

Université de Montréal

“The nothing that is”: An Ethics of Absence Within the Poetry of Wallace Stevens
(“The nothing that is”: Une éthique de l’absence, dans la poésie de Wallace Stevens)

par
Johanna Skibsrud

Département d'études anglaises
Faculté des arts et des sciences

Thèse présentée à la Faculté des arts et des sciences
en vue de l’obtention du grade de Philosophiae Doctor (Ph.D.)
en études anglaises

January 2012

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Faculté des arts et des sciences

Cette thèse intitulée :

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présentée par : Johanna Skibsrud

a été évaluée par un jury composé des personnes suivantes :

Lianne Moyes
président-rapporteur
Eric Savoy
directeur de recherche
Elizabeth Oliver
membre du jury
Daniel O’Hara
examineur externe
Représentant du Doyen
Ugo Dion

Résumé de synthèse

Cette thèse se concentre sur ce que j'appelle « l'espace négatif » de la représentation dans la poésie de Stevens comme étant un véritable espace d'engagement politique, une interprétation qui se distingue de la plus grande partie de la critique sur Stevens. En suivant les écrits philosophiques d'Emmanuel Levinas, j'affirme que l'emphase que Stevens place sur *la représentation de la représentation elle-même* ouvre un espace au-delà des limites rigides de l'identité-ce que Levinas appelle « le je [sujet] semblable », permettant un contact authentique avec « l'Autre » ainsi qu'avec le concept de « l'infini ». Bien que Stevens s'est farouchement opposé à la notion Romantique de la sublime transcendance, c'est-à-dire d'un espace censé exister en dehors des limites de l'imagination humaine, il se concerne néanmoins avec l'exploration d'un espace au-delà de l'identité individuelle. Pour Stevens, cependant, « la transcendance » est toujours, nécessairement, liée par les restrictions reconnues du langage humain et de l'imagination, et donc par la réalité du monde perceptible. Toute « transcendance » qui est recherchée ou atteinte, dans la poésie de Stevens ne devrait donc pas - ma thèse affirme - être entendu dans le sens sublime déterminé auparavant par les Romantiques. Une connexion plus appropriée peut plutôt être faite avec la transcendance concrète et immédiate décrit par Lévinas comme le « face à face ». L'attention que Stevens accordent aux notions concrètes et immédiates est souvent exprimé à travers son attention sur les qualités esthétiques de la langue. Sa poésie a en effet la poésie pour sujet, mais pas dans le sens solipsiste qui lui est souvent attribué. En se concentrant sur le processus actif et créateur inhérent à l'écriture et à la lecture de la poésie, Stevens explore la nature de l'Être lui-même. Je compare cette exploration dans le travail de Stevens à celle du dessinateur, ou de l'artiste, et dans ma conclusion, je suggère les liens entre l'approche d'enquête de Stevens et celle d'artistes visuels contemporains qui se sont également engagés à la figuration du processus créatif. L'artiste sud-africain William

Kentridge est mon exemple principal , en raison de sa conviction que la méthode est intrinsèquement liée à l'engagement politique et social.

Mots Clés: Littérature américain; Poésie; Philosophie; Wallace Stevens; Emmanuel Levinas; Art contemporain; photographie; Théorie; Représentation; Éthiques.

Abstract

This dissertation focuses on what I refer to as a “negative-space” of representation in the poetry of Wallace Stevens’s in order to explore what, contrary to the bulk of Stevens research to date, I understand to be a genuine politics of engagement. Drawing on the philosophical writings of Emmanuel Levinas, I argue that Stevens’s emphasis on the representation of *representation itself* opens up a space *beyond* the rigid limitations of identity—what Levinas refers to as the “I of the same”—allowing genuine contact with the concept of “the infinite,” or “the Other.” Though Stevens staunchly opposed himself to the Romantic notion of sublime transcendence—of a space purported to exist *outside* the limits of the human imagination—he nonetheless concerns himself with the exploration of just such a space “beyond” individual identity. For Stevens, however, “transcendence” is always, necessarily, bound by the acknowledged *restrictions* of human language and imagination and therefore by the reality of the perceivable world. Any “transcendence” that is sought, or achieved, in Stevens’s work should not, therefore, be understood in the sublime sense intended by the earlier Romantics—a more apt connection can instead be made with the concrete and immediate transcendence described by Levinas as the “face to face.” Stevens’s concern for the concrete and the immediate is often expressed through his attention to the aesthetic qualities of language. His is indeed a poetry *about* poetry—but not in the limited, solipsistic sense that is often assumed. In concentrating on the active, creative process inherent to writing and reading poetry, Stevens explores the nature of Being itself. I compare this exploration in Stevens’s work to that of the draftsman, or to the artist’s sketch, and in my conclusion suggest the connections between Stevens’s investigative approach and contemporary visual artists who are also committed to the figuration of the creative process. South African artist William Kentridge provides my chief example, due to his conviction that the method is linked intrinsically to political and social engagement.

Key Words: American literature; Poetry, Philosophy, Wallace Stevens, Emmanuel Levinas, Contemporary Art, Photography, Theory, Representation, Ethics.

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List of Chief Abbreviations

AWE	Richard Poirier, <i>A World Elsewhere</i>
BPP	Sigmund Freud, <i>Beyond the Pleasure Principle</i>
BT	Martin Heidegger, <i>Being and Time</i>
CL	Roland Barthes, <i>Camera Lucida</i>
CP	Wallace Stevens, <i>Collected Poetry and Prose</i>
OG	Jacques Derrida, <i>Of Grammatology</i>
OTB	Emmanuel Levinas, <i>Otherwise than Being</i>
OU	Rosalind Krauss, <i>The Optical Unconscious</i>
L	Wallace Stevens, <i>Letters of Wallace Stevens</i>
MOP	Jacques Derrida, <i>Margins of Philosophy</i>
PL	Marjorie Perloff, <i>Poetic License</i>
PLT	Martin Heidegger, <i>Poetry, Language Thought</i>
RF	Roland Barthes, <i>The Responsibility of Forms</i>
RL	Roland Barthes, <i>The Rustle of Language</i>
SELP	Ralph Waldo Emerson, <i>Selected Essays, Lectures and Poems</i>
SP	John Ashbery, <i>Selected Poems</i>
TI	Emmanuel Levinas, <i>Totality and Infinity</i>
TMA	Simon Critchley, <i>Things Merely Are</i>
TO	Giorgio Agamben, <i>The Open</i>

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Figure 1: Rosalind Krauss, "Klein Group." *The Optical Unconscious*. Cambridge: MIT Press, 1993. Pp14.

Dedication

For John

What self, for example, did he contain that had not yet been
loosed,
Snarling in him for discovery as his attentions spread,
As if all his hereditary lights were suddenly increased
By an access of color, a new and unobserved, slight
dithering,

The smallest lamp, which added its puissant flick, to which
he gave
A name and privilege over the ordinary of his
commonplace—

A flick which added to what was real and its vocabulary,
The way some first thing coming into Northern trees
Adds to them the whole vocabulary of the South,
The way the earliest single light in the evening sky, in
spring,
Creates a fresh universe out of nothingness by adding itself,
The way a look or a touch reveals its unexpected
magnitudes.

—Wallace Stevens, from “Prologues to What is Possible”

Acknowledgements

I would like to express my gratitude to the professors I had the privilege of studying with at Université de Montréal, namely, Professor Lianne Moyes, Professor Amaryll Chanady, Professor Robert Schwartzwald, and Professor Taiwo Adetunji Asanubi. I would especially like to thank the late Professor Andrew John Miller, who believed in this project, and without whose support it may never have been written. Professor Eric Savoy's guidance and enthusiasm have also been indispensable to this project; I am grateful to his patience, keen insights, editorial comments, and endless encouragement. I would also like to thank Kelly MacPhail for his thoughtful editorial suggestions, and my cohort—Maude LaPierre and Jean-Francois Bernard. Their friendship over the last four years has been invaluable to me. My mother, Janet Shively, has, as always, been an incredible source of both practical and emotional support. I would like to thank her for her continued and devoted interest in my work, and her editorial suggestions for this project. Finally, I would like to thank my fiancé, John Melillo, to whom this project is dedicated, for his editorial comments, and unwavering support.

Introduction: “That which is always beginning”

Perhaps it is of more value to infuriate philosophers than to go along with them
—Wallace Stevens (CP 906).

“If...poetry,” Benedetto Croce asked in his 1933 Oxford lecture, “is intuition and expression, the fusion of sound and imagery, what is the material which takes on the form of sound and imagery?” Echoed in Wallace Stevens’s 1940 prose piece, “The Noble Rider and the Sound of Words,” this question is central to Stevens’s own investigations. The material structure of poetry—a concern, in other words, with *language as such*—would ever more urgently become Stevens’s chief poetic concern. Rather than offering language as a fact or an end in itself, however, Stevens concerns himself instead with what Croce, as if in reply to his own question, had asserted in 1930 constituted the true material essence of poetry:

[T]he whole man: the man who thinks and wills, and loves and hates; who is strong and weak, sublime and pathetic, good and wicked; man in the exultation and agony of living; and together with the man, integral with him, it is all nature in its perpetual labour of evolution... Poetry... is the triumph of contemplation...Poetic genius chooses a straight path in which passion is calmed and calm is passionate (CP 652).

It is no surprise that Croce’s words sufficiently resonated with Stevens to include this quotation in full. Croce’s assertion exemplifies Stevens’s own conception of poetry as “the triumph of contemplation”—the route by which “man” may come to discover the fullness of his reality, replete with its chiasms and contradictions; in short, its resistance to being known at all. Poetry’s ability to expand and explore the intermediate spaces revealed among those chiasms and contradictions fundamental to human nature and experience is what allows it access—according to both Croce and Stevens—to the “fullness” of the real. *Contradiction*, then—“a state or condition of opposition in things compared; variance; inconsistency; contrariety” (OED, vol. II 916)—is as important to any understanding of Stevens’s poetics as the transcendence of that argument in a conceivable “whole.” This

project asserts that what emerges in Stevens's work, in the absence of any positive solution or reply to the most fundamental questions of Being, is a negative-space of engagement and encounter with the representation of reality, and thus with Being itself. Though visual language and metaphor are central to Stevens's poetry, and the term "negative-space" certainly plays on that, it is important to this project that the term be conceived neither as an image or a negative-image in any purely ocular sense, but instead as an exploration of the sensible space *from* which any given reality or image of that reality may arise. *Negative-space* as it will be used in the following pages denotes the representation, in other words, of the processes of *representation itself*, and therefore offers a grasp of the very structure of subjectivity. It should be conceived of as a speculative rather than an established or formal space—one that opens up the possibility of considering and confronting the processes of perception and understanding through which the concepts presence and absence, reality and the imagination, are formed—rather than constituting or delimiting the space of any one of these concepts as such.

