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## “Such beauty transforming the dark”: Wallace Stevens’s Project in Frank Ormsby’s *Fireflies*

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### Abstract

Although Frank Ormsby’s poetry is associated with what Terry Eagleton has called tropes of irony and commitment, his 2009 collection *Fireflies* inclines, rather surprisingly, towards Wallace Stevens’s idea of imagination as a force impacting reality. Reading Ormsby’s volume against a selection of poems by Stevens unravels what appears to be a consistent affinity between the author of *Harmonium* and the Ulster-born poet. This affinity manifests itself, as the present paper aims to show, in the fact that in *Fireflies*, much like in Stevens, a form of perception of reality is delineated that is never to stagnate into an achieved balance.

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Among the generation of Northern Irish poets that comprises Seamus Heaney, Michael Longley and Derek Mahon as the most representative figures, few have tapped into the divisive condition of Ulster vis a vis the Republic of Ireland with as much acumen as Frank Ormsby. Ormsby’s involvement in the unbalanced situation in the two countries during, and in the wake of, the Troubles has over the years gone from writing poetry to editing anthologies and managing the *Honest Ulsterman*, a journal of literature started by James Simmons in 1968. In his capacity as writer and editor, Ormsby has valued poetry *qua* poetry, speaking eloquently against propaganda and political agendas underlying verse. As he put it in regard to his own *A Northern Spring* (1986), a sequence of poems in its bulk harking back to World War II, “I thought of the sequence as imagining the experiences of individual soldiers – so I suppose the poems could be read as an implicit riposte to the kind of ‘Troubles’ propaganda that presented soldiers as ‘legitimate targets’” (Brown 133). In tone and content, the volume, which is entitled after the central sequence, owes much to the soldiers-poets of World War I like Wilfred Owen, Siegfried Sassoon and Edmund Blunden, whose unalloyed, truthful (Owen wrote that “all a poet can do today is warn. That is why the true poets must be truthful,” 31) diction in their descriptions of day-to-day trench warfare Ormsby seeks to

emulate; it is particularly Sassoon's scorching ironies in a poem like "They," in which the speaker reveals the spuriousness of the Bishop's call to arms by noting that the change that the soldiers underwent is only injury and death ("For George lost both his legs; and Bill's stone blind; / Poor Jim's shot through the lungs and like to die," 19), that underlie Ormsby's approach. Ormsby, however, shuns easy connections between the experience of war and that of the "Troubles," noting nonetheless that poetry is necessarily an outgrowth of its times so that "it is arguable that *any* poem by a Northern Irish poet since 1968, on whatever subject, could be termed a Troubles poem, in that it may, consciously or unconsciously, reflect the context in which it was written" (1992, xviii; original emphasis). This speaks to the position of every writer who finds himself or herself in a "state of exception" when, adopting Agamben's theorisation of the idea, law allows for its own suspension (Agamben 3–5). If the only measure of stability derives from a power external to the exercise of law, then everybody is stripped of all rights apart from their "bare life." What this means is that among the aspects of life that are taken away language is the last and final to go. A "state of exception" manifests itself, therefore, in the abandonment of language as a means of conveying the uniqueness of one's situation, as Auden suspected, "poetry makes nothing happen" except "surviv[ing] / In the valley of its making" (1991, 248).

For a poet in Northern Ireland, this "state of exception," whereby words cannot extenuate, no matter how just they are (a point that did not occur to Auden, when he found extenuating circumstances for Yeats in the Irish poet's "syntax" that he pronounced "just" 2002, 71), was the harrowing experience of the 1968–1998 period, which opened the ground for the "Northern Ireland renaissance." Ormsby is well aware that every word spoken in a "state of exception" is a word informed by the state, for it peaks against its seemingly superior authority. As a result, poetry, as Ormsby adequately observes in respect to his own verse, becomes a search for "ways of being simultaneously oblique and immediate" (Brown 133) so as not to fall for the assertiveness of propaganda, ineffectual in a "state of exception," nor to lapse into escapism. In this way, *A Northern Spring* as well as, albeit to a lesser degree, the preceding *A Store of Candles* (1977) and the following *The Ghost Train* (1995) chart a territory of obliqueness and immediacy as the poems shift between a personalised viewpoint and a more global perspective. Throughout the two volumes, Ormsby deploys time and again the impulses of irony and commitment, knowing that "the 'negativity' of an oppressed people [...] already implies a more positive style of being" thus, "since any [...] positive identity evolves *within* oppressive conditions, [...] it can never be an unambiguous political gain" (Eagleton 16, original emphasis). Given the ironic/committed politics that underpins his first three volumes, Ormsby's 2009 *Fireflies* in a significant measure breaks new ground, following the logic that he himself proposed in his Preface to *A Rage for Order: Poetry of the Northern Ireland Troubles*, an anthology he edited in 1992. He explains there the rationale behind the division of the poems

