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Rilke, Richter, and Wallace Stevens's "Chaos"

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This article is the first entry in a debate on "Rilke, Richter, and Wallace Stevens's 'Chaos'" (http://www.connotations.de/debate/rilke-richter-and-wallace-stevenss-chaos). If you feel inspired to write a response, please send it to editors@connotations.de.

Abstract
One of the puzzles of Wallace Stevens's "Chaos in Motion and Not in Motion" is how Ludwig Richter could unleash the articulate "brutality" of some of Stevens's "harshest lines" (Helen Vendler). Much of the poem's explosive energy can be more readily related to Rainer Maria Rilke. The poem's circumstances, images, metaphors, and (to a lesser extent) theme(s) readily link with those in Rilke's exploration of divine relations with humanity as he contemplated an aesthetic embodiment of medieval Christian faith: "L'Ange du Méridien," from his Cathedral Cycle in *Neue Gedichte/New Poems* (1907). After examining these intersections, I will link them to Surrealism, whose excesses are sourced, by Stevens, in Richter. And, at least implicitly, "something more / Than the spirit of Ludwig Richter"—the energizing source for Stevens's own surrealistic poem—is located in Rilke. This aspect, amidst a thick intertextuality, indicates that it is quite plausible, if not likely, that Stevens is responding to Rilke's poem.

Wallace Stevens, in "Chaos in Motion and Not in Motion," sources his poem's chaotic activity, and non-activity, in Ludwig Richter, a Victorian-Romantic artist/illustrator. One of the poem's enduring puzzles is how Richter could unleash the articulate "brutality" (Vendler 11, 26) of some of Stevens's "harshest lines" (77). The Richter that Stevens knew was primarily the one that Stevens knew through his reading of John

Ruskin at Harvard, fifty years before he wrote the poem.[1] Nowhere else does he address Richter, and nowhere in the poem does he target either a specific work by Richter or even one of Richter's motifs (though glancing at Nature, churches, and children).

Much of the poem's explosive energy, I will argue, can be more readily related to another German, a poet whom Stevens highly regarded, and whom he had recently read and probably was contemplating in July 1945 when he wrote the poem: Rainer Maria Rilke.[2] The poem's circumstances, images, metaphors, and (to a lesser extent) theme(s) readily link with those in Rilke's exploration of divine relations with humanity as he contemplated an aesthetic embodiment of medieval Christian faith: "L'Ange du Méridien," from his Cathedral Cycle in *Neue Gedichte/New Poems* (1907). I will conclude by speculating on the implications of this intertextuality for Stevens's poem.

Each poem begins with its speaker experiencing, primarily through sight and feeling (sensory and emotional), a physical (wind)-storm which he defines in relation to a structure and figure(s) that are central to his poem's cultural/religious significance. Rilke, with Rodin at his side, engages with a masterpiece of medieval art, Chartres Cathedral. The day after his visit to Chartres (the letter of January 26, 1906), Rilke had written to his wife of a blustery wind: "[…] As we [he and Rodin] neared the cathedral, however, a wind, like somebody very large, unexpectedly swept round the corner where the angel is and pierced us through and through, mercilessly sharp and cutting. 'Oh,' I said, 'there's a storm coming up.'" In this sunless winter weather, he and Rodin "stood like the damned in comparison with the angel, who holds out his sundial so blissfully towards the sun he always sees" (*Selected Letters* 80-81).[3]

The poem links this personified wind, which "Master" Rodin had identified as an endemic evil that bedevils cathedrals, to a "Verneiner" who disrupts the speaker's contemplating the shelter, to which the storm drives him, offered by the Angel:

> In storm, that round the strong cathedral rages
> like a denier thinking through and through,

> your tender smiling suddenly engages our hearts
> and lifts them up to you. (Rilke, trans. Leishman 159)[4]

"Verneiner"[5]—a "denier." There are a variety of deniers, but translators often configure "Verneiner" in religious terms that would make Stevens himself a "Verneiner." Krisak renders the word as "unbeliever" (41). Flemming translates it as "atheist": "Amidst the storm that round the great cathedral / rages like an atheist who thinks and thinks" (59). Wolf goes even further: the Verneiner "is the Devil," even the medieval (and Goethe's) "Devil lying in ambush to destroy the works of God and of his saints, of evil always threatening to destroy goodness, purity, and innocence" ("Thematic Analysis" 12-13); and Rilke "may have thought at that moment of the negative forces of critical, rational thought threatening the creative forces of religious feeling, the basis of the great medieval art which produced the cathedrals" (9-18).[6]