What is an examination of "representation itself," after all, but an exploration of the manner in which the world *appears to*, and is subsequently *represented by*, the subject—of the process, therefore, by which the subject continuously re-defines the limits of his own subjectivity? Maurice Blanchot, following Barthes, conceives of this continuous process of re-definition both materially and linguistically through what he calls the "stammer" of language¹: "It is upon losing what we have to say that we speak" (21), he writes in *The Writing of the Disaster*. For Blanchot, as for Barthes, the generative source of both language and Being can be located in this absent, intermediate space at the centre of the

¹ "Speech is irreversible; that is its fatality" writes Barthes in "The Rustle of Language" (RL 76). It is constituted by "singular annulations-by-addition," which "condemns" it to "stammering" (77). Somewhat differently, but laying equal weight on the necessarily repetitive process-oriented nature—this time of written language—Barthes writes in "Right in the Eyes" that "a sign is what repeats itself. Without repetition there is no sign, for we could not recognize it, and recognition establishes the sign" (RL 237).

repetitive structure of language—between *what we have to say* (due to either obligation or desire) and *the spoken*. This perpetual state of prolepsis that Blanchot evokes as the (absent) core of language combines both an anticipatory, desirous and reactive state—that which is endlessly propelled forward, like a stutter, in the hopes of correcting what has already been said and simultaneously beginning again what one had *wanted* to say—and the Epicurean or Stoic concept of a state of consciousness that arises *independent* of any conscious desire: a thought, that is, provoked not by intellectual but rather by sense perception. Likewise, Stevens’s poetry is deeply concerned with the relationship between these two states—so much so that in a letter to Bernard Heringman of 1953 he referred to the persistent play on this relation in his work as his “reality-imagination complex” (L 792). As Frank Doggett affirms, however, for Stevens there was no real conflict; unlike the philosophers, he would continue throughout his career to put his “final trust in sentience” (Doggett 142). Stevens, Doggett writes, “is governed by the inherent bias of the poet for the body’s faith in the palpable certainty of the world of immediate experience” (142). His work is invested in, and embedded within, an intellectual and philosophic tradition, but the *root* of the intellectual and philosophic for Stevens is always sentient², and based on individualized and experiential contact with the world. Ultimately, it was always the imagination that was, for Stevens, “the liberating faculty in a deterministic world” (Peterson 52).

Yet Stevens was never interested in disorienting and subverting the empirical faculties as was often the ambition of the Symbolists—a poetic method once described by Rimbaud as a “long, intimidating, immense and rational derangement of all the senses”

² The internal ambiguity of the term “sense” is in itself interesting here. The word is potentially inclusive of everything from the vaguest impressions received by the senses to the most carefully considered and contrived intellectual activity; from the most deeply entrenched use-values of signs and language to the most “innate” and presumably uninstructed reactions to, and interpretations of, practical situations.

(Peyre 34). Stevens's concern was instead for what he saw to be the integral relationship among reality, sense perception, and the imagination. Margaret Peterson argues that, in essence, it is an "adaptation of Coleridge's faculty psychology" that is at the root of Stevens's "effort to reinstate poetry in the 'center of consciousness' as the 'sum of our faculties,'" and she interprets Stevens's primary poetic ambition to be, therefore, the reassertion of Coleridge's claim that the imagination "brings the whole soul of man into activity" (52).³ Stevens's reiteration of Croce's Oxford lecture in "The Noble Rider" would indeed suggest this most plainly. In addition, Stevens's emphasis on perception as "a bilateral rather than a unilateral activity" (Hill 3)⁴ confirms his allegiance to a sensibility (worthily represented by Coleridge) that emerged within the context of the empirical tradition advanced by philosophers like Hobbes, Locke, and Hume (Hill 3). Finally, the much-identified concern for the integration of poetry and philosophy in Stevens's work can

³ In Chapter XIV of Coleridge's *Biographia Literaria* he defines poetry in the following way: "My own conclusions on the nature of poetry, in the strictest use of the word, have been in part anticipated in the preceding disquisition on the fancy and imagination [in Chapter XIII]. What is poetry? is so nearly the same question with, what is a poem? that the answer to the one is involved in the solution of the other. For it is a distinction resulting from the poetic genius itself, which sustains and modifies the images, thoughts, and emotions of the poet's own mind. A poet, described in *ideal* perfection, brings the whole soul of man into activity, with the subordination of its faculties to each other, according to their relative worth and dignity. He diffuses a tone, and spirit of unity, that blends, and (as it were) *fuses*, each into each, by that synthetic and magical power, to which we have exclusively appropriated the name of imagination. This power, first put in action by the will and understanding, and retained under their irremissive, though gentle and unnoticed, control (*laxis effertur habenis* [it is carried onwards with loose reins]) reveals itself in the balance or reconciliation of opposite or discordant qualities: of sameness, with difference; of the general, with the concrete; the idea, with the image; the individual, with the representative; the sense of novelty and freshness, with old and familiar objects; a more than usual state of emotion, with more than usual order; judgement ever awake and steady self-possession, with enthusiasm and feeling profound or vehement; and while it blends and harmonizes the natural and the artificial, still subordinates art to nature; the manner to the matter; and our admiration of the poet to our sympathy with the poetry [...] Finally, GOOD SENSE is the BODY of poetic genius, FANCY its DRAPERY, MOTION its LIFE, and IMAGINATION the SOUL that is everywhere, and in each; and forms all into one graceful and intelligent whole. (180)

⁴ John Spencer Hill characterizes Coleridge's conception of sense experience as "a stimulus that evokes a response and involves (to borrow a phrase from Wordsworth) 'A balance, an ennobling interchange of action from within and from without.'" "Thus the product in any given act of perception," he continues, "is a modified combination of the percipient and the thing-perceived and is, as Coleridge asserts in *Biographia* Chap xii, neither a subject (perceiver) nor an object (thing-perceived) exclusively, but rather the most original union of both. In and through the act of blending 'thoughts' and 'things,' the (primary) Imagination functions as a fusing, synthesizing power -- an *esemplastic* power whose operation generates a new reality by shaping parts into wholes, by reconciling opposites and drawing unity from diversity" (3).

also be usefully traced back to the Romantics.⁵ Although his lineage is, therefore, undeniably Romantic, Stevens—as he himself, as well as plenty of critics who doggedly defend him as “the quintessential *modernist* poet” (Thrift 52, emphasis added) would be quick to remind us—was not. Indeed, Stevens sharply distinguished himself from the Romantic tradition as well as from any religious or transcendentalist influence. Though he wrote in “a time of disbelief,” that time was also “a time of truth-loving” (CP 849). The parameters of “truth” were firmly established, for Stevens, within the immediate world of “men”—men who, in the absence of “belief,” turn to “a fundamental glory of their own and from that create a style of bearing themselves in reality...a new style of a new bearing in a new reality” (CP 844).

In the preface to Williams’ *Collected Poems*, Stevens wrote, “All poets are, to some extent, romantic poets” (CP 770), but in a review of Marianne Moore’s work, published in *Life and Letters To-day* in December 1935, he clarified this statement, explaining that he meant:

the romantic in the other sense, meaning always the living and at the same time the imaginative, the youthful, the delicate and a variety of things which it is not necessary to try to particularize at the moment, constitutes the vital element in poetry. It is absurd to wince at being called a romantic poet. Unless one is that, one is not a poet at all. (CP 778)

This said, he had no tolerance for “metaphysical” pretensions, nor for a “humanism” that he suspected merely substituted the restrictive terms of institutionalized religion with new, equally restrictive, terms. His opposition to the rigidity of the Church is well known. “Reply to Papini” (1950) provides an obvious example of Stevens’s views, where in

⁵ “The Romantic poets wrote about philosophy by writing about poetry,” writes Paul Hamilton. He identifies a reaction against “Empiricist metaphors” as the cause of what he (rather short-sightedly) terms this “unusual complicity” (29).

uncharacteristically programmatic terms, he attacks institutionalized religion and proposes a substitution: the more elastic and accommodating approach of the poet.

Stevens's opinions aside, Harold Bloom's characterization of him as the single modern bearer of the Romantic tradition has had a lasting influence, albeit one that many contemporary critics have found as arbitrary as it is limiting. In his study of Wallace Stevens's relation to the "literary canons" John Timberman Newcomb objects to Bloom's interpretation of Stevens as having "forsak(en) the image"—claiming that the analysis was "created for the critic's own purposes" and demonstrates only a very narrow understanding of the work as a whole. The objection is underscored by Newcomb's observation that the quotation Bloom chose in order to establish his "anti-Imagist" argument (a quotation from "Esthetique de Mal" that begins: "The greatest poverty is not to live/ In a physical world" [CP 286]) "actually appeared to affirm the physicality and corporeality of this world—a habit of Stevens's which Bloom acknowledged at other points in the book" (222). Too often, as the debate between Bloom and Newcomb shows, the enthusiastic defense of Stevens's work according to the guiding principles of one group or style of criticism, or against the claims of another, results in the willful dismissal of much of the poetry's richness and complexity.

Perhaps the most common mistake that is repeatedly made by Stevens scholars is to polarize the philosophic and poetic concerns of the work. Critics who accuse Stevens on the one hand of being too philosophical for poetry and on the other for being too poetic for philosophy risk missing the point.⁶ The intermediary space that Stevens's poetry seeks to

⁶ In her discussion on Stevens's relationship with his philosophical influences, whom she identifies as Benedetto Croce, Henri Bergson, William James, and George Santayana, Margaret Peterson states that "it is difficult to specify relevant ideas in an area (modern philosophy) in which Stevens managed to be unspecific with remarkable consistency" (60). She resignedly announces, therefore, that "the most that can be hoped for is some grasp (admittedly limited) of the relation between Stevens's aesthetic problem and the modern development of the problem of knowledge as it bears upon the idealist tradition" (60). I would attest that the

establish *between* empirical knowledge and sensory experience should not be understood in positive, additive terms—“a little of this, a little of that”—making it possible, therefore, to isolate one thing from the other and argue over percentage values, but instead as a *negative-space* from which, or against which both the philosophical and poetic concerns of the work arise. It is not, in other words, a space of “*the said*” but of, as Blanchot puts it, “the *wanting to say, the saying,*” from which, or against which, “*the said*” can be observed to emerge. Put still differently—this time in the words of the painter, Paul Klee—Stevens’s object is not “to render the visible, but to *render visible*” (Deleuze, FB 40). The space within which “*visibility*” is rendered is a space that does not and cannot *exclude* the intellect, but is, more properly, as Klee’s dictum suggests, the native space of the senses.