into six sections, the last of which, perhaps less predictably than the previous five, "begins with an acknowledgement of 'odi atque amo' impulses recorded in MacNeice's 'Autumn Journal XVI' (section one) and the perpetually unfinished business of learning 'what is meant by home' (Mahon): its images of healing, peace, harmony, have an appropriately vulnerable ring; potential and aspiration are constantly affirmed, their fragility constantly recognised" (1992, xix). The vulnerability-exuding "images of healing, peace, harmony" represent an unsteady step of "desperate ironies," which Derek Mahon's speaker, in a poem whose title is also the title of Ormsby's anthology, envisions the poet to proffer, "Watch[ing] as I tear down / to build up with a desperate love" (Mahon 229). But those same images that in Mahon but also in Michael Longley's "Peace," a poem that closes *A Rage for Order*, return to ideas of love and communality can be viewed as expressions of a different kind of a "rage for order," that of Wallace Stevens. We argue in the present essay that *Fireflies* constitutes an attempt to conceive a rage for order less in the Mahonian beat-down sense, "indulging / his wretched rage for order" in "a dying art" (229), and more in the Stevensian mode of exploration of the multifarious interdependences between reality and imagination.

Stevens is liable to be regarded as a poet preoccupied with epistemology (Eeckhout 262–270), ontology (Critchley 15–32) and aesthetics but not quite a war poet in the sense Sassoon and Edward Thomas were war poets (though criticism has given attention to Stevens's perception of both World Wars [see Longenbach 25–104]). Still, Stevens saw World War II as "the greatest evil" (1996, 373) and "the great disaster (1996, 381), and in 1941 testified to his feeling of horror in "A Noble Rider," writing in conclusion that "in speaking of the pressure of reality, I am thinking of life in a state of violence, not physically violent, as yet, for us in America, but physically violent for millions of our friends and for still more millions of our enemies and spiritually violent, it may be said, for everyone alive"; and so "A possible poet must be a poet capable of resisting or evading the pressure of the reality of this last degree, with the knowledge that the degree of today may become a deadlier degree tomorrow" (1951, 27). For Stevens, the Second World War offers a crisis in reality that threatens to quench any imaginary attempt at internalising and re-working it. If "the real is only the basis [...] but it is the basis" (1957, 87), as Stevens posits in one of his "Adagia," then the reality in the years 1939–1945 proved an overwhelming base, for the question arises how to find a voice to sing out such a ruthless havoc. Eventually, it was the war, though of course only as it was covered in the press, that led Stevens to a little jarring formula of poet as hero, which he used in the opening to his unmatched *Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction* (1942) and in a more sustained manner, though to less groundbreaking effect, in "Examination of the Hero in a Time of War," which ends *Parts of a World* (1942). In canto ix, the speaker extols the hero, concluding "His thoughts begotten at clear sources, / Apparently in air, fall from him / Like chantering from an abundant / Poet" (1982, 277). Even allowing for

the irony of the line break in “fall from him / Like chantering from an abundant / Poet,” the stanza suggests that there is a magnitude to the hero like there is to the poet, a dubious simile bearing in mind the time. Despite the occasionally inane suggestion, Stevens asks a crucial question in his poetry and prose of the years 1940–1942 as he wonders whether poetry can offer an imaginative restitution for this “pressure of reality.” This same question lies at the heart of the final section of Ormsby’s anthology and then re-surfaces a decade and a half later in *Fireflies*.

