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Introduction: The Lights of Norway and All That

Bart Eeckhout and Edward Ragg

A long time you have been making the trip
From Havre to Hartford, Master Soleil,
Bringing the lights of Norway and all that.

‘Of Hartford in a Purple Light’

To situate the quintessential Modernist poet Wallace Stevens ‘across the Atlantic’, where the lights of Norway mysteriously travel, is to place him in a realm that is at once dynamic and open-ended. Our primary aim in putting together this book is to reconsider Stevens’ development as he responds to intermingling influences from two different continents. In particular, we want to explore the nature of a poetics that may be called ‘Transatlantic’ because it is neither precisely American nor European, but involves a larger complex of literary, artistic and cultural qualities. Indeed, Stevens’ poetry, as we see it, threatens to disappear from view when discussed in simple oppositional terms of its ‘American’ qualities or its assimilations and transformations of ‘European’ subject-matter. In the language of Stevens’ own lecture ‘The Irrational Element in Poetry’, such amorphous notions as the ‘European’ and the ‘American’ are ultimately ‘too general to be serviceable’ (CPP 781). If either of these terms is to be rehabilitated in Stevens criticism, then it had better be in the reconstructed sense in which millions of Americans have implicitly defined themselves as ‘Transatlantic’: through preserving immigrant narratives, tracing genealogy (as Stevens did with his Dutch and German ancestry) or jostling different federal and state identities which seek to adapt European inheritances on American soil.

When we present ‘Wallace Stevens across the Atlantic’, then (without a qualifying subtitle), we intend to honour the dynamic travel in both directions implied in our title. To our more metaphoric purpose here the Atlantic Ocean serves as a magnetic, mutually enriching and defining horizon for the cultures that have developed on either side of its expanse. It is meant to provide perspective. Moreover, oceans actively invite crossing: a notion which we would like to deploy in its full complexity. As with the ‘Twenty men crossing
Wallace Stevens across the Atlantic

a bridge / Into a village’ in Stevens’ early poem ‘Metaphors of a Magnifico’ (CPP 15–16), we should understand the word not only in its literal, physical sense but as a reference also to language’s capacities to trope and translate (see Cook 177 and Maeder 49–51). Something similar applies to the word ‘Atlantic’, which is ultimately no more than a conventional name for a reality in permanent flux. Any attempt at linguistically demarcating so fluid an entity inevitably engages in what Stevens called, in a poem that will be among the most frequently cited in this book, ‘Description Without Place’. If many another American author could be described as ‘Transatlantic’ in the sense suggested, Stevens is nevertheless a special case; and not merely because this poet did not travel abroad extensively (visiting only Canada, Cuba and parts of the Gulf of Mexico). Far more significant is the extent to which Stevens made a point of not travelling. In some sense, his was the ‘stay-at-home’ mentality of Henry David Thoreau – albeit with greater ambivalence toward the ‘transcendental’ and with a modern stance obviously shaped by the international politics of his particular epoch. Yet Stevens was also uncomfortable following Thoreau, Emerson, Whitman and, in his own era, William Carlos Williams in writing in a self-consciously American grain. His work is hardly ever nativist in the sense Walter Benn Michaels has explored in his influential study Our America: Nativism, Modernism, and Pluralism. Paradoxically, this remains the case even with the late poetry and prose which appeals more overtly to place, particularly to Connecticut.

But neither was Stevens an American writer who happened to mine European art and literature and then turn his findings into something else again – something ‘homegrown’. With him the situation was more ‘complex’, in the etymological sense of that word: more entwined and folded over. He was a poet who constantly explored American and European artistic productions in order to find a voice which would be intrinsically satisfying outside and beyond immediate national contexts. Modulating upon his famous aphorism that ‘French and English constitute a single language’ (CPP 914), we might say that to Stevens Europe and America constituted a single culture, at least from the imaginative vantage of his home in Hartford, Connecticut.