For Stevens, no sense figures more prominently than the sense of sight. More like a painter’s sketch than a philosopher’s or even a poet’s discerning and singular choice of the signifying word, what is most important for Stevens is not the representation of the “seen,” but the development of a space from or against which a consciousness of the process through which that which is “*render(ed) visible*” might arise. It is this concentration on the sensory information through and against which we arrive at our knowledge of the world and our place within it—any depiction of which can only mark, as in “Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird,” “the edge/ Of one of many circles” (CP 76)—that gives rise to the negative-space of representation in Stevens’s poetry explored throughout this project. The elaboration of this space affords Stevens and his readers the opportunity to consider language intimately, and at its deepest level, revealing the ethical space of both difference and contact—between the speaking “I” and the “Other” against which the “I” is spoken—that constitutes the heart of signification and representation itself.

“limitations” are here delineated by an insistence on reading Stevens within and against the rigid, rationalist structures of a philosophic tradition his poetry specifically sought to subvert and transcend.

The Letter as Such

Stevens's lifelong interest and identification with the contemporary art world is testament to the benefits of considering his work in terms of a process of visual figuration, but even more crucial to this project is the figuration within Stevens's work of the *processes of figuration itself*. Through the use of this technique Stevens *pushes past* the representing figure—the speaking “I”—toward the “Other” who exists, necessarily, beyond the limits of the “I”'s capacity for representation. Emmanuel Levinas's thinking is particularly useful to developing these considerations, but—as many critics such as Richard A. Macksey have justly warned, there is both “a peculiar temptation to enlist analogies from the philosophers in reading Wallace Stevens's poetry—and a peculiar danger” (191). Some of these dangers are made evident enough by Stevens's own remarks, cited above, regarding his resistance to “metaphysics”: albeit a “thinking” poet, he is, he insists, above all, a *poet*. Nonetheless, to restrict an analysis of Stevens's work strictly to language and the text itself is just as dangerous; essential to any thorough approach to Stevens's work is, I believe, the conscientious attempt to establish a ground of reading as concordant as possible with the ground he himself tried so hard to establish for his writing: a ground of “reality” that would be inclusive of, but not limited to, the world of language and the imagination.

This project focuses on Stevens's relationship with the materiality of language, but just as Heidegger developed his “tool analysis” in *Being and Time*, not to analyze tools in themselves, but as part of a greater project that had to do with our manner of living and being in the world as a whole, so the emphasis placed on the function and material of language in Stevens's poetry is only a “part” of what Stevens endeavoured to explore. His minute analysis of both the possibilities and impossibilities of sound and meaning through

an emphasis on the “letter as such” (“The never rounding O,” “the dominant X”), and the introduction into his text of nonsense and foreign words (“Monocle de Mon Oncle,” “Lolling the endlessness of poetry” [391])—both of which draw attention to the surface or “aesthetic” features of his poetry—has led many critics, especially in the work’s initial reception, to dismiss Stevens as an “aesthete” or “hedonist.”⁷ This emphasis on the aesthetic qualities of language is crucial to Stevens’s larger aim, but it is indeed only a “part” of it. As Macksey writes, what Stevens confronts in his work is, in proper Hegelian fashion, “pure Being.” Though “it vanishes before his attention”—displaced by what Macksey terms “its antithesis, the nothingness which is to play an increasingly vital role in his thought”—Stevens does manage, according to Macksey, and the Hegelian formulation of the dialectic, to finally locate through his poetry:

the concrete synthesis of Being and Not-Being in Becoming, the dynamism of both his worlds which saves the one from the curse of changelessness and propels the other ceaselessly toward the ‘ultimate poem’ which is always one concept to its contrary, from thesis to antithesis, and then to union. (190)

Indeed, change and movement are so fundamental to Stevens’s poetry that for him the danger is in becoming too reliant on this imagery—on “change” itself becoming a static form in his work. What alleviates this is his corresponding interest in and impulse toward *exteriorization*, toward the figuration of a space wherein, in Levinas’s words, “absolute exteriority presents itself in expressing itself, in a movement at each instant recovering and

⁷ As Joseph N. Riddel has observed, “If anything distinguished the popular criticism of Stevens it is this insistence that his poetry was disengaged from reality, was “hermetic art.” Although Eliot was also, contemporaneously, considered “a dandy, a wit,” his apocalyptic mode, along with his professed admiration of Laforgue and Baudelaire, permitted his poetry to be perceived to have “brought the age into critical focus even as it detached the poetic self from the age’s chaos.” Stevens’s “hedonism” on the other hand was perceived of as “invading language, (it) made such beautiful music that it destroyed meaning. This withdrawal of self into the imagination’s finery, it appeared, denied him the privilege of facing the age objectively and critically. His detachment took the form of irresponsible escape.” (251)

deciphering the very signs it emits” (OTB 172). His challenge, therefore, was to find a method of imag(in)ing movement in his work that would not reduce that movement to static form (to words or images alone), but would at the same time be brought to the fore; indeed, be *imaged*, thus resisting an equally alluring retreat into a nebulous and ultimately solipsistic interior space. He would strike this balance most convincingly in his last collection, *The Rock*; here, movement is rendered not for its own sake, but for the sake of the immediate ethical encounter effected through radical exteriorization, an emphasis on the signifying element of language and representation as such⁸.

The Same and the Other

Emmanuel Levinas’s interrogation into the question of representation as the space of contact between the “I” of “the Same” and the “Other”⁹—a relation which, in the opening chapter of *Totality and Infinity*, he asserts “is language” (39)—will be a crucial touch-point for this project as it is precisely this space that Stevens works to elaborate within his own work. Where Levinas is interested in uncovering and exploring representation at a primordial level (the manner in which subjectivities approach,

⁸ According to Derrida in *Of Grammatology*, “The exteriority of the signifier is the exteriority of writing in general. [...] Without that exteriority, the very idea of the sign falls into decay” (14). In our epoch, Derrida explains, writing is always secondary, “preceded by truth.” The “literal” meaning of writing is “metaphoricity itself.” The signifier is thus always outside, external to, the truth, the signified, and that exteriority is essential to its function as signifier. The “totality” of the signifier can never be a totality, “unless a totality constituted by the signifier preexists it, supervises its inscriptions and its signs, and is independent of it in ideality” (18). The essential point here is that the idea of exteriority is crucial to the possibility of its opposite: interiority. The “exterior” allows for an “inside,” and thus for the meaningfulness, of signification.

⁹ In *Totality and Infinity* Levinas clarifies what he means by “the Same”: “The I is not a being that always remains the same, but is the being whose existing consists in identifying itself, in recovering its identity through all that happens to it. It is the primal identity, the primordial work of identification” (36). That which interrupts the “I” and thus defines its subjectivity “is the Other.” Of this entity, Levinas writes: “He and I do not form a number. The collectivity in which I say ‘you’ or ‘we’ is not a plural of the ‘I.’ I, you—these are not individuals in a common concept. Neither possession nor unity of number nor the unity of concepts links me to the Stranger [l’Etranger], the Stranger who disturbs the being at home with oneself [le chez soi]. But stranger also means the free one. Over him I have no *power*. He escapes my grasp by an essential dimension even if I have him at my disposal. He is not wholly in my sight. But I, who have no concept in common with the Stranger, am, like him, without genus. We are the same and the other. The conjunction *and* here designates neither addition nor power of one term over the other” (39).

appropriate and reflect what exists as “Other,” beyond the limits of their particular sensibilities) Stevens explores representation at the level of the text (the manner in which the speaker arrives at his ideas and perceptions and that the poem, therefore, arrives at its content). In order to elaborate this perceptual space, however, Stevens also—necessarily—grapples with the primordial questions of representation engaged by Levinas.

In order for a subject to understand itself as “being” a subject at all, writes Levinas, it must first “signify.” This signification is based on the primordial relationship of the “I” to the “Other,” which is at the root of sensibility, and thus representation. In *Otherwise Than Being* this relationship is explored by Levinas in depth. He explains: “This changing of being into signification, that is, into substitution, is the subject’s subjectivity, of its subjection to everything, its susceptibility, its vulnerability, that is, its sensibility” (14). It is this very primordial “breakup of identity”—which constitutes subjectivity itself—that is, for Levinas, the very definition of “ethics.” “Responsibility for the other,” he expounds, “in its antecedence to my freedom, its antecedence to the present and to representation, is a passivity more passive than all passivity, an exposure to the other without this exposure being assumed, an exposure without holding back, exposure of exposedness, expression, saying” (15). In the extremity of its passivity and exposedness, the subject is always-already a representation or “expression” of itself *for* the other. It is this being “*for* the other” that is being at all, but it is a responsibility “that goes beyond being,” and remains, even “in its activity, a passivity, more passive than all passivity, for it is a sacrifice without reserve” (OTB 15). Being is defined by Levinas, in other words, by what is always *beyond being*, impossible to articulate, but nevertheless always implicit, indeed at the root of, the processes of representation by which and through which it is defined. Ethics is precisely that which refuses representation, the negative-space of every subjectivity, the originary

fracturing of that which lies *beyond* signification from and against which the signified is constituted.

It is precisely this space that Stevens works, through his poetry, not to define but to expose. Even his pronouncement in his posthumously published notebooks, that “[e]thics are no more a part of poetry than they are of painting” (904), reveals despite (indeed *because of*) its insistence on a *negative* construction of the relationship among poetry, painting and ethics, a shared space of relationship among them. In fact, bringing the three together in this pronouncement is testament to the fact that—though it is by no means defined, and indeed is here half-heartedly denied—the relationship existed for Stevens. This project endeavours to open up the space of this relation in Stevens’s poetry in terms of what is common to all three: an engagement with the “Other” through the processes of representation itself.