Even though he has dismissed Stevens as a major influence (Brown 129) and acknowledges Mahon’s poem only as a source for the title, Ormsby’s interest in particularly the early Stevens’s preoccupation with the struggle of imagination against the “pressure of reality,” not only in the form of war, is crucial throughout *Fireflies*. There are blackbirds, statues and the eponymous fireflies, but the affinity goes beyond the merely denotative, reaching what seems to be the foundations of the volume. The first poem that features fireflies is entitled after the insect; it is a hushed meditation on the enfolding “dominion” of darkness that is interspersed with sudden flourishes of the lightning bugs, those “lights [that] come and go and stay under the trees” (Ormsby 2015, 108). Initially, however, their arrival gives the speaker a start, suggesting a fire of some magnitude: “Sudden, as though a match / failed to ignite at the foot of the garden, the first squibs / trouble the eye” (Ormsby 2015, 108). The fragment sports a marked allusion to Yeats’s “In Memory of Eva Gore-Booth and Con Markievicz,” in which the speaker in a brilliantly elusive stanza anticipates a conflagration which he may or may not hanker after: “bid me strike a match / And strike another till time catch / [...] / Bid me strike a match and blow” (233–234); this apocalyptic mode is further reinforced by an ostentatious evocation of “The Second Coming,” in which “a vast image out of *Spiritus Mundi* / Troubles my sight” (187). And yet, the suggestions that the fireflies are harbingers of a looming disaster, willed or not, are instantly dissolved in a paradoxical formulation, as Ormsby’s speaker claims that the fireflies represent a “sportive, abortive, clumsy, where-are-we-now / dalliance with night, such soothing restlessness” (2015, 108). There is no mistaking the speaker’s new-found jollity at the their “soothing restlessness,” the “jauntiness in nature” that “We are loath to miss,” as the fireflies are now emblems of liveliness even if this liveliness “come[s] up from the woods to haunt us.” What the speaker lacks is just that energy so that the fireflies’ “tentative frolic” becomes an interrogatory accusation: can he accept that his loneliness may be regarded as “convivial singleness?” That “any antic spark / cruising the dark might titillate creation?” The latter question (including a use of “titillate” that represents a spark to creativity in a manner closely resembling that of Stevens’s trifling lyric “Jasmine’s Beautiful Thoughts Underneath the Willow” 1982, 79) implies that the speaker’s anxiety extends to his own creativity, a point emphasized by the echo of Ted Hughes’s early “Hawk Roosting”: “It took the whole of Creation / To produce my foot, my each feather: / Now I hold Creation in my foot” (68–69). The hawk

embodies perfection of natural creation, which a poet can never rival. Whereas Hughes finds masochistic pleasure in humbling himself before the hawk, Ormsby allows himself to doubt if the fireflies are indeed nature’s derisive laughter at the poet’s puny efforts. Nevertheless, the question is about the potency of imagination that is faced with utter blackness of the night and in this sense, Ormsby, unlike Hughes who would deliberately seek out darkness and ugliness in his Crow cycle, struggles with a thoroughly Stevensian anxiety over a paucity of imagination in an unimaginative world.

Stevens’s earliest attempt at tackling the onset of night which threatens to engulf imagination comes in his 1916 poem “Domination of Black.” The poem holds a kernel of the later meditations, particularly of “Auroras of Autumn,” but here the anxiety, which Ormsby’s poem is also fraught with, is given a compact expression. While “At night, by the fire, / The colors of the bushes / And of the fallen leaves” and “of the heavy hemlocks” (Stevens 1982, 8) all represent the overwhelming darkness that poisons the solitary speaker, “the cry of the peacocks” comes to his succour and becomes a rallying call of imagination “against the twilight,” the falling leaves and the hemlocks, which the speaker declares he “remembered” when he “was afraid.” In this context, the ending of Ormsby’s poem appears to be a similar gesture, for even when the fireflies “have left the gloom,” it is “as though [their departure] unearthed some memory of light / from its long blackout, a hospitable core / fit home for fireflies, brushed by fireflies’ wings” (2015, 108). Their “jauntiness” becomes here, like the cry of the peacocks, a ruse against the dying of imagination, a last “memory of light.” Kennedy-Andrews, resorting to Derridean parlance a little too swiftly, sees them as “creatures of *différance* and ‘otherness,’” representing “states of fiery instability” (251) and as such fireflies embody the fluctuant, unpredictable supreme fiction, “The hum of thoughts evaded in the mind” (Stevens 1982, 388). Thus the fireflies take on totemic proportions as they feature in the subsequent lyrics in the volume.

In “Two Birthday Poems,” written for Ormsby’s wife’s cousins Eoin and Conor Walden, the poet imagines a brighter future for the children, noting that “You will learn to catch fireflies” and adding: “In your cupped hands / they will beat and beat / like little hearts of darkness. / You will free them and give chase / to the one of your choice” and “follow its lead / into the whole world of fireflies” (2015, 118–119). In an inversion of Conrad’s deployment of the image, fireflies as “hearts of darkness” represent not so much the core of deepest nightmare but rather the living element at the heart of even the oiliest night, an evocation of youthful dreams in an uncertain future. In a sequence “Catching Fireflies,” they scuttle across the poet’s familiar landscapes, penetrating its various elements. What distinguishes them from the previous ones is the fact that they are identified as textual constructs in a context closely resembling that of Stevens’s “The Snow Man”: “Even in winter / I seed our patch of grass / with fireflies from the haiku poets” (Ormsby 2015, 122). If in “The Snow Man,” “a mind of winter” is