We might also remind ourselves of the trouble Stevens had in characterizing his American experience. His natural points of artistic reference were largely French as were the majority of the paintings he bought. His book collecting and correspondence took him considerably outside an American context as well; and his literary influences were an eclectic mix drawing on French Symbolism, British Romanticism and the American Renaissance. Time and again, the correspondence reveals Stevens both constructing and failing to realize what it means to be ‘American’ as well as what it might mean to be ‘French’, ‘Irish’ or ‘Cuban’. As he wrote to his epistolary poet-friend in Ireland, Thomas McGreevy: ‘One is so homeless over here ... and something really American is like meeting a beautiful cousin or ... even one’s mother.
for the first time’ (L 626). To a poet so concerned with place and genealogy, this searching after a fleeting, provisional sense of identity – as well as the idea of living in a creative atmosphere composed out of words – became a persistent preoccupation.

The effect of this preoccupation on his poetic output is plain for all to see. Any reader coming to Stevens’ work for the first time – without any advance knowledge of the poet’s life – might suppose him to have been an experienced international traveller: one of those American fin-de-siècle or Modernist émigrés who spent considerable time in Paris and elsewhere on the European continent, like Henry James, Edith Wharton, Ernest Hemingway, F. Scott Fitzgerald, T. S. Eliot, Ezra Pound, Gertrude Stein or Hart Crane. Stevens’ poetry is chock-full of references to European places. By name, it takes us on a trip through a range of European countries: England and France, clearly, but also Ireland, Switzerland, Holland, Germany, Sweden, Norway, Denmark, Italy, Spain, Poland and Bulgaria. Even Belgian grapes are mentioned – as a form of ‘fat pastiche’ (CPP 124). Within these countries, moreover, countless names of cities are dropped: not merely Paris, but other French places such as Fontainebleau, Aix, Arras, Le Havre, Avignon or Bordeaux. In Switzerland, cities like Geneva, Basel and Zurich are named. On the Italian peninsula we find Florence, Venice, Rome, Bergamo and Naples; in Spain, Madrid, Seville and Segovia; and there are further references to Stockholm, Hamburg, Athens, Vienna, Salzburg and Leyden (but not to Amsterdam, and, in Britain, little outside London: just ‘the mountainous coiffures of Bath’ [CPP 11] and some ‘Glasgow-frost’ [CPP 162]). In the same seemingly slapdash manner, Stevens’ poetry takes us along European rivers like the Danube, the Rhone, the Moldau or the Tiber. And it betrays a mild obsession with the Alps.

Ever since the 1910s, when Stevens began publishing and being reviewed in the little magazines, critical responses to his work have naturally attended to the poet’s transformation of European influences, particularly French Symbolism. But for the Stevens specialist there are interesting lessons to be drawn from scanning the poetry specifically for such European place-names. There is the fact, for example, that the regular appearance of these names largely post-dates the poet’s first collection, Harmonium (1923). It becomes a staple of his writings only by the 1930s, at a time when Stevens was finally making enough money as an insurance lawyer to be able to cross the Atlantic for himself; only to realize that, in all likelihood, he would never do so. That realization, and its consequences, is of greater interest than anything else for this book. It means that what we have inherited, in the case of Wallace Stevens, is the singularly powerful literary heritage of a major Modernist poet who spent a large share of his imaginative life ‘in’ or ‘with’ places he had never been to, and ‘in’ or ‘with’ cultures he constructed entirely out of words and images (mostly from paintings and postcards).

Stevens’ well-nigh obsessive interest in the imaginative construction of places lies behind several of the analyses in this book. Any Stevens lover
knows this interest to be more than a personal quirk: it allows the poet – in the indirect, self-reflective manner he favoured – to address wider notions of identity as they impact on the personal and cultural existence of every individual. As John Serio explains in his introduction to a special issue of The Wallace Stevens Journal devoted to ‘The Poetics of Place’: with Stevens any composition of place becomes ‘the essential exercise in a composition of self’ (4). To Serio the environmental determinism that limits some of the poetic ideas on place pursued in Harmonium is superseded from the mid-thirties by a new awareness on the poet’s part: ‘By seeing the relationship between people and place as a distinctively poetic process – “Poetry is a response to the daily necessity of getting the world right” [CPP 913] – he modifies his ideas concerning the relationship with one’s surroundings by translating them into an active, aesthetic mode. Recognizing that “the world about us would be desolate except for the world within us” [CPP 747], he expresses the central importance of the imagination’s non-geography to the world’s geography’ (ibid.). It is precisely this dynamic interaction between the imagination’s non-geography and Transatlantic ingredients from the world’s geography which the current volume sets out to explore at different levels – some biographical and material, others more abstract, indirect or allegorical.

