality, but at the same time creation of a (new) reality, or as Stevens puts it in a letter to José Rodríguez Foe: “[T]he power of literature is that in describing the world it creates what it describes” (Letters 495). Although impossible to get to ‘reality’ through language, it is important for Stevens to try to get close to the “Thing Itself,” as his poem’s title—referring to William Carlos Williams’s famous dictum “No ideas but in things” (Patterson 6)—already indicates. This perspective requires, first of all, “continued attention” and secondly a completely new approach (Olson, Modernism 138). After all, as his metapoem “Of Modern Poetry” states, the modern poem is

The poem of the mind in the act of finding
What will suffice. It has not always had
To find: the scene was set; it repeated what
Was in the script.
Then the theatre was changed
To something else. Its past was a souvenir.
(Collected 218)
This new approach calls for a process, an activity, “the act of finding,” in which one has to leave behind handed-down or clichéd descriptions. Then, and only then, can one get to what Stevens calls the “first idea”: “If you take the varnish and dirt of generations off a picture, you see it in its first idea. If you think about the world without its varnish and dirt, you are a thinker of the first idea” (Letters 426-27). In “Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction” it becomes clear that Stevens sees poetry as one way to scrape away the accumulated dirt: “The poem refreshes life so that we share, / For a moment, the first idea” (Collected 330).

Two significant Stevens poems further explain how this can be achieved. “The Man with the Blue Guitar” states in Canto XXXII: “Throw away the lights, the definitions, / And say of what you see in the dark // That it is this or that it is that, / But do not use the rotten names” (Collected 150). In a similar vein, “Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction” celebrates a stance that in traditional philosophy is called philosophical astonishment: “You must become an ignorant man again / And see the sun again with an ignorant eye” (329).

Like James in The Will to Believe, who claimed that we “must go on experiencing and thinking over our experience, for only thus can our opinions grow more true” (466), Stevens agrees with the concept that—while not being able to get right to reality when describing it—one could get close to it when looking anew, finding new ways of describing. This can even lead to a state that “satisfies / Belief” (Collected 330). Belief, and Stevens again shares this pragmatic notion, is valid and is valuable. Yet belief and faith are always only momentary and part of a process that will change again, will reintroduce uncertainty and skepticism. Any attempt “to extrapolate a fixed meaning for other than functional purposes are denials of this process” (McDermott 36). This ever-changing process is due to what “Ordinary Evening” calls “the never-ending meditation” (Collected 397), and it is deeply reflected in the ambiguity and paradoxical movement of “Not Ideas.”

A key word in “Not Ideas” is “outside,” which appears three times in the poem. Hereby, already in the first stanza a dichotomy is set up between the outside and the inside, “the mind,” a dichotomy repeated in the fourth stanza through the opposition to “vast ventriloquism.” Yet there is no simple dichotomy. The verb “seem” and the simile “like a sound” take on a strong semantic sense. They stress a hesitation about the sensorial experience of the cry, a hesitation furthered by the synesthesia connecting the cry to the sun in the fourth stanza. Put simply, there is no such thing as complete certainty in unmediated perception, even at the level of raw sensory data. As soon as something is perceived, whether ordinary or extraordinary, we try to make sense of it by fitting it into categories and linguistic patterns. For Stevens, this is part of all habitual experience and our habitual mode of expression, a habit that exists and cannot be overcome.

However, the mindless habit of fitting experience into categories is also turned into a conscious reflection when interrupted through a new impulse. Counter-
acting his hesitation, the speaker proceeds with an inquiry. Accordingly, in the second stanza he tries to get closer to the sound by describing it as a bird's cry that appears with the sun “rising at six.” While the speaker first contemplates the sound as if in his own mind, through the reflective process in the moment of his waking up—having an experience in the Deweyan sense—he comes to recognize that it is the cry of a bird that announces the coming of spring as “It was part of the colossal sun.” This knowledge comes with growing conviction. While the final line of the third stanza ends with the simple and yet beautiful line “It would have been outside,” using the conditional to stress ambiguity, the final line of the fourth stanza expresses clarity and certainty: “The sun was coming from outside.” The speaker’s explorations then come to rest in the metaphor of the bird as “chorister,” before the cry and the sun are synthesized into unity by the “choral rings” in the final stanza. The real—and the ordinary—are thus transformed or elevated from being a part of an unconscious experience.