required to “behold” “The nothing that is not there and the nothing that is” (Stevens 1982, 9), then in Ormsby’s poem, the desire to maintain the imaginary perception of “the time and place” is not given up in favour of an invocation of a sphere beyond the visible. There is again an echo of Hughes, when the speaker notices “the dark stain / of crows and ravens, the patient slow hover / of the yellow-tailed hawk” (Ormsby 2015, 122). Like in “Fireflies,” the allusion to Hughes’s vision of perfection in nature which dwarfs the poet serves as polar opposite to the wintry landscape but also similarly to “Fireflies” Ormsby’s speaker finds a hopeful note between desolation and furious omnipotence: “the American firefly / gleams in our hedge / from the poems of Charles Wright.” This hopefulness returns throughout the sequence, perhaps most notably in “Firefly Hour”: “All my life / and anxious optimist, / I wait on the dark porch / for firefly hour” (2015, 123). If the haiku and the American firefly are summoned from poems, the “Celtic firefly” “exists only in disguise” and “Is even harder to track / than his elusive ancestor, / the bogland will o’ the wisp” (2015, 123). In “The Celtic Firefly,” the aura of hope is exuded not by images from poems but by other instances of light amid darkness, which grow in symbolic meaning once they are conceived of as tantamount to the lightning bug’s totemic quality. They can be the “revolving light / on the belly of the night flight / from Tokyo or JFK” or “a mountain transmitter” that “blink[s] at the top,” or finally the glow of the cigarette tip “in the dark yards behind bars / where smokers go / to endure their exile” (Ormsby 2015, 123–124). The gesture is similar here to the association of “the firefly’s quick, electric stroke” (Stevens 1982, 15) to stars which Stevens makes in stanza v of “Le Monocle de Mon Oncle,” even though Ormsby’s use of the trope far extends the scope of meanings. Ending “Catching Fireflies” on a political note by adverting to prisoners, most likely the “incendiaries” mentioned in the first poem of the sequence, the poet effectively transforms fireflies into an embodiment of hope, unstable and unpredictable but enduring nonetheless.

If fireflies explore Stevens’s struggle of imagination with the mundanity and hopelessness of the outside world, a similar role is played by the birds. In “On Not Hearing the American Nightjar,” the poet admits that “For all we knew / [the American Nightjar] had died out, its name and note preserved / as pastoral echo where the turnpike roared” (2015, 121) but it turns out that “It was common there, the voice of the place” which “we half-heard / when our thoughts were elsewhere.” In effect, “So often hushed to receive it, we tuned instead / to a great gap in nature.” The absence of the Nightjar’s song is thus in people who are unable to attend carefully enough to the song and so lose touch with the land, whose “secret” remains “withheld.” The poem, therefore, becomes a plea for greater attention and renewed focus, which could help re-constitute the link between people and nature but more importantly between people and their own ability to apprehend the world in its multifariousness. Stevens of “To the One of Fictive Music” could be a motto to Ormsby’s poem: “Unreal, give back to us what once

you gave: / The imagination that we spurned and crave” (2015, 88). This motif returns in what seems to be a most sustained exploration of Stevensian themes in “Fireflies,” “Blackbirds, North Circular Road.” The bird has become so fused with Stevens’s poetry that one can hardly be surprised that there is a distinct measure of awareness of “Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird” in Ormsby’s poem. The speaker notes that blackbirds “were here long before us” and so “seem to preside / through our first winter”: “they swivel and flit, / as though in time and space / they mapped the neighbourhood” (2015, 130). The snowy, wintry landscape in Ormsby mirrors the season in “Thirteen Ways,” in which the weather is suggestive of the barrenness that is invoked in “The Snow Man,” “Domination of Black” and indeed features consistently throughout *Harmonium*. Stevens’s speaker concludes that “It was snowing / And it was going to snow. / The blackbird sat / In the cedar-limbs” (1982, 95). The poised fixity of the ending of the poem stands in a tense relation with the recurrent emphasis on the blackbirds’ motion: “The only moving thing / Was the eye of the blackbird” in canto i, “The blackbird whirled in the autumn winds” in canto iii and “The blackbird must be flying” in canto xii. This correlates with the tension between presiding and swivelling/flitting in Ormsby, but the larger connection between the poems is to be found in the use of the blackbird as a lens through which to regard the world. For Stevens, the blackbird represents the purview of the poet’s probing eye, it “is involved / In what I know” (1982, 94). Similarly in Ormsby, the various species of blackbirds help the speaker discover his own map of the neighbourhood to which he has recently moved. In the end, a Yellow Bill’s “nonchalant, deft slalom in the snowbound tree” (2015, 130) becomes a “free gift” to the poet, thus bringing the poem into a balance of motion and beholding that is at one with the fireflies’ rapid, uncharted motions.