To address a sufficiently diverse range of perspectives in situating Stevens across the Atlantic, we have chosen to divide this book – in somewhat Stevensian fashion – into three interlinking sections. The first part, ‘Descriptions without Place: Ideas of Europe in Stevens’, looks closely at the different conceptions of Europe (and, in a continually defining dialectic, of America) which we find in Stevens’ published writings. Inspired by the tactic of Stevens’ own 1945 poem ‘Description Without Place’, these chapters reflect directly on how Stevens created imaginative projections of the European continent as part of his development as a literary artist. The second, largest section of the volume, ‘Beyond Staten Island: Stevens in Transatlantic Conversation’, takes its lead from the poet’s own wistful comment that he had ‘never been closer to Europe than Staten Island’ (qtd in Brazeau 201). The types of Transatlantic dialogue covered here are subdivided into philosophical and artistic conversations, bringing together interesting new examples of the kind of comparative studies that are such a powerful staple of Stevens criticism. Here Stevens’ poetics and aesthetics are considered as part of an ongoing cross-continental conversation with specific writers and artists. These virtual interlocutors may be philosophers and theorists, visual artists or poets, figures from religious history, or a combination of such. They may serve as identifiable, likely sources of inspiration or else reveal notable affinities that manage to shed new light on the poet’s work.

The third and final part (which could be expanded into a study in its own right) concerns Stevens’ reception in various European contexts. The poet’s own observation at the end of ‘Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction’ that ‘They will get it straight one day at the Sorbonne’ (CPP 351) lends a fittingly ironic
title to this section, which includes neither the reflections of a Sorbonne professor nor any attempt at getting Stevens unappealingly straight. Our focus, rather, is on the instructive cases of two very different British poets (the first establishing a playful and eccentric lineage that died with him, the second doing his best to downplay and repress Stevens’ influence) as well as one living Portuguese poet for whom ‘affinity’ is a more apposite term than ‘influence’; and, finally, the more palpable afterlife of Stevens' translation into Italian and French.

* * *

Our first chapter, George Lensing’s ‘“The Switzerland of the Mind”: Stevens’ Invention of Europe’, opens the volume beautifully by identifying many of the issues affecting the present work. Capitalizing on Lensing’s long-standing experience as a reader of Stevens – particularly his archival work on the poet’s correspondence – Chapter 1 explores Stevens’ changing attitudes to the European continent as a poetic and actual notion with reference to the letters, the poet’s working notebooks and significant poems such as ‘The Irish Cliffs of Moher’, ‘The Novel’ and ‘A Dish of Peaches in Russia’. Lensing establishes how Stevens aimed to ‘bring Europe to himself in intimately personal ways and in ways that would have important consequences for his poetry’.

J. Hillis Miller’s ‘Stevens in Connecticut (and Denmark)’ also witnesses a lifelong reader of Stevens reconsidering his sense of the poet’s overall achievement. Miller blends compelling personal testimonial with incisive close-reading and instructive comparative allusions (to Husserl, Derrida, Plato and Blanchot, among others). Chapter 2 portrays Stevens as a ‘hybrid poet, mixing the indigenous with American culture’s essential Transatlantic legacy’. Contrasting Stevens with the more nativist Williams, Miller analyses Stevens’ treatment of American place-names; focusing, in particular, on both a passage from ‘The Auroras of Autumn’ and the rich late poem ‘The River of Rivers in Connecticut’. The chapter reveals a Stevens who is both indigene stay-at-home and cosmopolitan in his outlook and tastes. Playfully, Miller argues of ‘The River of Rivers in Connecticut’: ‘This wonderful poem is scarcely intelligible to someone not from Connecticut … [But it is also] scarcely intelligible to a reader who is not able to place it in the context of European ideas about “the wholly other”, which it obliquely dramatizes’.

