David Bohm, in *Wholeness and the Implicate Order*—his argument for viewing reality, in the light of quantum physics, as an unified whole—devotes an entire chapter to a language experiment he calls the rheomode. Employing the Greek root *rheo*, meaning “to flow,” it aims to demonstrate not only that movement remains central to his wholeness theory of reality but also that, as Bohm argues, “all movements shade into each other” (47). Consequently, the rheomode offers a systematic approach to language that grants primacy to the verb and emphasizes how the adjective and noun emanate from it. At the same time, however, this experiment seems cursory; in fact, it mostly highlights the limitations of common approaches to language. We view the world as divided, as atomized, into seemingly stable objects because our language grants primacy to the noun. While quantum theory, for Bohm, reveals the limitations of atomism, our common approaches to language bind us to atomistic worldviews. As a humanist, and non-physicist, I do not want to interrogate the veracity of Bohm’s claims about quantum theory, however. Nor do I want to treat the rheomode as a constant point of comparison for everything that follows in this paper. Instead, I want to use Bohm’s experiment with language—an experiment that seems both systematic and cursory—as an impetus to address a series of questions. First, what would a more sustained attempt at reconceiving language to foreground movement, as essential to understanding reality, entail? Second, in what context, or contexts, would such an attempt occur? And, finally, how would such an attempt challenge common conceptions of ourselves as stable human subjects?

Modernist poetics, in general, and the poetics of Wallace Stevens, in particular, seem like more sustained attempts to reconceive language along these lines. Ezra Pound’s championing of
Ernest Fenollosa’s scholarship on the ideographic nature of the Chinese character, and its potential to reshape Western poetics, also highlights the primacy of the verb and the importance of movement. In fact, Fenollosa and Pound specifically advocate for the use of strong verbs to restore some sense of vitality to language. Unsurprisingly, this occurs in the early twentieth century where modernist writers must contend with new scientific insights—the importance of the wave and wave theory, the breakdown of Newtonian physics at the quantum level—into the fundamental aspects of reality. These insights, ultimately, emphasize movement, chance, and the blurring of phenomena. Stevens, of course, operates within these discourses—he knew of Pound’s modernist poetics, he read A. N. Whitehead on modern science. This seems clear especially in “The Man with the Blue Guitar” and “The Auroras of Autumn.” Like Fenollosa and Pound before him, and Bohm after him, he values the verb, and he often employs chiasmus to articulate how movements, and related phenomena, fold, unfold, and interact with each other. In doing so, he ultimately disturbs conceptions of our own bodies. We should not regard ourselves so much as nouns but as collections of moving matter, which shade into other matter and ultimately dissolve. A poetics of the verb, of chiasmic folding and unfolding, and, ultimately, of movement destabilizes the idea of the human subject as a singular entity. We are not undisturbed observers. We are defined by and comprised of movement, best represented by verbs not nouns, and continuously interacting with the phenomena that surround us.

Before delving into the specifics of Bohm’s rheomode, it seems worthwhile to present first the underlying argument of *Wholeness and the Implicate Order* and its attention to movement. For Bohm, quantum physics requires us to reconsider atomistic worldviews: “in the domains covered by quantum theory and relativity, the notion of atomism leads to confused questions, which indicate the need for new forms of insight, as different from atomism as the latter is from theories that came before it” (11). Atomism, in other words, when it moves into the
“domains” of quantum physics, can no longer elucidate matters. Unhelpful and unactionable, it produces “confused questions.” We should not, however, retreat from these domains and rehabilitate atomism; instead, we should cast it aside and construct “new forms of insight.” Naturally, the findings of quantum physics—specifically the breakdown in the distinctions between the observer and the observed and the thought-process and its content—become the bases for constructing one of these new forms of insight:

Thus, one can no longer maintain the division between the observer and observed (which is implicit in the atomistic view that regards each of these as separate aggregates of atoms). Rather, both observer and observed are merging and interpenetrating aspects of one whole reality, which is indivisible and unanalysable. (12)

We have to deal here with the one-ness of the thinking process and its content, similar in key ways to the one-ness of observer and observed; that has been discussed in relativity theory and quantum theory. Questions of this nature cannot be met properly while we are caught up, consciously or unconsciously, in a mode of thought which attempts to analyse itself in terms of a presumed separation between the process of thinking and the content of thought that is its product. (23)

By presenting the false “division between the observer and observed,” Bohm introduces his wholeness theory of reality. Contra atomism, and its separation of observer and observed into “separate aggregates of atoms,” he argues for a theory of reality where observer and observed become “merging and interpenetrating aspects” of a unified whole. “Merging” and “interpenetrating,” here, also underscore the importance of movement to this theory more generally; aggregates of atoms are not separate and stable but part of the whole and in flux. Later, Bohm maps this argument onto his discussion of “the thinking process and its content.” We cannot, in light of quantum theory and relativity theory, divide thinking and thought, and
atomism cannot address thinking and thought because it views them as two separate aggregates. Only a wholeness theory of reality can begin to address the findings of quantum physics and, in doing so, discard the “presumed separation” of observer and observed, thinking and thought, and, ultimately, phenomena themselves.