Stevens, or his speaker with Stevens at his side, experiences a violently windy storm that is personified in an antithesis of Rilke's Verneiner. His is a Victorian-Romantic artist, often of pure, simple harmonious scenes of benign Nature, solacing God, and children: "Oh, that this lashing wind was something more / Than the spirit of Ludwig Richter" (357-58). Dysfunctional implications are also expressed in relation to a significant cultural structure, a "theatre"/opera house (though "deaf-mute churches" will soon emerge in Stevens's chaos). The imagery, as in Rilke, is related as seeing and physical sensation: "The rain is pouring down. It is July. / There is lightning and the thickest thunder."[7]

Rilke, not completely unlike a Romantic-Victorian artist, links an ordered full human life to his "smiling angel, sympathetic stone" (Rilke, trans. Leishman 160; "feeling figure," Rilke, trans. Snow, 1998 ed. 51) whose "ever-filled / sundial" records, and structures, "our hours […] gliding one by one […] balanced equally, / as though all hours alike were ripe and rich" (Rilke, trans. Leishman 160); "gliding […] like a procession" (Rilke, trans. Flemming 60). Richter's "spirit" amplifies Rilke's speaker's quiet but intense yearning: the storm emerges from

Richter's "violent insistence" on "the transcendent possibilities of a divine order controlling the world," creating concord among God, nature, and humans (Beyers 203-04, 198). Rilke's besieged but calmly ordered angel-cathedral becomes Stevens's disorderly ordered theatre/opera house, as Rilke's "procession" becomes Stevens's "spectacle. Scene 10 becomes 11, / In Series X, Act IV, et cetera." The numbers can suggest that the show is nearly over (Vendler 13)—or actually over, if the "spectacle" is only three acts, as Victorian melodramas often were. A "violent insistence" on a sheltering providential order has generated its opposite: "People fall out of windows, trees tumble down, / Summer is changed to winter, the young grow old, / The air is full of children, statues, roofs." This disordering is the immediate result of a "theatre […] spinning round / Colliding with deaf-mute churches [and angels?] and optical trains." "Optical trains" (in cameras and/or telescopes), suggests that churches, even those with space-gazing angels with sundials, are blind as well as deaf unless they modernize.[8] "Optical trains" further links with "et cetera" to suggest a randomly interested but vibrant modern mob following, or attempting to follow, an individual though generic itinerary, at a theatre and/or tourist attraction.

Rilke opposes the destructive "thinking wind" (of the Verneiner) to the sheltering "feeling angel" (Wolf, "Thematic Analysis" 13). Stevens's wind appears to be generated by the too little thinking and no feeling of his conventionally pious Victorian-Romantic artist. In a witty rephrasing of the oracle's estimate of Socrates, Richter "knows he has nothing more to think about." This complements his having "desire without an object of desire," any desired object requiring a whole (the nineteenth century?) that has vanished. This chaotic dead-end emerges from Richter's being "all mind and violence and nothing felt"[9]—an extremely negative condition in a poem that emphasizes feeling. Stevens's Richter is a "turbulent Schlemihl," the latter a word describing character (a fool) and (in)competency (a practical bungling, more often attached to overly creative artists rather than to professional "bourgeois" ones). The inscrutable and aloof serenity of Rilke's stone angel is reconfigured as the "profound if comical apathy of Ludwig Richter"

whose stonily "passive indifference […] takes on the pale hue of death" (Perlis 38),[10] reflecting his indifference to, or separation from, or rejection of, his consequences for Stevens's contemporary society.