In Chapter 3, ‘Stevens’ Europe: Delicate Clinkings and Total Grandeur’, Robert Rehder artfully explains how for Stevens ‘European poetry was his natural heritage as an American and a poet’ but that with ‘Europe as a place’, the poet’s relationship was necessarily imaginative. Rehder consolidates Lensing’s and Miller’s reflections in extended readings of both ‘Description Without Place’ and the masterful poem Stevens addressed to George Santayana, ‘To an Old Philosopher in Rome’. Significantly, both Santayana and Rome are transfigured in the architectural imagery of the poem through
which Rehder deftly explores Stevens’ complex imaginative dialogue with different places, philosophies and descriptive strategies. Indeed, Part I of the book as a whole represents the reclusive poet who spent most of his productive writing life in the small city of Hartford as arguably one of the first glocalists of the imagination: a writer who constantly read the global through the local and vice versa, convinced that these two levels are indissociable, only making sense in relation to each other.

Part II, ‘Beyond Staten Island: Stevens in Transatlantic Conversation’, finds Charles Altieri asking what can still be learnt from exploring the complex relationships within Stevens’ work between ideas and words, philosophical reflections and poetic statement. Taking its lead from Edmund Husserl’s Crisis in the European Sciences, Chapter 4 argues that Stevens’ mature poetry involves a meditation on the ‘transcendentalist ego’. More especially, Altieri draws on his own extensive experience in reading Stevens to argue that ‘Husserl’s capacity to blend the transcendental and the elemental ... helps us see what is philosophically dynamic and engaging about Stevens’ sense of the distinctive tasks his poetry had to perform’. The sense of that task is emphasized in Altieri’s analysis by his disagreement with aspects of philosopher Simon Critchley’s Things Merely Are: Philosophy in the Poetry of Wallace Stevens (2005). Altieri finds Critchley’s ‘model’ of reading to be ‘neither sufficiently rich in its affirmations nor sufficiently dark in its sense of tragedy to be adequate to late Stevens’. His main concern is that ‘Critchley emphasizes the situations the late poems face rather than the situatings the poems afford if we read them as exemplary acts of mind’.

If Stevens criticism has already harnessed phenomenology in a variety of ways, and if Critchley’s study has proved both insightful and contentious, Krzysztof Ziarek adds to Altieri’s Husserlian account by revisiting the shadow of Martin Heidegger in the poet’s late work. Significantly, he also takes issue with the Stevens proposed by Critchley. In Chapter 5, ‘“Without human meaning”: Stevens, Heidegger and the Foreignness of Poetry’, Ziarek provides a new reading of the late poem ‘Of Mere Being’, glossing both Heideggerian and Stevensian concerns about the limits and extent of the human. The chapter subtly argues: ‘The reality of “mere being” is indeed without human purpose and human meaning; and it becomes disclosed as such through a poietic letting-be, a release from power performed by language’. As Ziarek continues: ‘For what Critchley calls the “simple “there is” of things” ... is not there of its own, as it were, prior to the entrance of the imagination: it is in fact the very “minimal” transformation of the imagination that brings forth the “there is” of things.’ To this extent, Altieri’s and Ziarek’s chapters may be read as significant companion pieces.

Justin Quinn’s ‘Early Christianity in Late Stevens’ sets a different, if not unrelated tone, to the Stevens who can be read through phenomenology. Taking its lead from the presence of St Jerome in ‘Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction’, Quinn reminds us in Chapter 6 that Stevens’ relationship with
Christianity in his later poetry (especially *Transport to Summer* and *The Auroras of Autumn*) is signally different from the attitudes to Christian faith encountered in the early work. Dispensing with the Nietzschean gaiety and poetic ‘mockery’ of Christianity in *Harmonium*, the later poetry makes more robust references to the influence of Christian doctrine on Western literature. Contrasting Stevens with Yeats, Quinn finds the American poet meditating on Emperor Constantine in ‘An Ordinary Evening in New Haven’ and argues that his preoccupation with ‘saints and sanctity’ enables Stevens to define himself as ‘post-Christian’. Rather than distance himself in the very act of addressing what the early *Harmonium* poem calls ‘A High-Toned Old Christian Woman’, Quinn claims that Stevens explores Christian icons and iconography in greater depth precisely to characterize his own post-Christian poetic experience.