Communicating this theory of reality, however, requires language, and common approaches to language contribute to fragmentation via the “subject-verb-object structure of sentences” (36). By separating the subject and the object with the verb, such a structure separates and stabilizes the two entities. Moreover, it will always remain antithetical to a theory of reality where all phenomena move, merge, and interpenetrate within a unified whole. We need to interrogate this common approach to language, Bohm suggests, before we can even begin to consider the details of reality as a unified whole. (“The rheomode — an Experiment with Language and Thought,” is the second chapter of *Wholeness and the Implicate Order* for a reason: it seems difficult to proceed further without exploring the limitations of verbal communication.) Therefore, he proposes an experimental structure that values the verb: “Is it not possible for the syntax and grammatical form of language to be changed so as to give a basic role to the verb rather than to the noun? ... for the verb describes action and movements” (37). Much like the earlier considerations of the false division between observer and observed, or between thinking and thought, became the bases for a new form of insight into reality, this consideration of the verb becomes the base for a new approach to language. *Wholeness and the Implicate Order* assigns the verb the “basic role” because, by describing “action and movements,” it seems consistent with Bohm’s initial “overall world view” (37).

After establishing the primacy of the verb within the rheomode, Bohm systematically demonstrates how other parts of speech emanate from it. Consider, for example, his transformation of the adjective “relevant” into the verb “re-levate”: “We then introduce the verb
‘re-levate’. This means: ‘To lift a certain content into attention again, for a particular context, as indicated by thought and language’” (44). Within the rheomode, “relevant” no longer operates as a stable entity that modifies nouns. Instead, this approach to language reveals the verbal base, “re-levate,” of this adjective, and it argues that “relevant” actually denotes the lifting of “certain content into attention” continuously. Revealing the verbal bases of words, for Bohm, seems like the operating principle of the rheomode: “We see, then, that adjectives have been built from the verbs as a root form. Nouns can also be constructed in this way, and they will not signify separate objects but, rather, continuing states of activity of the particular form indicated by the verbs. Thus, the noun ‘re-velation’ means a ‘continuing state of lifting a given content into attention’” (44–45). Neither nouns nor adjectives are stable entities here. Instead, they “have been built” from verbal “root” forms. or, put differently, they seem to emerge from verbal bases. Nouns, for example, become “continuing states” of their verbal bases: “re-levation,” just like “re-levant,” emerges from “re-levate.” Other examples—“ordinate,” “re-ordinate,” “re-ordinant,” “re-ordination”—follow the same course, but Bohm’s insistence that nouns, regardless of their specific verbal bases, emphasize “a certain aspect of movement in general” remains important. Where common approaches to language see nouns as stable entities, the rheomode sees them as continuing, but still momentary, states that emerge from verbal bases. The noun, in this context, can no longer claim the basic role in language.

Nowhere does the rheomode’s systematic nature seem clearer than in a block quotation of examples used throughout the chapter. Intended as a summary of words used up to that point, it highlights both the value assigned to the verb and the overarching logic of the rheomode itself:

Levate, re-levate, re-levant, irre-levant, levation, re-levation, irre-levation.

Vidate, re-vidate, re-vidant, irre-vidant, vidation, re-vidation, irre-vidation.
Di-vidate, re-vidate, re-vidant, irre-vidant, di-vidation, re-division, irre-division.

Ordinate, re-ordinate, re-ordinant, irre-ordinant, ordination, re-ordination, irre-ordination. (50–51)

Unsurprisingly, each line begins with a verb ("levate," "vidate," "di-vidate," and "ordinate"), unencumbered with a prefix like "re," emphasizing the pure verb’s primary place within this approach to language. Bohm follows these with verbs prepended with "re," suggesting that continuous actions—for example, "re-levate" as the "continuous raising of content to attention"—remain verbal. Adjectives appear next, assigning the adjective a secondary place within the rheomode. Nouns, meanwhile, end each line and, ultimately, are tertiary. Not only does this verb-adjective-noun structure depart from the subject-verb-object structure integral to common approaches to language, it also demotes the noun as much as possible. This block quotations, then, visualizes Bohm’s argument that, in the rheomode, everything flows from verbs and nouns are “continuing states of activity” rather than stable entities. Meanwhile, the simultaneous presence of the prefixes "re" and "irre" articulate the totality of the rheomode: continuous meaning, “re,” and the negation of continuous meaning, “irre,” share the same verbal base. Consistent and comprehensive, Bohm’s experiment with language reveals its systematic nature over the course of the chapter.

And yet, though the rheomode seems systematic, it remains cursory. Bohm himself highlights this when he wishes “to take a step in what might be an unending experimentation with language” (35). Note the scale and humility here: he proposes only “a step” and, characterizing the rheomode, argues that it only “might” have the potential to expand into a larger “experimentation with language.” Despite its verb-adjective-noun hierarchy and sense of
totality, it remains a small action in the larger field of language itself. The ellipsis that closes the chapter offers a similar impression:

More specifically, we see that the mere act of seriously considering such a new mode of language and observing how it works can help draw our attention to the way in which ordinary language structure puts strong and subtle pressures on us to hold the fragmentary worldview. Whether it would be useful to go further, however, and try to introduce the rheomode into active usage, it is not possible to say at present, though perhaps some such development may eventually be found to be helpful. (60)

Here, there exists a tension between the expansive potential of the rheomode and the cursory presentation of it in *Wholeness and the Implicate Order*. On one hand, “the mere act” of sketching out a language system that values the verb reveals “strong and subtle” ways that “ordinary language structure” reinforces the “fragmentary worldview.” On the other hand, the usefulness of pushing this approach to language beyond a cursory sketch remains unclear. Bohm seems ambivalent, in this passage, and pushes any commitment to the further “development” into the future. While the rheomode offers systematic rules for reconceiving language to foreground movement, its potential to become an “unending experimentation with language” remains, at best, an eventual development.