Nearly every line of Stevens's poem resonates with Rilke's. An exception is Richter's violence resulting from his having "lost the whole in which he was contained." There is a delicate link with Rilke's first line, in which the out-of-control violence is contained "in" (or "amidst") a storm. But a much stronger link is to the poem that follows "L'Ange du Méridien" in the cycle, "Die Kathedrale" / "The Cathedral": "In those small towns, where clustered round about old houses squat and jostle like a fair […] you come to realise how the cathedrals utterly outgrew their whole environment" (Rilke, trans. Leishman 160). "Umgangskreis" denotes a "circle of friends," and Edward Snow translates this more literally in his 1984 edition:

> […] in those small towns you can see
> how far the cathedrals outgrew the circle
> they were raised in. (53)[11]

"Circle" also recalls the first line of "L'Ange du Méridien": "In storm, that round [*um*] the strong cathedral rages / like a denier thinking through and through" (Rilke, trans. Leishman, 159). This savage circularity suggests Stevens's "spinning round" theatre of the "turbulent Schlemihl." Stevens's violent "spectacle" rewrites Rilke's rowdy "fair." Stevens's modernist speaker lacks authority among the results of the religious Richter's frenzy of "all mind" yet no thinking; Rilke's "massive pile of seemingly indestructible stone has an authority that is lacking in the turbulence and confusion of the surrounding marketplace, which is characterized by its variegated colorfulness and frantic confusion, and which seems to be guided by mere chance" (Ryan 138). Rilke's speaker meditates on, even admires, the order provided by a medieval cathedral. Stevens records the violent disorder of a new order that is generated by a religious culture, that is, or perhaps should be, over:

> It is a habit of mind with me to be thinking of some substitute for religion. I don't necessarily mean a substitute for the church, because no one believes

> more in the church as an institution than I do. My trouble, and the trouble of a great many people, is the loss of belief in the sort of God in Whom we were all brought up to believe. (Letter no. 396, January 9, 1940, from Stevens to Hi Simons, 348).

The intertextuality is indeed thick between these two short poems: wind storms that generate cultural statements expressed in terms of a significant structure; a disturbed, perhaps distressed, speaker (though a comic element complicates Stevens's poem); a speaker defining their dilemma in terms of refuge: Rilke recognizing, perhaps seeking, a shelter from secular modernity, Stevens expressing discontent with, if not seeking redress from, those whose insistence upon traditional sheltering infuses into modernity an unproductive cultural frenzy; primary dysfunction linked to thinking, especially in relation to feeling; pervasive sight-feel imagery; deaf-mute angels and deaf-mute churches; conflicts between chaos and order; faltering Christianity (for Stevens, implied in his subtextual advocacy of poetry as a substitute religion); and, if we include "Die Kathedrale," the consequences of a (once)-potent cultural force remaining after the whole that has generated it has morphed into something else.

How are we to assess this intertextuality? Is each poet responding to contemporary issues and/or texts in contemporary language/metaphor/imagery?[12] Or is Stevens, even unconsciously, actually responding to "L'Ange du Méridien"? One more aspect of Stevens's poem helps to confirm what the dense intertextuality suggests as plausible if not likely: Stevens is indeed responding to Rilke's poem. This aspect links Stevens's poem with Surrealism, another more immediate source for Stevens's violent lines. Orderly later nineteenth-century Romanticism, which included Richter among its exponents, has generated the fresh order/other of chaotic, dadaistic, surrealistic theatre/images/sound that had violently emerged out of the disorder created by a pursuit of order which had culminated in two world wars.[13] And here Stevens is also something of wind that lashes everything at once. Though sharing extensive ground with Dadaism/Surrealism,[14] Stevens was "deeply

ambivalent" about the Surrealists, believing them to be "limited, provincial" (MacLeod, "The Visual Arts" 193). He was alarmed (at least in 1936) by "the surrealists' reputation as 'exponents of disorder'" (MacLeod, *Wallace Stevens and Modern Art* 126). And he disliked "the din made by the surrealists and surrationalists [...] these romantic scholars" to whom Stevens opposes his own programme for the irrational (1936; "The Irrational Element in Poetry," *OP* 224).[15] Moreover, Stevens linked "Surrealist strategy" with "harmonious visions" that "easily degenerate into merely 'mystical rhetoric,' something Stevens could not abide" (MacLeod, *Wallace Stevens and Modern Art* 127, citing "The Irrational Element in Poetry," *OP* 231).

Whatever the poem's dialectic, the Surrealists, "these romantic scholars," have been defined by a bourgeois Romanticism that they noisily, provocatively assail. Richter's primary legacy, then, is one that neither Stevens nor his Richter could approve (which helps to explain how Richter can be read as a poet-figure, the "hero" of the poem [Vendler 12-13], and one not unlike Stevens).[16] After calmly presenting this "spectacle" as matter-of-fact, Stevens, with lofty disgust at the duplicity, adds: "And Ludwig Richter, turbulent Schlemihl / Has lost the whole in which he was contained." Richter's violence is as much the result as the cause of the spectacle; and the superhuman force that precedes the "spectacle" is reduced to a "Schlemihl." His "whole" over, Stevens's Richter's spirit, now far from apathetic, yet rages on, locked out of a theatre/(dis)order that he helped to create.