Josh Cohen in Chapter 7, ‘“The strange unlike”: Stevens’ Poetics of Resemblance’, returns Stevens to idealist and phenomenological speculation, and simultaneously looks forward to the more literary conversations in the next section. His nuanced argument enlarges discussion by considering Schlegel, Blanchot, Mallarmé and Freud in conjunction with the poet. Specifically, Cohen explores the philosophical meanings and resonances across the Stevens corpus of what ‘The Comedian as the Letter C’ calls ‘the essential prose’ (*CPP* 29). Drawing on ‘Nuances of a Theme by Williams’ and extending its reading throughout the corpus to ‘Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction’ and beyond, the chapter argues that traditional concepts of ‘poetry’ and ‘prose’ are insufficient to account for Stevens’ preoccupation with the relations between literary language and an idealist ‘thing’. As Cohen argues, ‘Paradoxically, prose can manifest itself only in the guise of a poem’. Moreover, in Stevens, ‘the essential prose of “English” lives in and through the imaginative alienations of “French”’.

The second half of Part II, which is devoted to more artistic conversations, opens with Chapter 8, David Haglund’s informative ‘Stevens, Duchamp and the American “ism”, 1915–1919’. Following through on Cohen, Haglund explores Stevens’ concept of his own poetic career as represented in ‘The Comedian as the Letter C’. Contrasting the gestures made by Stevens and Duchamp toward an ‘American art’ or ‘American identity’, the chapter discusses Stevens’ playful relationship with various ‘isms’ and the manifesto-aesthetics of early Modernism. For Haglund, Stevens is sceptical about an ‘Americanist’ literature and his poetic project is clearly differentiated from that of William Carlos Williams. Haglund also reads Stevens’ ‘Primordia’ and ‘Pecksniffiana’ sequences, focusing especially on ‘Anecdote of the Jar’, as instructive instances of the poet’s battle with American soil and an emergent poetic.

Edward Ragg turns to the middle and mature phases of Stevens’ career in Chapter 9, ‘Picasso, Cézanne and Stevens’ Abstract Engagements’. He sets out to demonstrate how the poet overcame his 1930s reservations about
abstraction and argues that the examples of Picasso and Cézanne galvanized Stevens’ acceptance of the advantages of an abstract aesthetic. Focusing on significant moments in ‘The Man with the Blue Guitar’ – a poem Ragg suggests ‘critiques the very abstraction it also embraces’ – the essay analyses Picasso’s effect on that poem as well as the presence of Cézanne in ‘Prelude to Objects’. The essay presents a Stevens who unashamedly turns to an abstract poetic because of its restorative human powers rather than marking a retreat into a world of the imagination. Indeed, the paradox of an abstract engagement informs the analysis of Stevens’ Transatlantic gestures throughout his career.

The chapters by Haglund and Ragg, which reconsider Stevens’ dialogue with European visual artists, are followed in turn by a chapter revisiting connections with a specific European writer. Lisa Goldfarb’s ‘Music and the Vocal Poetics of Stevens and Valéry’ offers a discussion of the still underappreciated relationship between Stevens and his French contemporary Paul Valéry. Goldfarb’s aim in Chapter 10 is to bring the vocal poetics of Valéry to a reading of Stevens’ work. After presenting the contours of Valéry’s vocal poetics, drawing from his many essays and voluminous notebooks, Goldfarb turns to Valéryan echoes in Stevens’ prose, to highlight how his essays, letters and ‘Adagia’ call forth the shaping structure of Valéry’s more extensive theory. She ends by discussing a number of Stevens’ poems – most notably ‘The Idea of Order at Key West’, ‘Variations on a Summer Day’, ‘The Creations of Sound’ and ‘Large Red Man Reading’ – to show how Stevens breathes life into their shared poetics of voice. According to Goldfarb, when we read Stevens’ work with Valéry’s theory in mind, we hear each poet’s voice more accurately and fully, and feel Valéry’s presence in Stevens’ poetic world.

Part III, ‘Getting It Straight at the Sorbonne? Stevens’ Afterlife in Europe’, opens with Mark Ford’s colourful investigation of the biographical and poetic links between Stevens and the English poet Nicholas Moore; as well as, through this connection, of Stevens’ dealings with the Fortune Press. One of the brightest young stars in the London poetry firmament of the 1940s and a widely published writer in the United States for a while, the charmingly eccentric Moore flew off the radar in the ensuing decades only to die in complete obscurity. Ford offers a vivid, genial and at times hilarious portrait of the man’s life and endlessly inventive work, which would bring him into contact with Stevens, the Modernist poet whom he admired most and actively sought to launch to a British readership. Thus Chapter 11 also tells the wonderful story of the Fortune Press and its shady founder, R. A. Caton, with cameo appearances by Kingsley Amis, Philip Larkin and the highly exotic Tambimuttu. It is a story that usefully reminds us of the crucial, at times volatile and unpredictable, role of ‘middle men’ in the establishment of a poet’s reputation and his ultimate canonization.