Published in 1980, *Wholeness and the Implicate Order* echoes many of the same concerns with reality and language that modernist poetics addressed much earlier in the twentieth century. When Pound published *The Chinese Written Character as a Medium for Poetry* in 1919, he popularized, obviously, Fenollosa’s controversial scholarship on the nature of the Chinese character, which holds that Chinese characters are, essentially, pictorial expressions of the concepts they represent. At the same time, however, he promoted, more subtly, Fenollosa’s theory of reality and his prescriptions for reconceiving language to concord with it.
For Fenollosa, reality does not consist of stable objects; instead, it consists of objects and actions that, to borrow Bohm’s phrase, interpenetrate and merge. Language, in turn, must reflect this by privileging strong, concrete verbs over weak, intransitive ones—something that Chinese poetry does well, but that English (and, more broadly, Western) translations of it do not. Similar to my discussion of Bohm, I do not want to interrogate the veracity of Fenollosa’s claims—in this case, his claims about the ideographic nature of the written Chinese character. Instead, I want to demonstrate that Fenollosa advocates a theory of reality that values movement and argues, via Chinese verse and his prescriptions for translating it, for an approach to language that values the verb in order to concord with this theory. That Pound championed this scholarship and, a decade after Fenollosa’s death, published the incomplete essay only highlights that movement and the verb were concerns of a certain strain of modernist poetics.

“My subject is poetry, not language, yet the roots of poetry are in language,” Fenollosa writes, and language, especially for those in the West, often does not concord with a theory of reality where objects and actions intermingle and remain in flux (6). To consider poetry, then, we must first stop, step back, and consider language itself. For Fenollosa, however, our common approach to language operates on unnatural principles:

A true noun, an isolated thing, does not exist in nature. Things are only the terminal points, or rather the meeting of points, of actions, of cross-sections cut through actions, of snapshots. Neither can a pure verb, an abstract motion, be possible in nature. The eye sees noun and verb as one: things in motion, motion in things … (10)

Though we divide nature into clear categories that seem “true” or “pure,” we do so erroneously. Nature does not contain “things” that, like nouns, remain stable and separate; instead, “things” emerge out of nature. Here, Fenollosa offers multiple, in his view, more accurate ways to consider them: “terminal points,” and the meetings “of points, of actions, of cross-sections cut
through actions, of snapshots.” By reconceiving “things” as discrete entities (“points”) bound by
movement (“actions”) and time (“snapshots”), he emphasizes the need to reconceive our notion
of the noun itself. Yet, Fenollosa, contra the common notion of the noun, does not gravitate to
the common notion of the verb. Rather, he argues that noun and verb remain intermingled in
nature as “things in motion, motion in things.” The chiasmus here underscores this argument:
“things” fold into “motion” only for “motion” to unfold back into “things.” Fenollosa goes even
further, however, when he claims that “valid scientific thought consists in following as closely as
may be the actual and entangled lines of forces as they pulse through things” (12). While he
again argues that objects and actions intermingle, he also grounds his argument in a rhetorical
idea of science. “Valid” science here becomes the study of his theory of reality where “lines of
forces ... pulse through things,” and this lends his subsequent discussions of language itself a
seemingly scientific basis.

If common approaches to language, with their clear but misguided notions of nouns and
verbs, do not concord with this theory of reality, then we must reconceive these approaches.
Devaluing the noun, for Fenollosa, seems like a good start. As he exclaims, “Nature herself has
no grammar. Fancy picking up a man and telling him he is a noun, a dead thing, rather than a
bundle of functions!” (16). Again, Fenollosa claims that “nature” and language do not have a
one-to-one correlation—the former has “no grammar.” At the same time, however, the noun
becomes a “dead thing” that erases the “bundle of functions” that comprise all things, including
ourselves. It becomes necessary, therefore, to turn away from the noun and towards the verb.
Even with the earlier acknowledgement that the “pure verb” does not exist in nature, Fenollosa
still claims that “the verb must be the primary fact of nature, since motion and change are all
that we can recognise in her” (19). Again, Fenollosa’s theory of reality values
movement—“motion and change”—and the verb emblematizes that.
This theory of reality, ultimately, propels Fenollosa into his discussions of Chinese verse and the proper approach for translating it vividly. If the noun represents a “dead thing,” if the verb remains “the primary fact of nature,” and if the “ideographic” Chinese character expresses a “verbal idea of action,” then we need an approach to language that values the verb (9).

Fenollosa’s scholarship on Chinese verse, in this respect, operates as a space where he can identify the weaknesses of common approaches to language and envision alternatives. Such weaknesses include the penchant to generalize, abstract, and reduce verbal actions into states of “bare existence”—in other words, “dead” nouns (15). Confronted with Chinese verse, however, Fenollosa sees an opportunity to assign language a verbal base that concords with his “motion and change” worldview. Therefore, he writes, “in translating Chinese, verse especially, we must hold as closely as possible to concrete force of the original, eschewing adjectives, nouns and intransitive forms wherever we can, and seeking instead strong and individual verbs” (15–16).

