

What doesn't slide over Wallace Stevens' western cataract – the shape of meaning

Haj Ross
Linguistics Department
University of North Texas
haj@unt.edu

In this poem, we might wonder what cataract Stevens might have in mind.
And west of what?

The Well Dressed Man with a Beard

¹After the final no there comes a yes
²And on that yes the future world depends.
³No was the night. Yes is this present sun.
⁴If the rejected things, the things denied,
⁵Slid over the western cataract, yet one,
⁶One only, one thing that was firm, even
⁷No greater than a cricket's horn, no more
⁸than a thought to be rehearsed all day, a speech
⁹Of the self that must sustain itself on speech,
¹⁰One thing remaining, infallible, would be
¹¹Enough. Ah! *douce campagna* of that thing!
¹²Ah! *douce campagna*, honey in the heart,
¹³Green in the body, out of a petty phrase,
¹⁴Out of a thing believed, a thing affirmed:
¹⁵The form on the pillow humming while one sleeps,
¹⁶The aureole above the humming house...

¹⁷It can never be satisfied, the mind, never.

Wallace Stevens

Who, we ask further, is this well dressed man? And why do we never hear of him after the title? It would seem, because of the separation of the last line from the rest of the poem, that we must view the previous 16 lines as a kind of explication of why the mind is never satisfied. But this perspective helps us little when we hold up this lens to the poem and ask: what is this *western cataract*? Or why is the strange Franco-Italian phrase *douce campagna* (*douce* is French for “sweet”; *campagna* is an Italian word that means either “rural countryside,” or “campaign”) repeated in lines 11 and 12? And what kind of horn might it be that a cricket has?

We notice that the poem's most frequent word, *thing(s)*, occurs 7 times – surely a lot for such a colorless word! And we must notice this word – for Stevens

has put it twice on one line, four lines from the beginning of the poem, and twice on another line, four lines from the end. And the first two of these highlighted *thing(s)* are both modified by negative past participles, while the last two are modified by two positive ones, echoing the *no* and *yes* of the polarizing first line. The starkness of these first-presented oppositions – *past / future; negative / positive; that / this: dark / light* – may open a possibility that an unexpressed *eastern* opposes the enigmatic *western*. We note that six of the seven *thing(s)* form an ovoid shape around the seventh: *one thing that was firm* – surely the poem’s semantically central occurrence, an assertion that is strengthened by the fact that this centered *thing* is preceded by *one*, as is the *thing* on line 10 – where both of these occurrences are followed by modifiers which are roughly synonymous here: *that was firm* \approx *remaining, infallible*. We conclude, tentatively, then, that the spatial placement of the poem’s words may be trying to tell us something. There may be a connection between this ovoid shape and some other part of the poem’s experience. I speak here of “experience,” preferring to leave unmentioned what the poem may be meaning (which is not to say that meaning is not a part of experience). But if we were to ask a child what the meaning of going to the beach was for her, or what the rollercoaster had “meant,” we would get a strange look. Rightly so – poems, and the poets who write them, are aiming for the same category of life that we “have” (a word as flabby as “mean”) when we are in love, or when our friend dies, or we become a parent for the first time. There has been entirely too much emphasis on the meaning of literature. Yes, words do mean, but they also sound, and they also bring images sometimes, and associations, and the work of verbal art has the enviable task of getting into the air all of these balls at once, not just the first one. Let us resee meaning as but one of the team of four mustangs pulling swiftly our poetic chariot! (Sorry)

Irresistibly, then, we are led to muse on an even greater mystery: the positioning of the French adjective for “sweet” before the Italian word for “open country,” or “campaign”: *douce campagna*. This baffling phrase repeats – it slides to the left, earlier as it repeats, as we move from line 11 to line 12. There are at least six other sliding repeaters – all going to the left, which would be westward, if the top of the poem is pointing north . . .

But the *western* might refer to Western thought, the *cataract* to the busyness of mind (expressed explicitly in the last line), contrasting with the stillness of the deep ocean of the more contemplative Eastern thought. This interpretation is helped by the visual rhyme of ₁₆*aureole* with the halo of the six *thing(s)*: the circle is one of Jung’s archetypes for soul, a word which we might expect to find, given the cooccurrence of the other three of the cosmic tetrad – ₁₂*heart*, ₁₃*body*, and finally ₁₇*mind*.

There is anyway a strong fourness to the poem: the first 16 lines seem to be parsable into four quatrains, A, B, C, D. A’s four lines all have 10 syllables; B’s first and last (lines 5 and 8) have 11, while the interior lines stay at 10; C starts with a pair of 11’s and ends with a pair of 10’s; and D alternates – 11 / 10 / 11 / 10. This exhausts the ways of symmetrically pairing four elements.

