My testimony in this chapter is more American than Transatlantic. I first began to read Wallace Stevens seriously when I was a graduate student at Harvard from 1948 to 1952. I bought, and still have, the separate volumes of his poems, available one by one before the _Collected Poems_ appeared. Though I did not read William Carlos Williams seriously until much later, when I was writing _Poets of Reality_, I heard both Stevens and Williams give readings at Harvard around 1950. I remember the powerful ‘Blouagh!’ Williams enunciated when he read ‘The Sea Elephant’. I remember also seeing him after the reading getting into a shabby car. This was, I supposed, the sort of car a family doctor in Rutherford, New Jersey, was likely to drive. Stevens I remember as austere and distant, ‘tall and of a port in air’, like that jar in Tennessee (CPP 61). Richard Wilbur, who seemed fragile and slight beside Stevens, introduced him. Though I suppose Stevens was not really wearing high-button shoes and a celluloid collar, he might as well have been. He looked like an overweight insurance executive, which he was. I remember he read ‘Credences of Summer’ (‘Now in midsummer come and all fools slaughtered’ [CPP 322]) and ‘Large Red Man Reading’ (‘he sat there reading, from out of the purple tabulae, / The outlines of being and its expressings, the syllables of its law: / Poesis, poesis, the literal characters, the vatic lines’ [CPP 365]). As the hour went on, Stevens got more and more carried away by his own poetry. His voice got softer and softer, more and more inward, until only those in the first two or three rows, where I happened to be, could hear him. People in the back started leaving, but he paid no attention. Nor did he pay any attention to the loud ambulances and fire engines going by on Mount Auburn Street behind him, bells clanging and sirens wailing. He went right on reading, more and more quietly, absorbed in the sound of his own words. That last phrase echoes the title of the first essay in Stevens’ _The Necessary Angel_: ‘The Noble Rider and the Sound of Words’.

My effort, in all the earnest reading I did at that time of Stevens’ work, was to make sense of it, to figure out what it meant, and why in the world he wrote in the way he did. That is, I suppose, what graduate students in English
were expected to do in those long ago days. My reading of Stevens, like my reading of philosophy and literary theory at that time, was, however, on the side, secret, private and somewhat furtive. I was supposed to be, and was, more or less, a Victorianist writing a dissertation on Dickens. A good bit of one’s most important reading, mine at least, is likely to be like that: amateur and unprofessional, even a little guilty. I should nevertheless have perhaps paid more attention to that phrase: ‘the sound of words’.

Stevens does not say the meaning of words, or even the force of words, is central in poetry. He says the sound of words, as we say ‘the sound of music’. It was only much later, and gradually, that I began to cherish the sound of Stevens’ poetry for its own sake and to murmur over to myself like incantations certain lines where the sound of the words exceeds, or almost exceeds, their sense. ‘Poetry’, says Stevens in one of the ‘Adagia’, ‘must resist the intelligence almost successfully’ (CPP 910). ‘In Hydaspia, by Howzen / Lived a lady, Lady Lowzen, / For whom what is was other things’ (CPP 243). ‘Chieftain Iffucan of Azcan in caftan / Of tan with henna hackles, halt!’ (CPP 60). ‘Poet, be seated at the piano. / Play the present, its hoo-hoo-hoo, / Its shoo-shoo-shoo, its ric-a-nic, / Its envious cachinnation’ (CPP 107). ‘Under the eglantine / The fretful concubine / Said, “Phooey! Phoo!” / She whispered, “Pfui!” // The demi-monde / On the mezzanine / Said, “Phooey!” too, / And a “Hey-de-i-do!”’ (CPP 191). ‘What more is there to love than I have loved? / And if there be nothing more, O bright, O bright, / The chick, the chidder-barn and grassy chives // And great moon, cricket- impresario, / And, hoy, the impopulous purple-plated past, / Hoy, hoy, the blue bulls kneeling down to rest. // Chome! clicks the clock, if there be nothing more’ (CPP 234). Such lines not only resist the intelligence, they also resist commentary – almost successfully. Full commentary would be possible, but lengthy and tedious, like trying to explain a joke.

As opposed to his friend William Carlos Williams, who was a resolutely American poet, Wallace Stevens was more cosmopolitan. On the one hand, many of Stevens’ most beautiful poems are ‘in the American grain’, at least in the sense that their mise en scène is American or that they lovingly employ American place-names, often Native American ones, as in ‘The wood-doves are singing along the Perkiomen’ (‘Thinking of a Relation Between the Images of Metaphors’ [CPP 310]), or ‘Damariscotta da da doo’ (‘Variations on a Summer Day’ [CPP 215]), or the ‘thin men of Haddam’ (‘Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird’ [CPP 75]), or ‘thought-like Monadnocks’ (‘This Solitude of Cataracts’ [CPP 366]), or ‘The River of Rivers in Connecticut’. The Perkiomen is the name of a small river in the Pennsylvania Dutch country where Stevens was born. ‘Dutch’ of course was American for ‘Deutsch’, so often today this group is called, more properly, ‘Pennsylvania German’. Damariscotta is the name of a small town on the coast of Maine. Haddam is a village on the Connecticut River. The last item in my list is the title of the next to last poem in Stevens’ Collected Poems. Haddam is mentioned in that poem too. This