A major difference exists, however, between the negative-space of representation in the visual arts and the negative-space fundamental to Stevens’s poetics. In contrast to the way that the particular arises within a painting or photograph—even in the most abstract of images—against the negative-space of what it is not, Stevens attempts the reverse. He focuses on the particular—the image, the letter, the word; what has, in short, already been “render(ed) visible”—in order to gain access to that which *exceeds* the visible. Through a focus on the particularly, materiality and functionality of language, Stevens attempts to locate a method by which the ultimate passivity of representation itself—in the words of Blanchot, a “time without present, (an) I without I” (15)—might be confronted and explored. The goal for Stevens is to grasp the particular at the point where it marks, like an absent blackbird, the edge of an endless continuance of spiralling circles—not in order to depict or fix that edge, or the circles themselves, but in order to figure the process of that ever-outward, ever-continual, spiral of perception and representation. This is a process that

is, after all, the very work of being, and also therefore of ethics: the work of perceiving, filtering, identifying, and eventually (in one form or another) addressing one's experiences to "the Other."

Another name for the figuration of this process is, of course, as Levinas and others have pointed out, *language*.¹⁰ Just as it was delineated at the beginning of his career in "Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird," Stevens's project was to discover a space in which to explore representation through a "*render(ing) visible*" of language itself, accomplished by investigating and accounting for both the sensory experience of the eye and the intellectual filtering processes of the mind. Language, for Stevens, like vision, is a collaborative activity of both the intellect and the senses. An exploration of language therefore reveals the integral relationship between body and mind, reality and imagination.

World and Thing

Consistent with Martin Heidegger's formulation of "world" and "thing," whereby a mutual penetration results in an intermediate space of what Heidegger terms their "difference,"¹¹ Stevens's poetry is characterized by the constant inter-penetration between

¹⁰ "It is supplementarity," according to Derrida, "that constitutes the property [*propre*] of man," and makes possible "speech, society, passion, etc" (OG 244). That is, it is not the sign, but the possibility of the sign's repetition that pre-figures language. "But," we might ask, along with Derrida, "what is this property [*propre*] of man? On the one hand, it is that of which the possibility must be thought before man, and outside of him. Man allows himself to be announced to himself after the fact of supplementarity, which is thus not an attribute—accidental or essential—of man. For on the other hand, supplementarity, which *is nothing*, neither a presence nor an absence, is neither a substance nor an essence of man. It is precisely the play of presence and absence, the opening of this play that no metaphysical or ontological concept can comprehend. Therefore this property [*propre*] of man is not a property of man: it is the dislocation of the proper in general. [...] Man *calls himself* man only by drawing limits excluding his other from the play of supplementarity: the purity of animality, primitivism, childhood, madness, divinity. The approach to these limits is at once feared as a threat of death, and desired as access to a life without *différance* (OG 244).

¹¹ Heidegger's "*dif-ference*" is, of course, a precursor of Derrida's "*différance*." Heidegger uses the term "dif-ference" in his essay, "Language" to discuss the "separation of the between" in the intimate relationship between "world" ("the ever non-objective"[PLT 43]) and "thing" (the object, that which is "not simply nothing"[PLT 21]; "something always already there"[PLT 22]). He writes: "In the midst of the two, in the between of world and thing, in their *inter*, division prevails: a *dif-ference*" (PLT 199). It is important to Heidegger that the word used to describe this in-between space is "removed from its usual and customary

several seeming dichotomies: “reality” (the sensory world understood through the intellectual processes of the mind) and “the imagination” (an intermediate zone into which sensory input is received and the intellectual processes, including language, take place); the “peculiar” and the “general;” and the “minor” (or “singular”) and the “major” man. Again, in his preface to Williams’ *Collected Poems*, Stevens would write: “Something of the unreal is necessary to fecundate the real; something of the sentimental is necessary to fecundate the anti-poetic” (CP 770). The development of Stevens’s own work traces his efforts toward establishing a tangible space in which to figure a “Reality” that would be inclusive of these contradictions. His is an exploration of Being itself as neither “real” nor “imaginary,” “peculiar” nor “general,” but instead—moving beyond an ultimately solipsistic enquiry into the possibilities and limitations of the Cartesian cogito—a space of Levinasian encounter between the speaking “I” and the “Other.”¹² Stevens figures a space, that is, of *transcendence*, though not in any religious or, as he once wrote, “derogatory” Romantic sense (CP 778). As is the case for Levinas’s thinking, “transcendence” in relation to Stevens’s poetry must be understood in a positive, but ultimately limited, sense—bound always by the restrictions of human imagination and therefore by the reality of the perceivable world—within the space of a consideration of *language and representation*

usage” (PLT 200). Derrida takes this further, insisting that *différance* “is literally neither a word nor a concept” (MOP 3). It is instead a movement—a continual displacing/displacement of the trace, which opens a temporal interval, but also a spatial one. It is crucial that the substitution of an *a* for an *e* “remains purely graphic: it is read, or it is written, but it cannot be heard. It cannot be [apprehended] in speech, and [...] bypasses the order of apprehension in general” (MOP 3-4). It is always an opening, and always in motion; it can never be grasped. Derrida even goes so far as to suggest that his *différance* refers “to an order which no longer belongs to sensibility” (MOP 5), and “derives from no category of being, whether present or absent” (MOP 6). This is certainly not far from Heidegger’s sense of “dif-ference” as that “which is neither distinction nor relation,” a “dimension” that “no longer means a precinct already present independently in which this or that comes to settle” (PLT 200), but Derrida goes even farther to insist upon the absolute alterity of his term.

¹² This is an argument that has been suggested by critic David Jarraway in his 1993 publication *Wallace Stevens and the Question of Belief*. In his commentary on Stevens’s poem “The Countryman,” Jarraway cites Levinas’s view that “a work conceived radically is a movement of the same toward the Other which never returns to the same” (289). The implications of this statement and the drive in Stevens’s work toward an exteriorization which is simultaneously a drive toward encounter with the “Other” in this Levinasian sense remains to be more comprehensively explored.

itself. Because of this, it will be useful to again turn to Levinas for a more explicit vocabulary with which to express the particular quality of “transcendence” that is unremittingly sought and, by times, achieved, through Stevens’s poetry. It is a “transcendence” that should be understood neither in high Romantic, nor in the hyperbolic high Modernist terms implemented by Newcomb to describe the modern poet’s “overriding ‘need’... to establish a space of transcendence in the absence of gods” which drives him deeper and deeper into the “yawning emptiness of the self” (Newcomb 220-221), but instead in Levinasian terms of the “face to face.”¹³

Language as Desire

The positive deployment of (the) pacific relation with the other, without frontier or any negativity, is produced in language. Language does not belong among the relations that could appear through the structures of formal logic; it is contact across distance, relation with the untouchable, across a void. It takes place in the dimension of absolute desire by which the same is in relation with an other that was not simply lost by the same. (TI 172)

Levinas’s formulation of language as a space of desire can also be exceptionally illuminating when brought to bear on the negativity at the root of much of Stevens’s poetry. This negativity is perhaps most complexly explored, and therefore also particularly striking, in the later post-war collections, *Transport to Summer* (1947), *The Auroras of Autumn* (1950) and *The Rock* (1954). The negative-space that is achieved in these collections through further emphasis on the processes of *representation itself*—processes as equally

¹³ “The notion of the face...makes possible the description of the notion of the immediate. The philosophy of the immediate is realized neither in Berkeley’s idealism nor in modern ontology. To say that the existent is disclosed only in the openness of Being is to say that we are never directly with the existent as such. The immediate is the interpellation and, if we may speak thus, the imperative of language. The idea of contact does not represent the primordial mode of the immediate. Contact is already a thematization and a reference to a horizon. The immediate is the face to face” (Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 52)

inclusive of the represented object or idea as the sensory material and intellectual practices from which that object or idea arises—provides an opportunity for the investigation of language as part of the more fundamental structure of desire described by Levinas. This is not a space of “seeing or grasping” (which, as Levinas explains, are modes merely of “enjoyment, sensibility, and possession” [OTB 172]), but instead that space where “absolute exteriority presents itself in expressing itself” (OTB 172). It is a space, in other words, wherein what can at any time be “seen” or “grasped” by the limited senses is exposed. This allows for the “transcendence” of those limitations through the same excessive desire by which they (and thus sensibility itself) are defined, as well as the potential figuration of that state of prolepsis Blanchot describes as the very (absent) core of language.

Indeed, Stevens charges that the true measure of a poet is not the measure of his power to “grasp” or delimit anything in a positive sense, but “his power to abstract himself, and to withdraw with him into his abstraction the reality on which the lovers of truth insist” (CP 657). The poet, Stevens insists, “must be able to abstract himself and also to abstract reality, which he does by placing it in his imagination” (CP 657). The absorbent space of the imagination that Stevens evokes here functions as a space of “transcendence” in which “truth”—the immediate and *absolute exteriority* of the world and our experience within it—is made accessible not at the remove of mere “enjoyment, sensibility, or possession” but instead through genuine contact and reflection.

“The pressure of reality”

Stevens’s “Noble Rider”—although echoing the words of Croce’s Oxford Lecture as cited above—begins with the words of another philosopher, Plato, whom Stevens also quotes at length. The passage is from the *Phaedrus* and describes the soul as a composite

figure of a pair of winged horses (one noble, one ignoble) and a charioteer. In describing the method by which we are seized by Plato's description (identifying immediately with the charioteer) but then soon dropped from the sky, the images dissolving in the realization of their ultimate unreality, Stevens asserts:

The imagination loses vitality as it ceases to adhere to what is real. When it adheres to the unreal and intensifies what is unreal, while its first effect may be extraordinary, that effect is the maximum effect that it will ever have. In Plato's figure, his imagination does not adhere to what is real. On the contrary, having created something unreal, it adheres to it and intensifies its unreality.¹⁴(CP 645)

For Stevens, it is not so much, as this excerpt endeavours to explain, that there exists a visible hard and fast distinction between the "real" and the "unreal," but rather that the "unreality" to which Plato has affixed his images must also be understood as a part of "reality." "Unreal things have a reality of their own, in poetry as elsewhere," (CP 644) Stevens writes—an idea compellingly rendered in "An Ordinary Evening in New Haven": "Everything as unreal as real could be, // In the inquisitive eye" (CP 399). For Stevens, as usual, what is at stake is a question not of "real" or "unreal," but of the process of *figuration*: the process by which that *perceived* as "real" or "unreal" is interpreted and conveyed. Understood in this sense, "unreal" things (that is, those things invisible to the "inquisitive eye"—"inquisitive" here meaning that which has not been selected or chosen