The hierarchy here seems clear: transitive verbs, “intransitive forms” of verbs, nouns, and adjectives. As The Chinese Written Character as a Medium for Poetry progresses, Fenollosa increasingly elevates the importance of the verb. Not content simply to devalue the noun and adjective, he insists that both retain some occluded, but still present, verbal base. In fact, he writes that “the adjective retains a substratum of verbal meaning” and that we ought to “bear in mind the verbal undertone of each noun” (19, 28). “Substratum” and “undertone” both suggest a verbal ground to language in this passage: before the adjective leaves its mark, the verb does; when the noun makes its sound, the verb makes a deeper, underlying one. Even prepositions and conjunctions become ostensible verbs: the former because they operate as verbs in a “generalised sense,” the latter because they “mediate actions between verbs” (20). For Fenollosa, everything returns to the verb.
Of course, Fenollosa does not write *The Written Chinese Character as a Medium for Poetry*, nor does Pound publish it, in a vacuum. Beginning in the nineteenth century, modern science destabilized the common conception of phenomena as stable entities. Physicists like James Clerk Maxwell, and others working on wave theory, emphasized the essentially vibratory nature of all phenomena. Gillian Beer has argued that such scientific arguments, by foregrounding the importance of movement in nature, helped create the conditions required for literary modernism in the early twentieth century. She writes, for example, that “wave theory, acoustics, radiation, all seemed to indicate that our senses are contracted and that we are battered by continuous events beyond their registration: sound waves, air waves, the irreversible transformations of thermodynamic energy” (296). As observers, our range of observation remains limited—we perceive phenomena like sound, air, and energy as stable entities because we cannot easily ascertain their continuous, vibratory nature through our own senses. Waves, understand in this context, assumed a new importance in what Beer describes “a manifest social complex of referents” of the nineteenth century (299). No longer did they only refer to the ocean’s movement; they came to represent “any kind of periodic disturbance in a medium or in space” as well (299). By emphasizing “periodic disturbance” through the metaphor of constantly moving, constantly changing waves, such scientific arguments also established movement as integral to understanding nature. Slowly, Beer claims, these arguments made their ways into more public discourses. In fact, she quotes Clerk Maxwell’s own wish that wave theory could intrigue the “intelligent public” and lead them “in pursuit of the arcana of science to the study of the singularities and instabilities, rather than the continuities and stabilities of things” (306). Clerk Maxwell, in other words, had no desire to sequester his scientific work. Instead, he hoped its “arcana” could shift the public’s focus from “continuities and stabilities” towards the
“singularities and instabilities” that more accurately describe nature. By the late nineteenth century, Beer claims, literature had begun to interact with such scientific arcana:

The idea of the universe as waves, of the parallels between light, heat, and sound, and the single process expressed through them, enters late-nineteenth-century writing with a fresh urgency. Flux, the vortex, the ocean, the aura, the ‘sea of forces flowing and rushing together’, as Nietzsche called it, so important in modernism, are all elements of a repertoire shifting across fields. (313)

Consider the language used in the passage: “process,” “flux,” “vortex,” “ocean,” Nietzsche’s “sea of forces flowing and rushing together,” and “shifting.” The primary metaphors of late nineteenth century writing, in Beer’s view, express continuous movement. If modern science presents nature as primarily vibratory, then it seems natural that modern writers, aware of these arguments, would seek to develop methods for conveying this.

This shift, from phenomena as stable to phenomena as vibratory, continues in the early twentieth century. Quantum physics, in fact, tends to confirm the importance of movement in understanding nature. Whitehead, in *Science and Modern World* (published in 1925), finds the vibratory essence of phenomena the most helpful way of contending with contemporaneous physics: “The path in space is such that a vibratory entity—where the entity is constituted by vibrations—must be represented by a series of detached positions in space, analogously to the automobile which is found at successive milestones nowhere in between” (36). While Whitehead seems most concerned with “the path in space” of an entity, the repetition here belies his concern with the nature of such an entity. After introducing “a vibratory entity,” he stops and emphasizes that this term is synonymous with an entity “constituted by vibrations.” Things do not merely vibrate but are vibrations. Like the scientific arguments of the nineteenth century discussed by Beer, the argument here destabilizes the notion that phenomena are stable. Later,
alluding to contemporaneous conversations in quantum physics (specifically, it seems, those related to what would become Heisenberg’s uncertainty principle which holds that we can never, fully or precisely, locate the position of an electron in space), Whitehead takes his argument further: “It seems, therefore, that the hypothesis of essentially vibratory existence is the most helpful way of explaining the paradox of discontinuous orbit” (36). To understand the questions posed by modern science, we need to commit to the “essentially vibratory existence” of phenomena. Early twentieth-century science, in this respect, confirms the nineteenth-century shift from the stable to the vibratory that Beer regards as so important to the rise of literary modernism.