Gareth Reeves in Chapter 12, ‘A Ghost Never Exorcized: Stevens in the Poetry of Charles Tomlinson’, tells a very different, more earnest story of
a poet who instead of insouciantly emulating his Transatlantic forebear ambivalently struggled with him. Although Tomlinson is widely regarded as one of the most ‘Americanized’ of the British poets to come to prominence in the twenty or so years following the Second World War, his relationship with American poetry, Reeves argues, is not easy to categorize. His poetry is haunted by the contradictions inherent in American poetic Modernism, summed up as the Symbolist tendencies of Stevens on the one hand and the Imagism of Williams on the other. The common view of Tomlinson, fostered by the poet himself, is that an early, mistaken allegiance to Stevens gave way to a more fruitful reading of Williams. But the picture Reeves offers is less simple and more fascinating: for one way of looking at Tomlinson’s poetic career is as an attempt to exorcize the ghost of Stevens.

If, in the case of Moore and Tomlinson, we are clearly talking of the direct influence exerted by Stevens on a younger generation of Transatlantic poets, this is altogether different in the case study presented by Irene Ramalho Santos. Chapter 13, ‘A Poetics of Ignorance: António Ramos Rosa and Stevens’, offers the first extended investigation of the prominent Portuguese poet Ramos Rosa’s work in conjunction with Stevens’ aesthetics. The essay argues that rather than see Ramos Rosa as explicitly responding to Stevens (with whose poetry he claims to be only vaguely familiar), the later poet gathers inspiration from a ‘poetics of ignorance’ in which Ramos Rosa’s acquaintance with Stevens is a cannily ‘unknowing’ catalyst for his own work. Ramalho Santos’ suave chapter is interested more in understanding what she calls ‘constellations of poets’ based on a shared aesthetic affinity and a joint resistance to poetry’s colonization by philosophy than in tracing direct intertextual genealogies. Such constellations offer extended possibilities for critical exploration, as she briefly illustrates with the further example of the Brazilian poet Manoel de Barros.

Finally, Chapter 14, Massimo Bacigalupo’s insightful and good-humoured ‘Reading Stevens in Italian’, rounds up the academic chapters in this volume by looking at another mode through which Stevens has been crossing the Atlantic: through the efforts of translators to let him be heard in other languages. Bacigalupo’s own experience as an award-winning translator (not just of Stevens but of several other major poets) allows him to survey the rich translation history of Stevens in Italy and to testify to the multiple joys and frustrations of translating this particular poet. Working through a closely considered study of lapses, slips and miscomprehensions, he shows us how translators of Stevens, in their own indirect ways, are important critics too, who present us with their proper mix of blindness and insight. His discussion is all the more rewarding for drawing not only on his own translations but on those of Italian colleagues as well as recent French versions by Claire Malroux. Bacigalupo wraps up his caressingly detailed investigation with various passages from ‘To an Old Philosopher in Rome’, thus returning one final time
to a poem already held up for inspection by several other contributors to the volume.

While the academic chapters may thus be said to have come full circle, we are pleased to be able to append a visually attractive coda as a concluding instance of Stevens’ Transatlantic afterlife. This time, however, the crossings involved are also generic: the personal testimonial offered by Helga Kos is that of a visual artist from Amsterdam who learnt of Stevens first through the musical transposition of seven late poems by famous American composer (and author) Ned Rorem, to which in turn she was invited to provide a painter’s response. What was originally intended as a relatively circumscribed, short-lived assignment ran out of hand as Kos became mesmerized by Stevens’ powerful appeal as an image-maker. The result was a happily obsessive five-year adventure that ended with a three-volume ‘artist’s book’ which we have tried to evoke, however imperfectly, through a series of colour reproductions. Ideally, however, the book itself, as Kos explains, should be experienced – like Rorem’s music – in time, thus presenting us with an appropriate concluding image for a study of Stevens that is especially interested in the open-ended act of finding what crossings will suffice.

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