¹⁴ In Derrida's discussion of this work in his important early essay, "Plato's Pharmacy," he interrogates the play of language in the Plato's text, a play that Plato himself was only partially in control of. Derrida metaphorically refers to writing in this essay as a "pharmakon"—a word that, in Greek, can mean both drug or poison, can imply either the cure for or the cause of a disease. "The word *pharmakon* is caught in a chain of significations" (ADR 124), writes Derrida, and "no absolute privilege allows us absolutely to master its textual system" (ADR 125). Writing is always tied to the central ambiguity by which it is represented in *Phaedrus*, always-already cloaked in *mythos* and betraying its fundamental metaphoric structure. "The god of writing is thus also a god of medicine," writes Derrida (ADR 123). In just this way, Stevens highlights the ambiguous relationship between imagination and reality. There is no way of unraveling the one from the other, "no absolute privilege" that would allow us to master the system within which the two are united, no ultimate "Reality" that could provide the key to the puzzling metaphoricity at the root of the relationship between the two.

by the intellect) have just as much potential as “real” things for being figured palpably enough to adhere to Stevens’s more expansive and general sense of the “real.” “Reality,” that is, “as a thing seen by the mind:

Not that which is but that which is apprehended,
a mirror, a lake of reflections in a room,
A glassy ocean lying at the door. (CP 399)

It was imperative for Stevens, throughout his career, that imagination and reality be considered in dialectical *relation* to one another, as vital parts of a potentially synthetic space of inter-*action*. The “idea of nobility” in art, which Stevens delineates in “The Noble Rider,” had all but disappeared in his estimation due to the mistaken privileging in contemporary society of an impoverished sense of phenomenal “reality” over the life of the mind and the value of the contemplative imagination. If the early to mid twentieth century art world familiar to Stevens had, indeed, retained any sense of the “nobility” Stevens describes, it was only in “degenerate forms or in a much diminished state” due to a “failure in the *relation* between the imagination and reality” (CP 649, emphasis added). This failure was attributable in turn to what Stevens refers to in “The Noble Rider”—in a phrase that would echo resoundingly through subsequent generations of artists, its influence renewed in the 1950s by the Abstract Expressionist movement in the United States—as “the pressure of reality” (CP 650). In the artistic realm of the 1930s and 1940s, this “pressure,” which Stevens describes as resulting from “an external event or events on the consciousness to the exclusion of any power of contemplation,” resulted not so much from the occurrence of any singular “external event” in itself (though the economic and political atmosphere of the day, cannot, of course, be separated from the production and concerns of the working artists) but from the cultural *reaction* to this strain. This reaction contributed to the exaltation and popularization of a literature of social realism, which defined the styles of a much wider and more various array of artists than merely those who, like Theodore Dreiser and Upton

Sinclair, identified stylistically as “social realists,” or those associated, in the realm of the visual art, with either the Ashcan school or the later “regionalist” style typified by Thomas Hart Benton.

“Social Realism”—the depiction of the gritty reality of working class life in the 1930s and 1940s—had indeed become the dominant mode of perceiving and thinking about art and the world. Those working in between the two World Wars were hard pressed, as Stevens observed, to conceive of the task of the artist as other than a direct medium for the immediate, visible world that surrounded him.¹⁵ The reaction to the “pressure” of this reality, and the obvious limits to artistic representation that it posed, was various. One striking example was the poet George Oppen, who would give up poetry for a span of thirty years from the 1930s until the 1960s, because of his conviction that the political pressures of his time bore more obvious and immediate weight—as well as the fear that his having given way (necessarily, as he saw it) to a more “pressing” political reality would make him a writer of “bad poetry—poetry tied to a moral or a political (same thing) judgement” (66). Later, Oppen would return to poetry, in part from a sense of defeat in the political realm (“I...returned to poetry only when we knew that we had failed” [quoted in Nicholls 40], he once wrote), but also from a new sense of optimism born of his realization, through poetry, of a means with which he might “rediscover” politics—“this time in the ‘existential’ world of being and making rather than in that other world in which ‘knowledge’ had been devalued to the currency of surveillance” [Nicholls 42]).

¹⁵ “When I was at Harvard, a long time ago,” recounts Stevens in his 1936 Harvard address, “it was a commonplace to say that all the poetry had been written and all the paintings painted” (CP 783). Robert Buttell comments that Stevens’s conception was that poetry had begun around that time to seem “less and less significant in a world of science, industrialism, and middle class culture. The Decadent’s response was to establish a cult of isolated beauty” (Stevens’s mentor Santayana, with whose thinking Stevens would always sit uncomfortably, would fall in this camp), “while at the opposite extreme the realistic and naturalistic novelists were making a determined effort to deal with the actual world, as sordid as it might be” (Pearce and Miller 29).

What gave Oppen cause for cautious hope with his return to poetry in the 1960s, however—with a new formula by which he conceived that the “pressure of reality” (CP 650) might be integrated with the generative potency of the imagination¹⁶—was one that Stevens had been working out since the days of *Harmonium* (1923). What Stevens referred to as his “reality-imagination complex” (L 792) indeed formed the generative thrust of his poetry from the beginning of his career. The space of their interpenetration—the emphasis placed, that is, on neither “reality,” nor the “imagination,” but instead on the shared negative-space of sensibility and representation between them—is explored, however, with greater and greater intensity as his career progresses.

A Necessary Angel

Though I will continue, throughout this project, to rely on the use of word “between”—which is unfortunately suggestive of a separately delineated “third space”—it is crucial to remember that the negative-space that provided the generative source for Stevens’s poetry throughout his career should not be considered a separate space at any final *remove* from the conflict between “imagination” and “reality.” It should also be kept firmly in mind that the investigation of this space is *not* geared finally toward any “solution” (or to use the language of “The Rock,” a “cure”) to the conflict it seeks to encompass and embody. Instead, it serves to articulate a hyphenated space of “dif-ference” between imagination and reality, time and space. Indeed, it strives to articulate the very chiasmic interval wherein imagination exists *as* reality and reality as the imagination, where space is encountered *as* time and time is encountered as space. The particular relevance of Levinas’s thinking in relation to this opening of a space between these tightly interlocked

¹⁶ “Poetry has to be protean,” wrote Oppen in a letter to his sister June dated 1959, “meaning must begin there...A poem has got to be written into the future” (22)

concepts is that for him, as for Stevens, it is never simply a question of dialectics. The exploration of this chiasmic interval between reality and the imagination, as between subjects, is an ethically charged movement toward contact and comprehension.

In his useful essay, “Wallace Stevens and the Symbolist Imagination”—which laid to rest the last lingering suspicions of a legitimate correspondence between Stevens work and the French Symbolists—Michel Benamou remarks that where Baudelaire remembers a world “before the fall,” Stevens projects an “Adamic hopefulness”; that where Mallarmé sought out a land of the mind “beyond reality,” Stevens sought “a land beyond the mind, as part of reality” (92). Disillusion is described by Stevens in “An Ordinary Evening in New Haven” as “the last illusion.” His “fiction of the absolute” strives to move past even this, to rid itself of the apocalyptic rhetoric of his era, not necessarily in order to assert a new vision or an optimism for the future, but in order to access the space in which our realities—that is, our disillusionments as equally as our illusions—are made.

Stanley Burnshaw’s infamous dismissal of Stevens’s long-awaited second volume of poetry, *Ideas of Order*, in the October 1935 issue of *New Masses*, has had lasting influence on Stevens criticism—though, over seventy-five years later, it has itself been dismissed countless times, and even renounced by the author himself.¹⁷ Burnshaw, who had

¹⁷ In his preface to the review (reprinted in *The Stanley Burnshaw Reader* in 1990), Burnshaw insists that the piece was included only because of “the documentary relevance to the Stevens poem that it evoked” (“Mr. Burnshaw and the Statue”) and “is offered without the slightest pride of authorship.” Earlier in the preface he contextualizes his critical position at the time as an (admittedly naïve) American writer and critic of the far Left. Speaking of himself in the third person, Burnshaw writes: “He had also been advised that formal analysis could lead to futile complexities, and that a too-temperate stance was simply a foolish timidity. And yet, nobody had tried to speed up his slow ‘political’ development by flashing a party-membership card under his nose. And none of his words had ever been corrected by the red pencil of a commissar. He could do as he pleased—for he *would* do no wrong. Like the others around him he deeply believed in the necessity for promoting the Ultimate Good, whatever the circumstances. But within a year after writing the Stevens review, his private angel had pinned his shoulders to the ground. Until his departure, however, he continued to do as he had done, without wavering from his public position, perhaps hoping unconsciously that the very act of repeating beliefs might make them unquestionable for him” (26).

admired Stevens's earlier collection, *Harmonium*¹⁸—referring to it as “mainly sense poetry, but not as Keats's is sense poetry”—criticized Stevens sharply for what he saw in *Ideas of Order* to be a lack of engagement with social and political realities. Stevens's once “harmonious cosmos” is, according to Burnshaw, in his second collection, “suddenly screeching with confusion.” *Ideas of Order*, complained Burnshaw, is merely “the record of a man who, having lost his footing, now scrambles to stand up and find his balance” (30).

Despite the irrelevant political overtone to the critique—which would very shortly inspire Burnshaw to disown it—the review touches on a legitimate disjuncture in the work between the fictive world of the singular imagination and the social reality beyond it. The summary dismissal of the “confusion” that this disjuncture causes, however, overlooks the book's most fundamental concern. “Will Stevens sweep his contradictory notions into a valid Idea of Order?” Burnshaw had asked—replying himself that the answer would depend not only on the “personal predisposition of the poet” but on the “alternatives” facing him as a poet. For Burnshaw in 1935, the disjuncture between social pressures and the life of the mind is one that can only be solved by deductive reasoning processes like those he recognized within *Harmonium*—certainly not by the “confusions” and “contradictions” that pepper *Ideas of Order*. Published after a ten year silence (a silence that, unlike Oppen's, had more to do with Stevens's responsibilities at the Hartford Insurance company and as a new father than any overt artistic or political concerns) this highly anticipated collection was, as Burnshaw's review makes apparent, initially misunderstood because of its refusal to adhere to the expectations of the more overtly socially and politically engaged poetry that

¹⁸ Burnshaw argued that in *Harmonium* Stevens manages to suffuse his sensory imagery with subjective emotion—that the poetry is “scientific,” its sensuousness objectified: “separated from its kernel of fire, and allowed to settle, cool off, and harden in the poet's mind until it emerges a strange amazing crystal” (29). Reading Stevens's early poetry, Burnshaw concluded, “becomes a venture in crystallography” (29).

was emblematic of the time.¹⁹ Although the book is widely appreciated now as one of Stevens's finest, the idea promoted by Burnshaw's *New Masses* review—that Stevens cloistered himself from the “reality” of his day—lingers, revealing perhaps that our contemporary critical understanding of “reality” is not much more nuanced than it was in 1935. But, as David Jarraway writes, even in the politically-charged climate of the 1930s, “Stevens must have secretly known,” that “writing more socially correct poetry [...] could have done nothing to resolve conflicts that were rooted at a more psychic and inspirational level” (72). Far from retreating from, or disengaging with, the issues of his day, Stevens instead sought an approach by which they might be explored more meditatively—through an exploration of the fundamental disjuncture between the internal life of the mind (its desires, expectations and inhibitions) and the external pressures and limitations that delimit and shape that interiority.