This complex structure is also due to Stevens’s agreement with Dewey that ‘mind’ and ‘reality’ are abstractions from a single, indivisible process. In the essay “The Noble Rider and the Sound of Words,” Stevens explicitly claims that reality and imagination are equal and inseparable (cf. Collected 657). Only by agreeing with reality does the imagination have vitality. But it is reality (the thing itself) that the poet has to turn to, and everyday reality at that. As Stevens says in a letter, he tries “to get as close to the ordinary […] as it is possible for a poet to get” (Letters 636). Therefore, the poet, like the “insatiable actor” in “Of Modern Poetry,” has to continually look for “the act of finding what will suffice” (Collected 218). The word “insatiable” underlines the fact that this process is never-ending, while the words “slowly and / With meditation” indicate the cognitive work needed in a process that cannot rely upon God’s inspiration or “what / Was in the script” (218).

Stevens here also puns on the meaning of “act.” Poetry can be seen as an act in which the poet has to “learn the speech of the place / It has to face the men of the time and to meet / The women of the time. It has to think about war / And it has to find what will suffice” (Collected 218-19). This move resembles Dewey’s call for the need to abandon the pseudo-problems of epistemology and calling attention to “the problems of men” (46). In a different sense, an act is a dramatic performance to be heard by an audience. For a poet, this audience is usually “invisible.” Nevertheless, it is this intersubjective level that the poet has to keep in mind, in contrast to a self-sufficient subjective act. Again, the poem expresses this aspect with a sound, not one of a bird, but just as central. If the poet presents the thing itself as clearly as he can, when the construct of his imagination correlates with reality as seen by the people, then like the “c that precedes the choir,” this sound unifies by fusing actor and audience “as of two / Emotions becoming one” (Collected 219). The enjambements further emphasize this intersubjective act and serve as an organizing principle, stressing an aesthetic of connection between lines. When the

23 As James writes: “All our thoughts are instrumental, and mental modes of adaptation to reality, rather than revelations or Gnostic answers to some divinely instituted world-enigma” (Pragmatism 94).
miriam strube poet meditates on and orients himself to the things themselves that surround him and that ordinary people recognize as their shared reality, then—but only then—does he achieve a “sudden rightness” (219).

In this moment, which follows a pragmatic inquiry and which I would call a pragmatic version of epiphany, both ordinariness and intersubjectivity play a central role. In “Of Modern Poetry,” it is a sound that satisfies, again a rather ordinary sound, namely when the invisible actor is “twanging a wiry string,” reaching out to ordinary people like “a man skating, a woman dancing, a woman / Comb-” (Collected 219).24

Similarly, “Not Ideas” has the bird’s “scrawny cry” at its center. However, in all its ordinariness, the cry is also extraordinary, as the metaphor in the fifth stanza so fiercely demonstrates. The sound is brilliantly reduced to a thing itself. It is the note C sung by the leader of the choir for the tuning of the group. In accord with William Carlos Williams, this single note is the ordinary thing that does not have any meaning beyond itself. Nevertheless, in the poem’s paradoxical structure, it nonetheless serves as the connection between thing and singer, as well as among the singers themselves. As DeSales Harrison points out, while itself meaningless, the ordinary sound “ushers in all meaning, echoing outward” (96) through “choir,” “colossal,” and “choral,” thereby creating not a new knowledge of reality, but at least what the final simile describes as “like / A new knowledge of reality.” Brendan Mahoney indicates that in order to achieve this, we “must attend to the mereness of things, to their simplicity. After all, the note that the bird sings in ‘Not Ideas’ is a plain C; the root note of the only entire natural key, and therefore, the fundamental root of every other musical key and scale” (237). The bird’s cry is both ordinary and extraordinary, a notion that is further expressed in the ambiguity of the indefinite pronoun that in its final mentioning refers “to the possibility that anything is itself and more than itself” (229).

Part of the final simile’s paradoxical function is that it also replaces the absolute certainty of the fourth stanza with an open-ended ambiguity and uncertainty. Being a poetic pragmatist, Stevens is critical of absolutist philosophies, but he nevertheless acknowledges the possibility of belief, of feeling certain when hitting the right note in accordance with others, with ordinary people. The moment of this pragmatist epiphany is only provisional, yet it exists when the ordinary meets the extraordinary, when the ordinary and the abstract are one and the same. Hereby, Stevens connects the ordinary not with mindless practice but with conscious search. However, he does not simply celebrate a conscious inquiry which drives toward a definite endpoint. In Reconstruction in Philosophy, Dewey frames uncertainty as something positive, revealing “an open-minded will to learn and courage of re-adjustment” (Middle 12: 135). In the same way, many of Stevens’s poems move back and forth, employing the non-propositional or prelogical, like the music that is a “passion that we feel, not understand” (Collected 339). Similar to the