The external quatrains, A and D, exhibit lines which break neatly into two parts, one of which having six syllables, the other variously four or five, as we see in (1) [the type of punctuation which occurs between the line-parts is indicated; ‘/’ indicates the absence of punctuation]:

(1)	A:	line 1 -	6 / 4	Total: 10	a
		line 2 -	4 / 6	Total: 10	a
		line 3 -	4 . 6	Total: 10	a
		line 4 -	6 , 4	Total: 10	a
	D:	line 13 -	5 , 6	Total: 11	b
		line 14 -	6 , 4	Total: 10	a
		line 15 -	6 , 5	Total: 11	b
		line 16 -	4 , 6	Total: 10	a

I see this fouring as rhyming with the fourness of heart-body-mind-soul. But we can't just let the middle two quatrains slide by without saying anything about them, no can we?

(2)	B:	line 5 -	9 , 2	Total: 11	b
		line 6 -	[3 , 5] , 2 (???)	Total: 10	a
		line 7 -	8 , 2	Total: 10	a
		line 8 -	9 , 2	Total: 11	b
	C:	line 9 -	3 / [6 / 2] ANDEQUALLY [3 / 6] / 2 Wotta line!		b
		line 10 -	[5 , 4] , 2	Total: 11	b
		line 11 -	2 . [1 ! 7!] ANDEQUALLY 2 . [1 ! 8!] Wotta line!		a/b
		line 12 -	1 ! [4 , 5.] ANDEQUALLY 1 ! [5 , 5.] Wotta lines!		b/a

And let's not forget

E.	line 17 -	[8 , 2] , 2	Total: 12 [!!]	Line King!	c? Ω??
----	-----------	-------------	----------------	------------	--------

Below, I have superimposed upon the poor poem a colored diagram of the relationships I have been speaking of.

The Well Dressed Man with a Beard

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

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

₁₄Out of a **thing** believed, a **thing** affirmed:
₁₅The form on the pillow **humming** while one sleeps,
₁₆The aureole above the **humming** house...

₁₇It can never be satisfied, the mind, never.

There is one thing in this diagram which I have not mentioned yet: the boxed central line – *Of the self that must sustain itself on speech*. Whether or not it is true that all poems are self-referential, that every poem writes about the difficulty of writing, I see this one as doing this self-reflexion big time. This poem is for me perhaps more than anything like a ticket to ride the rollercoaster of Stevens' great *kokoro / shin*, two words we can find in Japanese and Chinese, respectively, which refer to the one concept which in English we must (Westernly) hyphenate into the tetragloss heartspiritmindbody, or perhaps, pushing it, into

s b

p o

m i n d

h e a r t y

i

t

But conceptually, no four words, no matter how artfully arranged, can lead us to the Oneness of a single concept, that place in all poets from which their deepest poems emerge in a resonant wave of energy which calls forth a meeting reverberation, echo, in that same One Word, the Word of All, in each of us, in our quietest, our best dressed Self. For it just might be, might it not, that when the Poem Itself, is finally done, printed, corrected – might not that poem stand there like a poised, steady, dignified man? A man of substance, of worth, of stature.

Stevens shows us how his poems “start,” with the quickness of polarities, categories, yes/no, this/that, past/present/future, dark/light – and these polarities are engaging, alluring, they are multitudinous, there are too many of them, but the One Thing needs a firmer place to stand than concept. If a poet, the smallest creature, no greater than a cricket, from whose horn emerges a firm song, a pulsing of life, one firm thing, if any one of us can find once this firmness, a frail thought which moves to speech, speech saying what? Showing what? Showing the essence of one who can do nothing else but speak, whose very words are food, are sustenance, if a poet or any creator has found this firm “Thing” (what better word than one so empty for that which escapes all word?), then for an ecstatic moment, and epiphany, all languages merge in their uselessness, there is but joy, and too briefly, just One —

But the mind, the source of distinction, elastic and indefatigable returns, never satisfiable, there is never a final never . . .

Whether this interpretation can stand is less important than the availability of such spatial corridors for the writing of not apparently concrete poetry. It is not hard to find one-dimensional corridors (straight lines, or even curved ones) in poems in several languages. But Stevens’ poem presents the strongest evidence that I have found so far for the need of positing that corridors can be closed curves.

One more arrow, in the quivers of poets everywhere, to hit the unhittable Bull’s Eye.