Even in *Harmonium*, it is the “spurning-craving” of psychic desire that constitutes the drive of the poems—a tension between the self-satisfied Hoon (“I was the world in which I walked” [CP 51]) and the impossible plight of “The Snow Man,” who, as “...nothing himself, beholds / Nothing that is not there and the nothing that is” (CP 8). It is this space of tension, typical of the modernist “crisis of representation” formulated by Fredric Jameson, that is, in Stevens's later collections, burst asunder, turning this “crisis”—in the disruptive fashion that would be later identified with the “postmodern”²⁰—on its head.

¹⁹ This engagement ranged from the language-oriented approach of Objectivist poets like Oppen, Zukofsky and Niedecker, who sought to offer—through a concentration on the “object” of the poem itself—a more honest and clear-sighted view of the world, to the overtly political and propagandist poetics favoured by Leftist magazines like *Partisan Review* and *New Masses*.

²⁰ Jarraway makes a striking comparison between Stevens's formulation of reality as the object seen in “its greatest common sense” and Lyotard's articulation, in *The Postmodern Condition*, of “the rule that there is no reality unless testified by a consensus between partners over a certain knowledge and certain commitments.” Jarraway goes on to suggest, quoting Jameson, that a “text” for Stevens thus “liberates us from the empirical object...by displacing our attention to its constitution as an object and its relationship to the other objects thus

According to Jameson, the “crisis of representation” through which Stevens lived and produced is characterized by “an essentially realistic epistemology, which conceives of representation as the reproduction, for subjectivity, of an objectivity that lies outside it—(it) projects a mirror theory of knowledge and art, whose fundamental evaluative categories are those of adequacy, accuracy and Truth itself” (as quoted in Jarraway 40). Stevens’s entire poetic project if observed as a whole—from the reality-imagination dichotomy of the early collections, epitomized by “Anecdote of a Jar,” to the “dizzle-dazzle” (CP 449) of the later poems’ endless refractions—can be conceived of as an explosion of this “mirror theory of knowledge,” in which the mirror, and along with it the notion of a single or empirical Reality that might be reflected therein, as well as the idea of a one-to-one correspondence between the outer (Real) and the inner (imaginative) worlds, was finally shattered.

Lost through this shattering was not a sense of the legitimacy of the Real world, but of the legitimacy of any illusory faith in a totalizing explanation or representation of that Reality. Writing that abandoned an effort to connect to the Real, as Stevens saw to be the case with the Symbolists, was equally as undesirable to him as limiting himself to the empirical facts: “Reality,” for Stevens, “was therefore a necessary angel. Without it, there could be no way for the imagination to distinguish itself, in its presupposing ‘*both* distinction from *and* relation to otherness”” (Jarraway 74). Even at the earliest stages of his career, then, and in direct contrast to the bulk of criticism of the past seventy-five years, which has dubbed Stevens variously as an “anti-realist ... solipsist ... escapist” (Chiasson 63), Stevens’s poetry is characterized by a far broader conception of Reality—or more accurately, a *will* to conception—than was in common currency at the time: a Reality in

constituted” (75). But this is, of course, an observation that could be made just as easily about Emily Dickinson as Stevens, and indeed the “crisis of representation” Jarraway deems fundamental to Stevens’s era is a critical argument that dates at least as far back as M.H. Abram’s study of Romanticism, “The Mirror and the Lamp.” Regardless, Jarraway’s insistence on the manner in which Stevens (continues to) destabilize empirical reality in order to illuminate and access a more ambiguous and thus inclusive version of reality is instructive in regards to Stevens’s moment and the particularities of his poetic approach.

which language—the “the sound of words”—as well as the life of the mind, were not separate, but instead a definitive part.

But rather than an emphasis on cohesion and wholeness Stevens’s emphasis was instead on disjuncture and difference. This is a poetic as well as an ethical impulse that goes back at least as far as Aristotle, who argued that in order for *pity* to arise between two subjects it was necessary that *a gap* should be established between them. For Plato, empathy of any kind between subjects had been a threat to the stable definition of the self—it was for this reason that he infamously decreed that the poet would be banned from his Republic. Aristotle makes an important step in ethical thinking, therefore, when he posits that pity is *not* immersive but something instead to be encountered, confronted—and that it therefore does not threaten to absorb the subject completely and therefore absolve him of his essential subjectivity as Plato had presumably feared. The basis of the ethical relation, for Aristotle, lay precisely in the introduction and maintenance not of direct identification, but of a definable space of difference that was revealed between subjectivities. In Tragedy, for example, pity functions only when a certain distance is achieved between he that pities and he that is pitied. This is why Aristotle instructs in his *Poetics* that pity and fear are more *affectively*, and therefore *effectively*, achieved through drama by building them into “the structure of events” rather than by introducing spectacle. He explains: “The plot should be constructed in such a way that, even without seeing it, anyone who hears the events which occur shudders and feels pity at what happens; this is how someone would react on hearing the plot of the *Oedipus*.” (22). The tragic “effect” is stronger when a distance from the event itself and the subjectivities involved has been achieved. Off-stage, this same distance is what allows empathy between two subjects to “affectively”—as well “effectively”—arise.

By the time of Aristotle, the concept of banishing the “poets” had become preposterous, if not outright impossible: for Aristotle, everything was poetry, or potential poetry—but this was not necessarily a good thing. It had become even more necessary to maintain a certain amount of distance from the subject in order to avoid getting locked into the absorbing egoism of the lyrical “I.” It is this distance that Stevens also strives to achieve—a dimension that, like the *inter* of Heidegger’s “dif-ference,” “no longer means a precinct already present independently in which this or that comes to settle” (PLT 200), and, like Derrida’s *différance*, would derive “from no category of being, whether present or absent” (MOP 6). It is this distance that establishes, as it does for Aristotle, the possibility of contact within Stevens’s poetry.

Make it Strange

Stevens’s concern for a method of expressing the hyphenated space of difference *between* reality and the imagination through the figuration of an overlapping negative-space, simultaneously reveals a correlative concern for the disruption of each—for the disruption, indeed, of the characterization of *any* experience or mode of perception as stable or isolate. This latter impulse can usefully be understood in terms of the Russian formalist project of *ostranenie*, or “defamiliarization,” first articulated by Victor Shklovsky in his 1917 essay, “Art as Device.” Poetry, for Shklovsky was an essential method whereby ordinary “prose” language, in being made conspicuous, difficult, or “strange,” could become *perceivable again*, thus re-investing the world with meaning; it was a way, in Shklovsky’s words, to “make the stone stony again” (16)²¹.

²¹ Two years earlier, in her preface to *Some Imagist Poets*, Amy Lowell had written that one of the express purposes of Imagist poetics was “to produce poetry that is hard and clear, never blurred or indefinite” (vi). (Think of Burnshaw’s disappointment that Stevens’s *Ideas of Order* had lost the “crystalline” sharpness he

“The purpose of art,” Shklovsky writes, “is to impart the sensation of things as they are perceived and not as they are known. The technique of art is to make objects ‘unfamiliar,’ to make forms difficult, to increase the difficulty and length of perception because the process of perception is an aesthetic end in itself and must be prolonged” (16). In “Two or Three Ideas”—an essay that was first delivered as a lecture at Mount Holyoke College—these ideas are echoed by Stevens in a discussion on poetic “style.” His major claim in the piece is that “the style of the poem and the poem itself are one” (CP 839), and to illustrate this point he uses the example of Baudelaire’s “La Vie Antérieure” and Yeats’ “Lake-Isle of Innisfree,” arguing that in both “[t]he familiar experience is made unfamiliar.” It is precisely this rendering of the familiar as “unfamiliar” that allows us, Steven contends, to return via the poem to “the [abode] of the imagination” (CP 840). “It is plain that when, in this world of weak feeling and blank thinking,” he explains further, “we encounter some integration of the poem that pierces and dazzles us, the effect is an effect of style and not of the poem itself or at least not of the poem alone. The effective integration is not a disengaging of the subject. It is a question of the style in which the subject is presented” (CP 840). It is not that the subject itself is “made strange” or unfamiliar, in other words, but that the formation of the reader’s *perception* of the subject is pronounced. The idea of elaborating the processes by which one arrives at a given perception so that this process is *prolonged* in the way that Shklovsky describes—that art could be a figuring of the processes of perception itself—would indeed have resonated with Stevens. For him, the goal was never to achieve a quality, in imagist or objectivist fashion, of “stoniness” for the sake of the “stone,” the “thing-in-itself²²,” but neither was it, in Russian formalist fashion, a

had detected in *Harmonium*). The poetic sensibility of the day was toward as concrete a rendering of the “solid,” the “real,” as language could be imagined to allow.

²² The imagists were invested in the “object-ness” of objects in order that we could see them as they are, in their plasticity and relation to other objects. For Stevens, there was only one “object” for poetry and that was

question of the representation of abstract *form*. Instead, his interest was, again, in “render(ing) visible” the processes of perception and representation in order that the fundamental integration between the concrete and the abstract might be more fully realized and explored. As Stevens remarked in a lecture delivered at the University of Chicago in 1951 titled “A Collect of Philosophy,” it is the belief in and dependence upon this fundamental integration that unites philosophy and poetry. Both poets and philosophers, he writes, are in “the habit of forming concepts,” and that habit is a “habit of the mind by which it probes for an integration” (862). For Stevens, the question did not revolve around either “stone” or “stoniness” itself, but the way that *the concept* “stone” is rendered through an “integration” of both. His interest, therefore, in making the stone “stony again” was an interest in the question of how the stone being stony *at all* (in the sense of Plato’s *noumenon*) might be encountered (by the senses, as *phenomenon*) and, more importantly, how that encounter might, subsequently, be conveyed.