24 Satisfaction is a word not only important to James, but also in “Of Modern Poetry,” as the repetition of the verb to suffice underlines. By the same token, Stevens remarks in a letter that “the essence of poetry is change,” and the essence of change is not that it provides stable truths but rather “that it gives pleasure” (Letters 430).
daydreams, reveries, or dispersed attention in everyday life in James’s work, Stevens does not reject such modes as unproductive. Rather, following James, they are seen as revealing something of the world.

Moreover, refusing certainty or finality underlines Stevens’s call for a pragmatist imagination. He undermines the imagination/reality binary in a pragmatist move but also displays a recognition of their interdependence: “Two Things of opposite nature seem to depend / On one another, […] the imagined / On the real” (Collected 339). This pragmatist imagination, Levin explains,

seeks to balance visionary and skeptical impulses. It attempts to keep its visionary flights tethered to the material and social facts of the world, but never to allow the cumulative weight of those facts to obscure its creative imperative. Because it identifies itself with the rhythm of fact and creative vision, the pragmatist imagination faces the inevitable conflict between what is and what might be with equanimity. Its voice is sometimes tragic, to the extent that its creative vision is invariably thwarted, and sometimes comic, so far as its creative impulses are continuously renewed and revived. (196)

Phillips thus places Stevens at a middle ground, claiming that he constitutes a rotating globe rather than a static location and a quotidian routine rather than a philosophical statement. Although it makes sense to speak of a Stevensian middle ground, it is exactly this middle ground where Stevens places the quotidian, the ordinary, and the commonplace in his philosophy. Stevens’s philosophical approach is pragmatic, and the turn to the quotidian and the ordinary is an integral feature of it, not its opposite. Stevens was well aware of the many paradoxes structuring life and structuring his poetry. In typical fashion he thus declares that we live in a world “In which nothing solid is its solid self” (Collected 301). This is the only sense of closure that Stevens’s pragmatist poetics permits.

**III. Conclusion:**

**Stevens’s Ordinary as Celebration of Collectivity and Democracy**

Stevens has been criticized for his (lack of) reaction to World War II. Indeed, Stevens was unsure how to describe the war through poetry. On the one hand, he claims that the pressure of reality is “the determining factor in the artistic character of an era” (Necessary 22). On the other hand, in a letter to Barbara Church in 1952 about his soon to be published Selected Poems he points to the fact that the collection

seemed rather slight and small to me—and unbelievably irrelevant to our actual world. It may be that all poetry has seemed like that at all times and always will. The close approach to reality has always been the supreme difficulty of any art; the communication of actuality, as [poetics?], has been not because it loses identity as the event passes. Nothing in the world is deader than yesterday’s political (or realistic) poetry. (Letters 760)

Stevens only rarely mentions politics explicitly in his poetry, despite his interest in the subject. But in contrast to some of his contemporaries’ political worldviews, Stevens’s is much less known, despite the fact that he wrote about it in letters and essays. We thus know that at least for a while he toyed with the idea of communism: “Communism is not the measure of humanity. […] It has for the present taken the
measure of an important part of humanity. With the collapse of other beliefs, this grubby faith promises a practicable earthly paradise” (Collected 730-31). Stevens regards this potentiality “in large part because Marxism’s emphasis on futurity agreed with the expectations central to his own work” (Phillips 92). However, Stevens was aware that—like religious belief—socialist thought could turn ordinary life into an ailment during which one waits for something better. For example, in the letter “To Leonard C. van Geyzel,” he points to a journal article by D. S. Savage, entitled “Socialism in Extreme,” which describes how socialism’s character is too “forward-looking or ‘progressive,’” focusing too exclusively on an “end in the future” and not on the “significance of the present” (Letters 486).