And "something more / Than the spirit of Ludwig Richter"? Stevens, if he wanted an energizing source, could have chosen few more brilliant, or congenial, an other than Rilke, the poet of the god-like power of the artist to create, and even to (re)create angels and cathedrals. Here was a poet who, as intensely as Stevens, had searched for "some substitute" for the religion that he had been taught as a child.[17] Whatever Rilke had found would have been of interest to Stevens, who believed he had experienced more than enough of whatever is generated by a standardized nineteenth-century Christian aesthetic that he locates in Richter, orderly disorder and monotonous motion not always in motion.

And what more precisely do we find in Rilke's poem, in regard to Christianity? Rilke, in his letter, writes of "the deep smile on his [the Angel's] gladly ministering face like a reflection of heaven." And "Rilke liked the notion of creatively gazing out into the night sky" (Schoolfield 84n). The angel then perhaps enacts the "dynamic tranquility"—in motion and not in motion—which Rilke at this time "often imagines […] as a kind of 'smiling'" (Louth 111). Whatever is hopeful in this modernist smiling, relating to Christianity, could have created chaos in motion, and not in motion, in a Stevens who was contemptuous of Christianity but who will nevertheless seek death-bed solace in Roman Catholicism, cathedrals and all and much of which Rilke despaired in Christianity.[18]

But Rilke's poem concludes with an unsettling question addressed to an unresponsive, if not deaf-mute, stone angel:

> What do you know, stone creature, of our life?
> and is your face perhaps even more blissful
> when you hold your slate into the night? (Rilke, trans. Snow, 1998 ed. 51)

The lofty stone angel of the sundial smiles even more blissfully at night, with a blank tablet, utterly inactive and oblivious to any motions, humane or celestial. His sundial's tidy, balanced, blank, and unaltering processional order becomes a violent disordering of humanity's often chaotic and vital hours—often most vital at night—such as the one rendered in Stevens's poem (an enervation that made Rilke at times "an almost rabid anti-Christian" [December 17, 1912, letter to Marie von Thurn und Taxis-Hohenlohe, *Selected Letters* 222]). Rilke, then, had written like a wind that lashes everything at once, not because he had stopped thinking but because he had continued to think of everything appropriate to his theme, reconfiguring issues of faith and doubt, even in the same poem.

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NOTES

[1]For example, Richter's illustrations of the Lord's Prayer, writes Ruskin in *The Art of England* (285), represent "all that is simplest, purest, and happiest in human life, all that is most strengthening and comforting in nature and in religion": "For the former fairy of the woods, Richter has brought to you the angel of the threshold; for the former promises of distant Paradise, he has brought you the perpetual blessing, 'God be with you': amidst all the turmoil and speeding to and fro, and wandering of the heart and eyes which perplex our paths, and betray our wills, he speaks to us in unfailing memorial of the message—'My Peace I leave with you'" (Beyers 201-02).

[2]For Stevens's high estimate of Rilke, see his October 6, 1948 letter (no. 671) to Thomas McGreevy. In July 1945 (when he wrote "Chaos"), Stevens had recently ("early 1940s") read Rilke's *Letters to a Young Poet* (McCann 57). Similarities between the poets appear to be primarily "external" (Freedman 61).

[3]Rilke's letters were published 1936-1939.

[4]Rilke's poems will be cited by page numbers. "L'Ange du Méridien" by Rainer Maria Rilke, translated by J. B. Leishman, from *Selected Works*, vol. 2, copyright ©1960 by The Hogarth Press Ltd. Reprinted by permission of New Directions Publishing Corp.

[5]Rilke does not use the word again in verse, but he does use *verneinender* in one of his most well-known poems, "Herbst" ("Autumn"). Leishman translates the word as "denying": "The leaves are falling, falling [...] they fall with a denying attitude [...] the heavy earth falls . [...] We are all falling. This hand's falling too—all have the falling sickness" but "this universal falling can't fall through" the "gently-holding hands" of "One" (Rilke, trans. Leishman 116-17).