The various instants of birds scudding across Ormsby’s volume repeatedly serve to show the process of working beyond the mirthless frozen landscapes towards an appreciation of liveliness, as winter is compensated for by the “ancient moon of spring,” “the moon in bloom, precarious and assured” (2015, 140). In “The Whooper Swan,” the familiar season of late autumn, already anticipating the desolation of winter, plunges the place into silence, it is “a season part-voiceless until the swan’s return” (2015, 141). At a time “When dawn was a soundless birth and sunset mimed / the idea of loss,” the Whooper’s “tune [...] made somehow bearable the wind’s / insistent dismissals, its miserly null-and-void” (2015, 141). The unmistakable allusion to the “misery in the sound of the wind, / In the sound of a few leaves” (Stevens 1982, 9) amplifies the aura of fixity and deadness that surrounds the place, ready to be enervated by “the rich plaint, the vibrant ochone of the whooper swan” that results in “balance restored.” This balance may not be a fixed state of perception, as Stevens has it in *Notes toward a Supreme Fiction*, “not balances / That we achieve but balances that happen” (1982, 386). As winter and darkness descend, the poet’s task, as it is insisted in *Fireflies*, is to find



a way out, not just a solace but an enlivening. This can be accomplished solely by means of the ever-fluid, unpredictable supreme fictions. Ormsby proposes as much in an openly metapoetic “Some Older American Poets,” in which the speaker confesses:

I can't get enough of you, bright-eyed and poetry mad  
 in the fields next to cemetery, where you drop to your knees  
 before the first flower in the world, where you lift your heads  
 to that bare cry among the brambles, the original bird. (2015, 120)

Praising American poets in this Adamic vein, the poet offers ample endorsement of his own goal in the entire collection. What they offer is an example of attunement to the balances of nature, which lie dormant without the activating force of imagination. In this sense, the American poets may include Stevens, for whom, at least in *Harmonium* and *Ideas of Order*, the external world offers richness that only a potent imagination can utilise and appreciate.

Throughout the volume, the search for balances, moments of marvel and hope is set against recurrent evocations of winter, darkness and lack of life. It is in fireflies but also in various other birds that Ormsby looks for a way of overcoming the deadness. This central tension is transposed onto the struggle between fragile imagination and a recalcitrant world in that the landscapes that Ormsby explores are repeatedly associated with monochromatic colours and absence of sounds, a trope that reworks Stevens's crucial conflict. This, however, is not just a matter of intertextual connection but of a deeper merger of designs. For Stevens, the conflict between the world and imagination is, in fact, a struggle against the reification of language, as a result all his peacocks, blackbirds and snow men are not metaphors of something in the world but textual constructs. They represent a certain modification of the language, which is intended to express a form of perception of reality that would never stagnate into an achieved balance. Instead, what Stevens seeks is a perpetual transformation of language, “The poem of the mind in the act of finding / What will suffice” (1982, 239), with reality being the principle of winter and literalisation. It is in this capacity that Ormsby's *Fireflies* is a Stevensian volume. In the conclusion of “The Kensico Dam,” a poem written during Ormsby's visit to an appropriately named Valhalla in the US, the speaker offers what may be a motto for Stevens as much as for *Fireflies*: as “The dam recedes / into our rear-view mirror,” the poet sees it

Waiting to be re-formed  
 in dream and daydream, already it locates  
 what is richly unfinished, already its shade extends  
 to the day's next arrivals stepping from cars:  
 couples and children, under a cloudless sky. (2015, 111)

Stevens finishes his “Idea of Order at Key West” by asserting “The maker’s rage to order words of the sea” but also “of ourselves and of our origins, / In ghostlier demarcations, keener sounds” (1982, 130). What he is seeking are greater subtleties, as the comparison indicates, and in that sense, the “rage for order” must never cease. These ghostlier demarcations, for Ormsby, lie in the familiar world: the North Circular Road, Belfast and Valhalla, NY, all of which must stay “richly unfinished” in the poet’s eye.

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