Stevens’s political outlook certainly cannot be called radical or one of direct involvement. When he mentions war at all, as he does in “Of Modern Poetry,” it is only in passing. War, for him, is not the ordinary. Nevertheless, cultural criticism is latent in his writing. Ross Posnock illuminates this kind of criticism in what he calls pragmatic modernism, seeing it in contrast to the European avant-garde: “This understanding of cultural critique forecloses a subtler, if less glamorous, alternative, one founded on the mundane fact that our experience of the social order is one of contradiction—that we are at once within and without it”25 (5). Stevens’s subtle social criticism is most obvious in his treatment of the ordinary. This first becomes apparent in his collection Owl’s Clover, his most unswerving reaction to the economic difficulties of the 1930s and the rise of European totalitarianism, displaying most directly a picture of his political worldview. As Olson notices, this is also the time that Stevens’s sense of commonplace develops more clearly (cf. Modernism, 119). Even the collection’s title points to something ordinary, using the common name for an herb and weed, and stands in the tradition of America’s most celebrated poet of democracy, Walt Whitman. As Epstein explains, Stevens asks “us to reconsider, even to reverse, conventional hierarchies of significance and value. To that end, they celebrate the seemingly unexceptional and low, simultaneously prompting us to contemplate why certain things and experiences are deemed exceptional at the expense of others” (61). Stevens continues engaging with the ordinary up to the very last poem of his Collected Poems, thereby showing how pivotal it is not only to remove the dirt from things, but also to place the ordinary—like a bird’s scrawny cry—at the center of his poetry. In this mode, like the man in “The Latest Freed Man,” everything is “more real, [...] everything bulging and blazing and big in itself” (Collected 187).

Moreover, Stevens not only connects the ordinary to a reversal of hierarchies, but also to creativity as he aims “to make poetry out of commonplaces” (Letters 311). Longenbach therefore reads Stevens’s quotidian as including a continuing provocation of imaginative desire (cf. 265), and hereby as significant for society. Phillips similarly interprets Stevens’s everyday creativity as socially relevant, arguing that it replaces “political belief as much as or more than it replaces religious faith” (91). However, I would argue that Stevens’s ordinary and common is pre-

25 Schoenbach maintains that the “dominance of the avant-garde tradition in historical, theoretical, and philosophical narratives of modernism has obscured one of pragmatism’s most characteristic and potentially useful contributions to theories of art, culture, and politics” (240).
cisely an expression of his political belief—a belief that is deeply connected to
democratic notions. In this, Stevens resembles Dewey. David Hildebrand recog-
nizes a democratizing move in Dewey’s conceptualizing of habit:

\[ \text{Genuine democracy rests upon habits of epistemic inquiry; such inquiry is effective}
\text{ when it strives for pragmatic objectivity; and pragmatic objectivity is itself sought by}
\text{habits of vigilantly starting from and testing results with ordinary or primary experi-
}\text{ence. Through this connection, primary experience underwrites democracy. (596)}^{26} \]

The same is true for Stevens. Placing the common, the ordinary, and the everyday
at the center, he re-emphasizes democracy not only as a representative institution,
but (and more importantly) in the sense of Alain Locke. Locke was one of James’s
most important black students, whose “Pluralism and Intellectual Democracy”
theorizes cultural relativism as including tolerance as an everyday habit, contrast-
ing it to a democratic liberalism in which tolerance exists primarily as a value. To
Locke and Stevens alike, democracy and tolerance have to exist as a way of social
and egalitarian living. While Stevens’s work certainly does not share the explicit
commitment to social transformation that we see in his pragmatist contempo-
raries Locke, Dewey, or Jane Addams, he nevertheless does what Judith Green’s
recent book \textit{Pragmatism and Social Hope} asks of a public philosopher: to open up
a “wider public conversation of citizen-thinkers that is reflective, reconstructive,
and deeply democratic” (17).

Furthermore, like James, Stevens senses a deep pessimism about cognitive ca-
pacities, language’s power and modes of communication as the dominant mood of
his age. Yet as his pragmatism shows, Stevens considers a more optimistic attitude
to be just as viable. Our perceptions can coincide with reality, even if we cannot
be absolutely sure of this and we only achieve provisional truths. Characterized
by trust, affection, and hope, pragmatist belief can be placed midway between a
conceited certitude and a gloomy nihilism. Stevens is as cautious about the risks
of believing too little as of believing too much.