The shifts in modern poetics and modern science towards movement as an organizing principle, whether in the use of the verb or in our understanding of phenomena, bring this essay both to Stevens and to the earlier discussion of Bohm. I do not simply want to compare these two writers, however. Instead, I want to use Bohm to frame Stevens, because if Bohm’s rheomode represents a cursory, later attempt to reconceive language along verbal lines in order to foreground the centrality of movement in reality, then Stevens’s poetics represents a more developed, earlier attempt to do exactly this. This attempt unfolds in two distinct ways, both on display in “The Man with the Blue Guitar.” First, Stevens values the verb, often beginning lines with verbs or carrying them across lines and couplets. In doing so, he suggests both that lines can emerge from verbs and that verbs often overflow poetic boundaries. Second, his use of chiasmus throughout the poem foregrounds the movement of words themselves. The inverted, abba structure of chiasmus how demonstrates words can, to borrow Bohm’s phrase again, “interpenetrate and merge” on the page—a moves into b, remains b for a moment, and returns as a. Read against the backdrop of Fenollosa’s essay and the findings of nineteenth- and early twentieth-century physics, Stevens’s poetics indicate an attempt to foreground the centrality of
movement in reality. I do not want to suggest that Stevens relied solely on Fenollosa and Pound or on quantum physics to develop this poetics, however. Marjorie Perloff, in fact, has highlighted the “mutual distrust” between Stevens and Pound (485). And, though Joan Richardson has explained how Stevens remained well aware of developments in quantum physics, it would be a mistake to reduce “The Man with the Blue Guitar” to his knowledge of Whitehead’s *Science and the Modern World* (Richardson). Instead, I want to argue that Stevens’s use of the verb and of chiasmus emerges from early twentieth-century discourses in both literature and science. His use of these techniques, moreover, also carry implications for how we view ourselves as human subjects. In sections two and three of “The Auroras of Autumn,” Stevens turns his poetics on the body and, thereby, demonstrates that we ought to understand ourselves as verbs, as movements, and not as nouns or stable entities.

From its opening sections, “The Man with the Blue Guitar” highlights the importance of the verb to the poem and to Stevens. Section three, for example, begins the majority of its lines with infinitive forms of verbs, suggesting that the lines themselves emerge from verbal bases:

Ah, but to play man number one,
To drive the dagger in his heart,
To lay his brain upon the board
And pick the acrid colors out,
To nail his thought across the door,
Its wings spread wide to rain and snow,
To strike his living hi and ho,
To tick it, tock it, tune it true,

To bang it from a savage blue,

Jangling the metal of the strings . . . (166)

While verbs assume prominent positions here, nouns recede or even disappear. “To drive the dagger in his heart” features only the infinitive “to drive,” the direct object “the dagger,” and the indirect object “his heart.” By removing the subject, Stevens devalues the noun and assigns the verb a greater role. This treatment continues throughout the section, in lines such as “To lay his brain upon the board” and “To nail his thought across the door.” With “To tick it, tock it, tune it true,” meanwhile, Stevens intensifies this approach in numerous ways: he presents only verbs and direct objects, he alliterates across the entire line, and each four-letter verb lends the line a staccato rhythm. And although the elliptical ending line does not feature an infinitive, it still begins with a participle. These lines, it seems, emerge from verbal bases; the infinitive forms above set them into motion. This formal approach, moreover, articulates one of the themes of “The Man with the Blue Guitar”: that “jangling the metal of the [guitar’s] strings” produces things as they are. Phenomena, in other words, emerge from vibrations and remain vibratory—discourses of modern poetics and modern science become entwined here.

Stevens also uses imperative forms of verbs to articulate his poetics and his themes elsewhere in the poem. The tenth section, for example, contains the following lines:

Raise reddest columns. Toll a bell
And clap the hollows full of tin.

Throw papers in the streets, the wills
Of the dead, majestic in their seals.
Roll a drum upon the blue guitar.

Lean from the steeple. Cry aloud ... (170)

Like the lines from the third section, quoted in the previous paragraph, these lines foreground verbs and dispense with subjects. Unlike those earlier lines, however, these seem more densely packed with verbs. “Raise reddest columns. Toll a bell” features two verbs, obviously; slightly less obviously, each verb begins a line or sentence, further suggesting how units of language can emerge from verbal bases. At the same time, however, Stevens also intensifies each verb. The alliteration in “Raise reddest” accomplishes this for “raise,” while the parallel structure of “Toll a bell”—“toll” and “bell” as two, four-letter words, beginning with consonants, followed by vowels, and ending with “ll”—accomplishes something similar for “toll.” Also, the period between these two phrases operates as a caesura and only adds to this intensification. So, not only does Stevens value these verbs, he proactively draws attention to them. These imperative forms do not disappear after this opening line, however. Instead, Stevens punctuates this passage with them: “clap,” “throw,” “roll,” “lean,” and “cry.” And, once again, he connects one of these verbs to “the blue guitar” thereby connecting his poetics to one of the thematic concerns of this work—language emanates from verbal bases, as phenomena emanate from movement.

Later sections of “The Man with the Blue Guitar” both continue and refine this use of the verb. See, for example, the following lines from section thirty-one: “The employer and employee contend, // Combat, compose their droll affair. / The bubbling sun will bubble up, // Spring sparkle and the cock-bird shriek” (182). Similar to the examples presented in the previous paragraphs, this passage positions verbs at the beginning of lines—“Combat,” “Spring”—to suggest how language often emerges from verbal bases. Also similar to the examples in the previous paragraph, this passage proactively intensifies these verbs. The caesuric comma that
follows “Combat” forces readers to pause over the word, and the alliterative “compose” that follows continues to draw attention to what precedes it. “Spring sparkle,” another alliterative phrase, produces a similar effect. This passage unfolds in some distinct ways, however. Verbal phrases break across lines and couplets, implying that verbs often overflow imposed boundaries and continue moving. “The employer and employee” do not just “contend” in one line or couplet; they also “combat” and “compose” into the next line and couplet. The “bubbling sun” will not simply “bubble up”; it will also “spring sparkle.” Meanwhile, in section thirty-two, Stevens revisits his earlier treatment of verbs as bases from which lines emerge when he writes both “Throw the lights away” and “Throw away the lights” (183). At the same time, however, he also revises his earlier treatment by inverting the order of the words that follow “Throw”—“the lights away” become “away the lights.” The same verb, and even the same words that follow it, can lead to a multiplicity of lines. While verbs retain their ability to set in motion lines, in these examples, they also demonstrate how verbs keep moving, and keep overflowing linguistic and poetic boundaries, in Stevens’s work.