[6]Also see Wolf's *Stone into Poetry: The Cathedral Cycle in Rainer Maria Rilke's "Neue Gedichte."*

[7]Citations of this poem refer to *Collected Poems* (*CP*) 311-12.

[8]In Beyers's words, "This disorder collides with churches unresponsive to the cries of the modern world" (203). Stevens's "necessary angel" is "of earth / Since, in my [the angel's] sight, you see the earth again" ("Angel. Surrounded by Paysans," *CP* 496-7). "Paysans" evokes the circumstances of Rilke's "Die Kathedrale."

[9]This configuration of desire/mind/thinking/violence likely has deeper implications, as in "The Men That Are Falling" (1936; *CP* 187-88), where men are brutalized for their love of earth rather than tended by the love of the heaven implied in Rilke's poem. Contemplating a head in "the catastrophic room [. . .] beyond despair," the speaker cryptically remarks, "What is it he desires? / But this he cannot know, the man that thinks."

[10]Perlis links Richter to Stevens's "Old Christian Woman's pious absolutes" (38) ("A High-Toned Old Christian Woman" *CP* 59).

[11]Snow later revised it for his 1998 edition: "[…] their circle of relations" (53).

[12]For example, Walter Benjamin's "Angel of History" (392-93) not only shares issues (a besieged angel's problematic relations to time/reality/history) and images (an angel sees, does not see, flees from and turns his back on stormy existence/history) with Rilke's poem, but he seems to respond to the poem. Louth records that Benjamin singled out "L'Ange du Méridien" when rebutting Franz Blei's negative assessment of Rilke (165-66). Benjamin's apocalyptic despair would be an interesting study in relation to Stevens's Olympian contempt for the results of history's dialectic(s).

[13]Gül Bilge Han has recently linked the destructive storm to the second world war, with Richter embodying the "backward-looking romantic who fails to respond" to "historical reality" (43-44).

[14]Similarities include a frequent "use of inconsequential detail and bizarre effect" (Willard 170, citing Cunliffe 271). And he, like the Surrealists, resisted "the opposition between imagination and reality"; viewed "aesthetic activity as equivalent to a mystical quest for the divine"; and shared "the Surrealist belief that the irrational is central to artistic creation" (MacLeod, *Wallace Stevens and Modern Art* 126-28, 134).

[15]Also see Stevens's "Materia Poetica" (1942; *Opus Posthumous* 203), a critique which appeared, like his critique in verse, in a Surrealist milieu, *View*, a Surrealist publication.

[16]Vendler (41) cites Stevens's June 23, 1948 letter (no. 656, to Wilson Taylor), in which Stevens describes himself in terms that echo his description of Richter as knowing desire with no object (*Letters* 604).

[17]Rilke's "creative reinterpretation of the Christian religion [...] hinges on a critical view of the contemporary version of Western Christianity and an emphasis on the need to find an alternative way to conceptualise the divine." His "search for an alternative turns into an endorsement of Eastern Christianity, specifically Russian Orthodoxy" (Rzepa 198). Stevens was probably unaware of the critiques of traditional Christianity in Rilke's *Christus Visionen* and "Letter from a Young Worker."

[18]A younger Stevens was attracted to angels and even possibly to cathedrals, but not as vessels of belief, as indicated by "Cathedrals Are not Built by the Sea," a poem that impressed George Santayana—his "Catholic atheist" mentor—while Stevens attended Harvard (also see stanza 29 of *The Blue Guitar*, *CP* 180-81). And he apparently approved of the dilapidation of "St. Armorer's Church From the Outside" (1952), a vivid contrast to Rilke's sad outrage at the "ruin" of Chartres (the letter of January 26, 1906, quoted above). Stevens links a stone angel, with apparatus, to "total death" in "Burghers of Petty Death": "[…] an imperium of quiet, / In which a wasted figure, with an instrument, / Propounds final blank music" (*CP* 362). Nevertheless, James Baird has linked Stevens's attraction to Roman Catholic architecture (evident in his verse architectonics) to his death-bed commitments. Tony Sharpe examines the complexities of a Stevens who, at age 37, threw his Bible into the trash but still claimed to say his prayers (to whom or what is not stated) as he urged his fiancée to join a church (278).

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