In this context the poet also plays an important role in regard to future-orien-
tation. Implicit is the belief that in transforming the role and structure of poetry,
a transformation of social reality itself can be achieved. As Stevens puts it in the
poem “Notes,” it is possible for the “fictive hero”—by inspiring behavior in his
own image—to become “real” (\textit{Collected} 380). Thus, in Stevens’s poetics there
is an indirect commitment to social change and to the belief that social change is
possible. Being a modern pragmatist, Stevens does not have a pre-modern belief.
As the poem “Of Modern Poetry” so clearly states, the theater “was changed”
(\textit{Collected} 218). While not having a pre-modern belief, Stevens also does not par-
take in a strong skepticism or lack of belief. Belief and gaining satisfaction from
belief in the pragmatic sense is central to Stevens’s writing:

\begin{quote}
His poems resist skepticism, therefore, with a trust much like Santayana’s “animal faith”;
this force “posits existence where existence is” and thereby proves “a prophetic pread-
\end{quote}

\begin{footnotes}
26 In a recent article, Herwig Friedl introduces a pragmatist reading of the protopragmatist
political thought of Emerson and Thoreau, arguing that within their thinking democracy should
be seen “as a persistently self-corrective experimental process and never as a stable entity” (474).
27 For a discussion and genealogy of black pragmatism, see Strube.
\end{footnotes}
aptation” to the “environment” (Scepticism, 104). Santayana’s positionings and prophecies oppose a “chastity of the intellect” that is too easily satisfied with the separation of thought and experience, […]. (Phillips, 83) 28

Thus, while admitting that every proposition really is an uncertainty, a hypothesis, Stevens shares the pragmatic view that uncertainty is insufficient reason for giving up on the possibility of being right and its attendant responsibilities. How does the poet fulfill these responsibilities? By pragmatically linking abstract thinking to ordinary things, shared experiences, and everyday life. Stevens “cultivates an experience of meditation that occurs not through a retreat from the world” (Critchley 7), but by closely perceiving and aestheticizing concrete details in all their quotidian banality and beauty. It is also through the everyday that the poet acknowledges the possible and indispensable negotiation between the private and the social. Stevens dwells on language as a trustworthy medium, in the pragmatist sense of gaining and granting satisfaction when hitting the right note. The right note is not an aesthetic quality, but again, a quality connecting the individual to a collectivity. Thus, by going back to the ordinary, Stevens not only emphasizes democracy but also the importance of becoming a part of a collectivity, of an egalitarian, non-elitist collective. In “Adagia,” Stevens’s posthumously published epigrams collected in a notebook, he writes: “The interest of life is experienced by participating and by being part, not by observing nor by thinking” (175). 29 Like James, Stevens has a conception of the self that “underscores a deep sense of relationality and involvement with those around us” (Medina 125). For both, pragmatic relationalism goes beyond the dichotomy between atomism and holism, actually undercutting it by neither assigning priority to the component parts nor to the whole.

So while Stevens astutely observes ordinary things like the scrawny cry in “Not Ideas,” it is always in relation to other things (like the sun) and people (like the chorister and members of the choir). Observation is thus not for its own sake. Stevens renders the ordinary strange, looking at it anew, possibly transforming his reader’s perspective as well. He does so by noticing the ordinary, to see what is ordinary as ordinary. He recognizes the paradoxical doubleness involved in the movement when the ordinary observed this way ceases being ordinary and turns into something quite extraordinary. There is no escaping it: seeing the ordinary, noticing it as ordinary, shows it as prevalent in the weave of life and this becomes an extraordinary way of seeing.

The moment of epiphany so familiar from modernist prose fiction finds a specifically American pragmatic mode in Stevens’s poetics of sudden rightness, even if this moment is set up to be challenged by new doubt continuing the never-ending process. In this process, Stevens’s poems resist a final conclusion by offering

28 Levin similarly concludes that “Stevens’s defense of the incredible reflects his pragmatist belief that our ordinary conceptions are in fact a subtle and constantly evolving fusion of rational and imaginative elements” (169).

29 Generally speaking, ‘being part of’ is greatly important in Stevens’s poetry. Therefore, many of his poems introduce the preposition ‘of’ in their title, for instance, “Of Mere Being,” “Of the Surface of Things,” “Of Modern Poetry.”
only something “like / A new knowledge.” Yet one can conclude with Stevens’s poetics that “round and round, the merely going round, / Until merely going round is a final good” (Collected 350). Then again, this final good is just a resting place for the imagination, while it waits for the physical world to speak up and wake one up, to interfere with the habitual, creating not a new final good, but something like a new final good.

This pragmatic moment of heightened awareness celebrates the world in all its admittedly ordinary and vague aspects. However, this ordinariness can be very productive and positive, allowing an experience in and through poetry that connects the individual to a community, provides a glimpse into egalitarian thinking and democracy, and grants pleasure and satisfaction, an experience that is possible any day and everyday. As Stevens puts it in a letter, “the bread of life is better than any soufflé” (741).

Works Cited