Like Stevens’s use of verbs, his use of chiasmus in “The Man with the Blue Guitar” also foregrounds the importance of movement to his poetics. Chiasmus, in this context, does not operate only as grammatical figure that features “an inverted relationship between the syntactic elements of parallel phrases,” however (“Chiasmus,” Bruhn 187). As Mark Bruhn has demonstrated, it operates on much deeper levels throughout Stevens’s poetry. Quoting the Swiss critic Max Nänny, Bruhn emphasizes that “the chiastic patterning abba may occur not just on the sentence level but on all levels of a literary text” (190). With this in mind, he suggests that chiasmus operates as an “eidetic” and “visual-spatial” pattern for Stevens (187, 192). While Bruhn ultimately argues that such a “pattern of mind” dovetails with those of individuals with autism spectrum disorder (those, in other words, sensitive to phenomena and patterns that
those without this disorder rarely experience), I want to use this argument as a point of departure for examining Stevens’s poetics in light of modern poetics and modern science. If chiasmus operates on deeper levels than that of a grammatical figure, and if it represents a “visual-spatial” pattern, then it becomes a technique for foregrounding movement through the movement of words on the page. Through its abba pattern, Stevens highlights how words fold into and then unfold from other, dissimilar words on the page. A folds into b, remains b for a moment, and unfolds back into a. Such movement, ultimately, articulates some of the concerns of Fenollosa, Pound, and the proponents of modern science: that continuous movement remains a “primary fact” of nature. In chiasmus, Stevens finds not only a grammatical figure but a “visual-spatial” pattern to articulate his poetics.

Consider two examples from “The Man with the Blue Guitar,” and how Stevens transforms seemingly straightforward instances of chiasmus into visual-spatial structures. One such example occurs in the first section: “They said, ‘You have a blue guitar / You do not play things as they are.’ // The man replied, ‘Things as they are / Are changed upon the blue guitar’” (165). Here, “blue guitar” becomes the “a” component and “things as they are” the “b” component of the chiasmic figure. Bruhn might term this example “lexical,” as words alone (rather than phonemes or themes, for example) comprise both “a” and “b” components. Though this seems straightforward, Stevens divides this example across two couplets and two speakers. Not only does this decision draw attention to the presence of the grammatical figure, but it also articulates continuous movement across the visual-spatial spread of the page. “Blue guitar” can appear at the beginning of one stanza or the end of another; it can appear in one piece of dialogue, uttered by one speaker, or in another piece, uttered by another speaker. Similarly, “things as they are” can bind two couplets or two pieces of dialogue. By following Bruhn’s lead, by thinking of chiasmus in visual-spatial terms, we can see the movement of words on the page.
“Blue guitar” folds into “things as they are” only to unfold back into the “blue guitar” across poetic and dialogic units. This continuous movement across and through “a” and “b” components foregrounds the importance of movement itself in Stevens’s poetics. Indeed, this example of chiasmus even accentuates the (similar) thematic concern of these lines: that the seemingly stable (“things as they are”) remain unstable and in flux (“are changed upon my blue guitar”). Another example, from section six, accomplishes a similar feat: “... The blue guitar // Becomes the place of things as they are, / A composing of senses of the guitar” (168). Once again, “blue guitar” becomes the “a” component, while “things as they are” and “a composing of senses,” as a modifying phrase, become the “b” component (using Bruhn’s terminology, this might constitute a mixed lexical/grammatical chiasmus). Like the earlier example, this chiasmic construction binds two couplets and suggests continuous movement of components across the page. Both examples, therefore, demonstrate that chiasmus operates more as a pattern than as a grammatical figure, and that such a pattern remains integral to Stevens’s poetics.

Even Stevens’s shorter and more punctuated chiasmic constructions underscore the importance of movement to his poetics. Section eleven of “The Man with the Blue Guitar,” for example, features these lines: “Deeper within the belly’s dark / Of time, time grows upon the rock” (171). Here, the chiasmus seems grammatical, with two non-nouns as the “a” component and one repeated noun as the “b” component. While this example does not present a visual-spatial movement of components across poetic or dialogic units, it still foregrounds movement within Stevens’s poetics. More specifically, this chiasmus argues against viewing things (that is, nouns) as stable entities. By separating the “b” component, “time,” with a caesuric comma, Stevens first suggests that this noun might be more complicated than at first glance. Then, by shifting from noun to verb (the non-noun “b” component of this chiasmus), he suggests that “time” is not a stable thing but something capable of “growing upon the rock.” This
example, in other words, unfolds one of its components into a movement—Stevens combines his use of chiasmus with his use of verbs. Later, in section thirteen, the following lines present something similar: “Of blue, blue sleek with a hundred chins, / The amorist Adjective aflame . . .” (172). Again, two non-nouns, the “a” component, bookend one repeated noun, the “b” component. Again, Stevens uses a caesuric comma to separate the two instances of the noun, implying that “blue” is not a stable concept. In fact, “blue” can assume various states—it can be “sleek with a hundred chins.” While neither of these examples operate on quite the visual-spatial level as those in the preceding paragraph, they nevertheless demonstrate how chiasmus can operate on multiple levels in “The Man with the Blue Guitar” and still suggest movement. Whether through the appearance of components across couplets, lines, or other literary units, or through shorter punctuated instances that destabilize nouns, Stevens finds in chiasmus a pattern that allows him to articulate that movement remains essential to understanding nature—a theme common to both modern poetics (Fenollosa, Pound) and modern science (wave theorists, Whitehead, and many others).