Stevens’s approach in this regard is often through an elaboration and interrogation into the privileged sense of sight and its role in the interpretation and representation of subjectivity. For this reason, his poetry can often be more interestingly illuminated through a concurrent exploration of the visual arts world of the mid-twentieth century, rather than the contemporaneous literary world. In the opening chapter of this project I will endeavour to show the way that Stevens’s elaboration of a negative-space of representation can be understood in terms of what Rosalind Krauss refers to as “redoubled vision”—a “seeing and a knowing that one sees, a kind of *cogito* of vision” (OU 19). Krauss’s *The Optical Unconscious* will be an indispensable guide for this chapter, as will Glen McLeod’s detailed study, *Wallace Stevens and Modern Art*, which delineates the relationship between

the figuration of the processes of perceiving objectivity itself. In other words, he was interested in figuring the intersection of subjectivity and the world—of rendering in language not what was solid and encounterable *via* perception but instead the processes of perception (of Being) itself.

Stevens's knowledge of and interactions with the visual art world and his own developing poetics. My own approach will concentrate less on the specific adherences and incongruities between Stevens's work and the visual arts, and more on the way in which his work endeavours to render in *spatial, visual* terms, the negative-space by which the mind's imaginative capacity and the phenomenal reality *beyond* the mind may be integrated in a "new knowledge of reality" (CP 452). Such a "new knowledge" would recognize, first and foremost, that the "reality" it seeks is finally neither estranged from, nor contingent upon, a solipsistic life of the mind. In other words, what I will be most concerned with is the way in which Stevens works to establish an inter-relational territory, in much the same manner as an abstract painting, between reality and the imagination. It is a *concrete* rendering of the *abstract* in Stevens's poetry that allows both elements—in the same manner that Rosalind Krauss describes for the figure versus ground relation in visual art—to be "preserved and cancelled. Preserved all the more surely in that they are cancelled" (OU 15).

"It must not be fixed"

But what is this "new knowledge of reality?" At root, Stevens's poetry is a contemplation of both language and "Being" itself (as it is impossible to separate one from the other). Though "Being" was understood by Stevens in a positive sense, he was wary of any description or definition of it, and sought instead a state of "ambiguity" for the consideration of both thought and language. In Chapter Two, "The Image," I shall explore the "ambiguous" roles of presence and absence in Stevens's work through Roland Barthes's analogous examination of the photograph in *Camera Lucida*. The "*absence-as-presence*" (106) described for the photograph—its simultaneous *being and non-being*—will provide a tangible approach to Stevens's use of negative-space, within which he addresses and explores the question of Being. Gaston Bachelard's study, *The Poetics of Space*, will

support the exploration and elaboration of this idea as it relates more particularly to the literary realm.

It is clear that for Stevens there is something to Being—a certain “something,” that is, rather than a “nothing”²³— but this “something” could only be defined negatively, for example the striking depiction in “The Snow Man” of “the nothing that is” (CP 8), if a definition was to be attempted at all. What is particularly compelling about this phrase, “the nothing that is,” is the way that the attachment of the definite article “is” to the simple form of “to be” works to negate the negation, *without* the subject (“the nothing”) either being utterly cancelled or translated into “something.” Instead these four simple words serve to open up a space of dialogue between “the nothing” and “something,” presence and absence. It is within this space that we are continuously invited by Stevens to move, and reflect. “If it is defined, it will be fixed and it must not be fixed,” he had declared in “The Noble Rider.” Continuing: “As in the case of an external thing, nobility resolves itself into an enormous number of vibrations, movements, changes. To fix it is to put an end to it” (664). Stevens’s accommodation for “the nothing that is” within “The Snowman,” and throughout his oeuvre, opens up a fluid space of contemplation that is *beyond* but *inclusive* of the concepts of presence and absence, reality and imagination.

Poetry was understood by Stevens as a protean, living thing—as that which, as he writes in “St. Armourer’s Church from the Outside,” “is always beginning because it is part / Of that which is always beginning, over and over (CP 449). This “part” of reality had the potential to encompass the *whole* of reality, to speak to, and from, the “whole man.” Poetry was, therefore, *inherently* political, *inherently* engaged, in that it requires us to think about the relationality of things, in both abstract and concrete ways. Poetry does not, that is, *via*

²³ “...There it is,” he writes in “The Noble Rider and the Sound of Words.” It is the very fact of “it’s” being there, which, he continues, “makes possible to invite to the reading and writing of poetry men of intelligence and desire for life” (CP 664).

language attempt to access the “political” as *thing*, or as a specific *event*, but instead, through a careful exploration of the space of language and Being itself, it locates an opening in thought where politics and ethics arise as *part* of a total conception of the Reality of a Being-political, Being-social, indeed, of a Being-human at all. It is this opening that Chapter Three, “The Word,” will endeavour to expose and explore. Derrida’s conception of *différance* and other aspects of his thinking, especially those observations included in *Languages of the Unsayable* and *Margins of Philosophy*, are particularly useful here, along with Barthes’s considerations of the text and language in *The Responsibility of Form* and *The Rustle of Language*.

“It Must Be Abstract”

Like Oppen and the generation of poets who came after him,²⁴ Stevens was captured by the ideas and energy of the Abstract Expressionist movement in the 1940s.²⁵ His first concerted attempt, in 1947, at formulating a poetic “theory” exemplified this affinity when, in *Transport to Summer’s* “Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction,” he declared: “It Must Be Abstract” (CP 329). The exultant refusal of representational painting by Abstract-Expressionists like Willem de Kooning and Mark Rothko, as well as the fusion of art and politics within a larger, more encompassing world-view and artistic mandate, encouraged

²⁴ Importantly, John Ashbery and the other New York School poets were influenced by the Abstract Expressionist painters—as well as (and congruently) by Stevens himself. Language poetry, with its emphasis on the connections between politics and semiotics (the “sound of words” and the constructed “sense” of meaning), must also be understood as a part of this lineage.

²⁵ The Abstract expressionists, indeed, formed their own idea of political engagement through Stevens’s notion of “pressures of reality.” Robert Motherwell and Ad Reinhardt, who edited the text *Modern Artists in America* in 1951, quoted Stevens in order to help explain the sudden rise in the popularity, as well as the political relevance, of abstract art: “This is where the ‘pressure of reality,’ in Wallace Stevens’s phrase, has led the majority of our most imaginative and fertile artists: ‘It is not that there is a new imagination but that there is a new reality’” (As quoted in McLeod 140).

Stevens to embrace his tendency toward the “abstract” in a new way. From *Transport to Summer* on, abstraction is affirmatively accepted by Stevens as the generative structure and force at the root of *all* conceptions and representations of reality. The developing holism of Stevens’s sensibility, advented by his concentrated turn to abstraction in the 1940s, actually renders his poetry *more* rather than less intrinsically concerned and engaged with the social as his career progresses. It would indeed be impossible, according to the influential conception of poetry advanced by Stevens’s “Notes,” for the poet—although he may continue to explore the “spurning-craving” of a seemingly solipsistic interior world—to be *actually* solipsistic, or removed from the “real world.” By engaging with and elaborating the processes by which reality is actualized and potentially altered (i.e., the life of the mind) one is brought closer to the “real world” than any concentration on “the actual” could ever allow.

Much later, in *Revolution in Poetic Language*, Julia Kristeva would describe poetic text as “a practise that could be compared to political revolution” (17); in fact, Stevens’s understanding of poetry was not dissimilar. To be sure, poetry, for him, was “revolutionary” not in terms of any particular political program or event, but in terms of the constantly renewed energy that it generated for any active as well as practical consideration of the world. Poetry was, essentially, “practise” for Stevens—an active “*saying*” rather than anything that could be or might ultimately be “said.” It is always the gerund form of every verb that constituted, for Stevens, the “acutest speech” and poetry’s “continuous present.”

As the oft quoted stanza XIX of “Chocorua To Its Neighbour” further expounds:

To say more than human things with human voice,
 That cannot be; to say human things with more
 Than human voice, that, also, cannot be;
 To speak humanly from the height or from the depth
 Of human things, that is acutest speech. (CP 266-267)

For Stevens, this “acutest speech” arises from the voice that is actively engaged in the process of its own speaking; it is a voice that arrives not from any conceivable “still point” either beyond the human or from the dead centre of “human things,” but is, instead, engaged in the *practise* of its own speech, therefore of its own being, and—through the distance achieved by a shift of perspective, either a plunge to the depth or an ascent to the heights—a *knowing* of that being. In Chapter Four, “The Mind,” we shall turn our attention to these processes of knowing—looking again to the analogy of the photograph in order to more tangibly address and interrogate “*the impossible science of the unique being*” (Barthes, *CL*, 71).

An Absolute Reality

Stevens was “revolutionary” in the sense that his deep investment in, and exploration of, “human things” never resorted to “humanism,” which he saw too easily replaced the old hierarchies. What he sought instead, and this is what “Chocorua” begins to sketch out, is a new space in which these “human things” could be newly imagined. Removed from “man,” his voice emanating instead as the “voice” of the Mountain, the speaker delineates a negative-space in which the *relation between* man and nature, between the “singular” (“How singular he was as man, how large”) and the expansive abstract vista that the mountain’s voice evokes (“If nothing more than that, for the moment, large in my presence” [CP 268]) might be figured. The mountain is indeed what *gives* the man his shape, just as the man (Stevens)—at the level of the world he “creates” for himself through his own experience and vision, and also at the level of the text created to reveal that world—gives shape to the mountain. What Stevens is interested in here, and this will remain his driving interest for the rest of his career, is the creation of an interim space

between “world” and “human thing” in which the “acutest speech”—that is, the *interrelationship* between “world” and “thing,” or indeed relationality *tout court*—can be figured and spoken.

But again—rather than the creation of a smooth, uniform space through this amalgamation—Stevens was primarily concerned with the *disjunctions* of thought and language, the *interruptions* of perceived phenomenal reality. The “practise of poetry” was for him a way to explore the underlying *ambiguity* of reality—an ambiguity at last more “Real” than the limited scope of any singular subjective “reality” to which the contemporary art world believed itself bound.