Stevens, at certain points, turns his use of verbs and chiasmus on the body. In doing so, he continues to echo the themes of modern poetics and modern science, and he demonstrates how interweaving these two discourses can alter our understanding of ourselves as subjects. This seems most apparent in “The Auroras of Autumn.” I do not want to argue that this later work (published in 1950) transparently mimics Stevens’s verbal and chiasmic techniques in the earlier “The Man with the Blue Guitar” (first published in 1936). Instead, I want to suggest that Stevens remains preoccupied with the verb and with chiasmus throughout his poetry, even as this preoccupation takes different forms in different works. Verbs, in “The Auroras of Autumn,” rarely begin or overflow lines or other poetic units. Chiasmic constructions, meanwhile, seem subtler and more self-contained than in “The Man with the Blue Guitar.” Yet Stevens still relies
heavily on verbs throughout this work, and his use of chiasmus continues. (Bruhn writes, correctly I think, that “given the ‘vital’ and accordingly ‘arrogant,’ ‘fatal,’ and ‘dominant’ presence of the chiastic ‘X’ in Stevens’ poetry [CPP 257], criticism that neglects the figure inevitably does so at its own peril” [Bruhn 200].) This preoccupation, moreover, not only highlights the themes of modernist poetics and quantum physics but also turns them on the body in destabilizing ways. Sections three and four, in particular, illuminate how Stevens’s poetics foreground movement, channel the contemporaneous discourses of modern poetics and modern science, and reconceive how we view ourselves as subjects by examining the body.

“The Auroras of Autumn” begins to touch upon the body, and ultimately the human subject, through its portrait of “the mother” in section three. Here, Stevens turns from some of the ghostlier images that define the opening two sections (“the serpent” and “form gulping after formlessness,” for example) and attends to the body: “Farewell to an idea . . . The mother’s face, / The purpose of the poem, fills the room. / They are together, here, and it is warm” (413). Stevens reprises “Farewell to an idea” here from the preceding section, and, though “Farewell” remains a noun, it combines a verb and an adjective (or adverb). These lines, in other words, begin with a word that has a clear verbal base and connotes journeys or, more generally, movement. The subsequent ellipsis leads us to the mother’s “face,” presented as the “purpose of the poem.” We can read “face” as a synecdoche in this passage, as one feature that represents the mother’s whole body. More importantly, however, Stevens does not regard this face, this feature of the body, as a stable entity. Instead, he destabilizes it when he writes that “it fills the room”—it moves and is comprised of movement. Unsurprisingly, Stevens uses a short, monosyllabic, and active verb (“fills”) to accomplish this (recall “Tick it, tock it, tune it true” from “The Man with the Blue Guitar”). Because his poetics already foreground movement via the verb, they accentuate this presentation of the body as an entity defined by movement. The
following stanza, though it turns away, momentarily, from the “mother’s face,” continues along the same lines: “With none of the prescience of oncoming dreams, / It is evening. The house is evening, half dissolved. / Only the half they can never possess remains” (413). “Evening” here operates on two levels. First, and most obviously, it operates as a noun that denotes the time of day. Second, and less obviously, it operates as a participle of “to even.” (This would align with Richardson’s reading of “evening” in the title of another Stevens poem, “An Ordinary Evening in New Haven” [Richardson].) On this second, and verbal, level, “evening” suggests that neither the general “it” nor the particular “house” are stable objects. Instead, they both move and are comprised of movement. The following line confirms this sense of destabilized entities in flux. The “half dissolved” house, which “they can never possess,” implies that this once seemingly solid structure remains ghostlier than previously envisioned. By using verbs to foreground movement, then, Stevens primes his readers to understand the body as a “bundle of functions” (Fenollosa) or a series of “instabilities” (Clerk Maxwell) but not as a stable entity.

This section of “The Auroras of Autumn,” however, ultimately returns to the mother and to her body. Indeed, Stevens continues,

Still-starred. It is the mother they possess,
Who gives transparence to their present peace.
She makes that gentler that gentle can be.

And yet she too is dissolved, she is destroyed.
She gives transparence. But she has grown old.
The necklace is a carving not a kiss.

The soft hands are a motion not a touch.
The house will crumble and the books will burn. (413)

Again, Stevens grounds his presentation of the mother in verbs: she “gives transparence” and “makes that gentler that gentle can be,” and her actions and movements define her. Stevens also returns to chiasmus in these lines. The phrase “makes that gentler that gentle can be” features a mixture of, what Bruhn might call, lexical and grammatical chiasmus: the verbs “makes” and “be” become the “a” component here, while the pronoun-adverb and pronoun-adjective pair “that gentler” and “that gentle” become the “b” component. By combining these verbal phrases and this chiasmic construction, Stevens continues to demonstrate a poetics that values both techniques as means to foreground movement. This, in turn, primes Stevens’s readers to grasp the import of the following lines where “she too is dissolved, she is destroyed.” The mother remains subject to movement as much as movement defines her—she dissolves and grows old, though she continues to “give transparence.” Through the “soft hands,” meanwhile, Stevens emphasizes that the mother and her body are synonymous here. And, just as “the house will crumble and the books will burn,” the mother, as a physical being, will remain in flux, capable of dissolution or destruction.

Section four extends these explorations of the body, while demonstrating many of the same verbal and chiasmic techniques, through the foil of the father. Where the mother might seem passive, the father seems far more active, yet he also remains comprised of and subject to movement. Consider, for example, the opening stanza: “Farewell to an idea . . . The cancellings, / The negations are never final. The father sits / In space, where he sits, of bleak regard” (414). Similar to the opening stanza of the previous section, Stevens reprises “Farewell to an idea” and eventually uses a short, monosyllabic, active verb (“sits”), twice in this instance, to present “the father.” The stanzas that follow, meanwhile, adopt similar approaches:

As one that is strong in the bushes of his eyes.
He says no to no and yes to yes. He says yes
To no; and in saying yes he says farewell.

He measures the velocities of change.
He leaps from heaven to heaven more rapidly
Than bad angels leap from heaven to hell in flames.

But now he sits in quiet and green-a-day.
He assumes the great speeds of space and flutters them
From cloud to cloudless, cloudless to keen clear (413)

Though this passage first describes the father adjectivally (“strong in the bushes of the eye”), it soon shifts back to short, monosyllabic, active verbs. Indeed, he “says” numerous times over the two lines; his “yeses” and “nos” are themselves short monosyllables, further intensifying the verbs here. While Stevens might regard the father as a pastiche of action, he nevertheless defines him through verbs. One of these lines, meanwhile, contains a subtle chiasmic construction: “He says [a] no to no [b] and yes to yes [b]. He says [a] ...” The verbal and chiasmic techniques, then, that foreground movement in Stevens’s poetics present themselves here. In fact, they continue throughout these lines: the father “measures,” “leaps,” “sits” (again), “assumes,” and “flutters,” and “to [a] cloudless [b], cloudless [b] to [a]” demonstrates Stevens’s persistent use of chiasmus. And, as in the earlier presentation of the mother, these techniques suggest that the human subject remains defined by and comprised of movement.

This becomes clearer in the closing stanzas of section four, when Stevens examines the father’s physicality. Consider, for example, the following lines: “In flights of eye and ear, the highest eye, / And the lowest ear, the deep ear that discerns, / At evening, things that attend to it
until it hears” (413). We can read “eye” and “ear” synecdochically here, like the mother’s face that “fills the room,” and these parts of the father still articulate how his whole remains defined by and comprised of movement. “Flights of eye and ear,” in fact, establishes the importance of movement to both, as does “the highest eye” and “the lowest ear” which suggest that both parts of the body operate across an expansive range. Meanwhile, though, Stevens defines both eye and ear via verbs, once again underscoring their importance within his poetics: the ear “discerns” and “hears”; later, he writes that the “eye defines” (414). “At evening,” moreover, reprises the earlier play on “evening” in section three where it reads both as a noun denoting the time of day and, less obviously, as a participle of the verb “to even.” Even as Stevens uses eye and ear as synecdoches for the father, he continues to use the same verbal techniques he uses elsewhere to foreground movement in his poetics. These techniques, moreover, when turned on the body, present the subject more as a “bundle of functions” or a series of “instabilities” than as a stable entity. One stanza in this section, in particular, confirms this: “Master O master seated by the fire / And yet in space and motionless and yet / Of motion … ” (414). Though “master,” “seated,” and “motionless” might present the father as some singular entity, fixed “in space,” they become ironic descriptions for a figure “of motion.”

Reading Stevens’s verbs and chiasmic constructions alongside Bohm’s rheomode does not offer us a point of comparison as much as it offers us a point of departure. If Bohm’s experiment attempts to reconceive language to foreground movement, and if it remains both systematic and cursory, then it encourages us to explore other attempts to reconceive language to accomplish this goal. Here, Stevens, at least in “The Man with the Blue Guitar” and “The Auroras of Autumn,” enters, but he does not enter into a vacuum. Fenollosa and Pound were already exploring (maybe deliberately misreading, in Pound’s case) the Chinese written character and Chinese poetry as means towards understanding how the verb operates as “the
primary fact of nature.” Meanwhile, nineteenth-century wave theory first suggested that vibrations and instabilities best describe phenomena, and early twentieth-century quantum physics committed itself to exploring “essentially vibratory existence.” So, Stevens’s poetics and its emphasis on movement has its precursors and contemporaries in both modernist poetics and modern science. Yet, Stevens’s poetics, when turned on the body, challenges common conceptions of the human subject as a stable entity. If verbs define us, if chiasmus emphasizes continuous threads of movement and folding and unfolding of phenomena, then how do we approach ourselves as subjects? In *Modes of Thought*, Whitehead follows the path of a single molecule, as it leaves and enters the body, to redefine “our bodies” more broadly as “region[s] of the world” (30). Given the countless molecules with which we interact, and given the limitations of our senses to apprehend these entities, the idea of the body as a singular, stable entity becomes untenable. Whitehead, in this thought experiment, clarifies that and pushes us to reconsider ourselves as subjects. Stevens, via his poetics, seems to accomplish something similar. Through verbs, through chiasmus, and by implicitly channeling earlier and contemporaneous discourses in poetry and science, he examines the body and finds the human subject best described as one comprised of and subject to movement.
Works Cited


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