As—in a rare moment of immodesty—he once claimed for his prose, Stevens’s poetry is intent on “the enlargements of life” *beyond* the frame of the singular perspective and a strict adherence to the limits of the phenomenal world. At the same time, however, it avoids—indeed has a horror of—leaving that world behind or becoming “metaphysical.” In “The Figure of the Youth as Virile Poet,” a prose piece from 1942, Stevens writes that it is when we find ourselves in agreement with reality that we “cease to be metaphysicians”—and that this should be precisely the goal. In contrast to other poets of the period, however—even the “metaphysical” poet, T.S. Eliot, for whom a poem’s success was defined by the success with which it translated thought into feeling and thus overcame the “dissociation of sensibility” (TLS 669-670)—Stevens believed that “the greater the mind the greater the poet” and reminded us in his essay, “Relations Between Poetry and Painting,” that “the evil of thinking as poetry is not the same thing as the good of thinking in poetry” (CP 744). Stevens was adamant, however, that the poet should be, first and foremost, a *poet*, and not a philosopher: we “do not want to be metaphysicians,” he decisively wrote in “The Figure or the Youth as Virile Poet” (CP 679). Stevens’s ultimate project was thus, unquestionably, *not* to abstract the poet *from* the real, phenomenal

world—but rather to find a way of inhabiting the Real “absolutely.” The final chapter of this project—Chapter Five, “The Act”—concerns Stevens’s effort to do just that. Not surprisingly, Stevens’s “absolute” Reality is one that requires an inclusion of the “unreal” of the imagination, as well as a certain amount of what Shklovsky had described as a process of *defamiliarization*, through which—by interrupting the established relationships between foreground and background, “real” and “unreal,” presence and absence—a broader “Reality” both *inclusive* and *excessive* of those relationships might be conveyed.

An Endless Projection

As Yeats once wrote, “We make with the quarrel with others, rhetoric, with the quarrel with ourselves, poetry” (492). Stevens knew this, of course. Though less overtly than Oppen, he was particularly fearful of, and resistant to, the idea of writing “poetry tied to a moral or a political...judgement” (SL 66). But it was precisely by engaging in a “quarrel with himself,” by opening a “gap” via the figuration of his own processes of perception, that Stevens was permitted to leave the isolating realm of the singular “I.” And if Stevens’s poetry can be understood in so systemizing a form of philosophic thought as Hegel’s dialectic, it is certainly in the synthesis of the space of the “I” with the “non-I” or “Other”—in the negative-space of their contact through poetic thinking.²⁶ If, as Shklovsky theorized in his *Theory of Prose* (201), poetry is employed to “lay bare” the devices of language, it also renders material the spaces and relations *between* words. It is these absent, “negative” spaces, what the poem *does not*, finally, and perhaps *cannot*, say, but that is

²⁶ Jarraway points out the similarity between Stevens’s “new direction” in thinking indicated by *Parts of a World*, in which he begins to question “the very notion of belief based on logocentric premises,” and Heidegger’s remarks that we “do not seek that force [of earlier thinking] in what has already been thought. We seek it in something that has not been thought, and from which what has been thought receives its essential space” (95).

figured in the poetry nevertheless, with which this project—and the bulk of Stevens’s oeuvre—is primarily concerned.

Stevens’s emphasis in *The Rock*, for example—a collection which, as the title suggests, places a heavy emphasis on concrete “reality”—should not be considered as working toward a rejection of the abstraction that typifies his previous few collections (notably the preceding *Auroras of Autumn*, which has been criticized for its perceived departure from any grounding in concrete reality at all²⁷). Instead, *The Rock*, and perhaps more successfully than any of his prior collections, works to elaborate and express Stevens’s “reality-imagination” complex—the self-professed drive of his entire poetic career. Indeed, what is finally *concrete* in *The Rock* is not the reality of the world represented *by* the poetry, or the objects within that world (no more so, at any rate, than throughout his earlier works), but instead, the *figuration* of the imagination itself. In a key example, “The Poem that Took the Place of a Mountain,” which can be read in many ways as an elaboration of “Chocorua,” Stevens begins: “There it was, word for word, the poem that took the place of a mountain”—in this way explicitly formulating from the beginning the “redoubled vision” that had already been evident in “Chocorua” and would become a trade-mark in these later poems. This “redoubled vision”—whereby the speaker distances himself *first* from the represented reality of the poem, and *then*, further, from the poem as art-object—opens a space for both speaker and reader in which the constructedness of both the poem *and* the reality of the outside phenomenal world becomes apparent. The poem continues:

²⁷ Even the critic Glen McLeod, who lauds the collection as a “meditation in the fullest sense, a poetry purely contemplative, issuing from a mind which is exploring itself, not a set of ideas” still deems it “a questionable poetry even by the most generous estimate” (225)

He breathed its oxygen,
Even when the book lay turned in the dust of his table.

It reminded him how he had needed
A place to go to in his own direction,

How he had recomposed the pines,
Shifted the rocks and picked his way among the clouds,

For the outlook that would be right,
Where he could be complete in an unexplained completion:

The exact rock where his inexactnesses
Would discover, at last, the view toward which they had
edged,

Where he could lie and, gazing down at the sea,
Recognize his unique and Solitary home. (435)

Stevens recognizes and articulates within this poem the concrete formal qualities of *both* reality and the imagination, managing to maintain them in the dialectical relation that for him was so essential to either of their subjective existence. This is achieved most notably through the juxtaposition of the subject's "inexactness" with the "exactness" of the rock within the grammatical mood of the conditional. It is toward this juxtaposition that the poem "edges"; indeed it is *via* precisely this juxtaposition that an edge can be (conditionally) delineated and encountered within the poem, and that an expansive view *beyond and inclusive of* both the "exactness" and "inexactness" fundamental to the subject and his perceptions can be (also conditionally) achieved. In another letter to Heringman Stevens had written: "Sometimes I believe most in the imagination for a long time and then, without reasoning about it, turn to reality and believe in that and that alone. But both of these things project themselves endlessly and I want them to do just that" (L 710). In "The Poem That Took the Place of a Mountain," Stevens realizes the "inexact" in "exact" form, not through the formulation of either *as such*, but instead, by figuring between them a space of just such *endless projection*.

The “redoubled vision” that Stevens effects in the poem allows for the representation not of “the mountain” itself, but instead of the process by which “the mountain” is perceived and represented (first to the poet himself, then to the poet’s projected reader, and then lastly of course to the reader of Stevens himself). In this way, the poem opens up a tangible space within which “reality” and the “imagination” may indeed be “endlessly projected.” It is precisely this space with which this project is concerned.

Chapter One: The Eye

Things seen are things as seen. Absolute real.

—Wallace Stevens (CP 902)

There is no wing like meaning.

—Wallace Stevens (CP 903)

Wallace Stevens's concern for ways of seeing and the representation of perspective is apparent in his earliest collection, *Harmonium*. Indeed, many of the strategies that he employs throughout the collection, as well as throughout his career, in examining subjectivity through close attention to ocular perception, are laid out in "Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird"—a poem which serves as a kind of *Ars Poetica* for Stevens, describing as it does a familiar trajectory in his poetry whereby the autonomous singular voice or frame is deconstructed to reveal a perspectival contingency. The initial representation of the blackbird as the "only moving thing" certainly constrains the perspectival frame in the poem's opening lines: "Among twenty snowy mountains,/ The only moving thing / Was the eye of the black bird" (CP 74). This perspective is, however, over the course of the rest of the poem, fractured, disseminated, and finally wholly dispersed. In the second section, the text shifts from the insular framework of the blackbird's eye as "only moving thing"—a perspective which had previously reduced the complexities of range and movement contained within twenty snowy mountains to its seemingly autonomous gaze—to a more diverse perspectival range: "I was of three minds," the speaker writes, "Like a tree/ In which there are three blackbirds" (CP 74). Though the absolutism of the first section has been abandoned in that we encounter here not one but *three* perspectives, it is important to note that each of these perspectives—the "three minds" of the speaker's consciousness, peering out from the branches of the tree at three fixed points—retain for themselves a fixed singularity. This fixity is exploded in the third section: "The blackbird whirled in the autumn winds. / It was a small part of the pantomime" (CP 75). Here, for the first time, the outside world is permitted to enter the frame. The whirl of the autumn winds shifts the speaker's perspective, dispersing it from the singular frame of the blackbird. The blackbird becomes at this juncture only "a small

part” of a larger and more complex structure of (perceived and perceiving) bodies who constitute together the “pantomime” of living things. This multiplicity is further reinforced and rendered more complex by the fourth section where the perspectives of “man” and “woman” are established as equal and level with the perspective of the blackbird: “A man and a woman/ Are one. / A man and a woman and a blackbird / Are one” (CP 75). What results is a flattening of the recently complicated perspective, which is taken a step further with section five:

I do not know which to prefer,
The beauty of inflections
Or the beauty of innuendoes,
The blackbird whistling
Or just after. (CP 75)

Here, the speaker’s sensory perceptions are removed from the blackbird itself. That is, he is once again established more firmly in his own autonomous territory and therefore free to reflect, “I do not know...” The *not-knowing* originates from within the fixed framework of a single subjectivity. The reference to the “or just after” of the blackbird’s whistle, however—the idea that the absence of sensory input might be in fact preferable to its presence—introduces another level of perspectival analysis to the poem. The speaker is now dislodged from the immediacy of the material and sensory world; he, along with the reader, is now finally open to the consideration of that which was and would remain most vital to Stevens throughout his career: the world of the imagination. The emphasis shifts to choice and preference, thus allowing for the first time the possibility that it is *both* inflections *and* innuendos that are beautiful; the possibility that *both* are, in fact, absolutely *integral* to the beauty the listener perceives within the blackbird’s call.

Sections six and seven further diffuse the perspectival range of the blackbird into the realm of the imagination. In section six, we see not the blackbird but its shadow—visible in front of the window, having “[c]rossed it, to and fro. / The mood / Traced in the

shadow / An indecipherable cause” (CP 75). In section seven an absent, abstract, audience is for the first time addressed: the men of Haddam (presumably the small town of Haddam, Connecticut). Not only is the reader now invited to leave the fixed space of the speaker and the blackbird to engage in the shadowy space of unknown and unknowable men, but she is further asked to reflect upon the (perhaps misguided, it is suggested) imaginations of these already-imagined men: “Why do you imagine golden birds? / Do you not see how the blackbird / Walks around the feet / Of the women about you?” (CP 75).

What is introduced in these sections, in terms of an elaboration of the role of the imagination in the structure of reality (the “mood” and “indecipherable cause” of section six, and the men of Haddam’s inability to perceive their own reality due to the loftiness of their imaginations) is further elaborated upon in section eight:

I know noble accents
And lucid, inescapable rhythms;
But I know, too,
That the blackbird is involved
In what I know. (CP 75-76)

Not only is the perspective of the blackbird equal or level to the perspective of man or woman here, they are suddenly fused. From here on, the multiplicity of perspectives in the poem are demonstrated to be inextricably linked.

The perspectival trajectory in section nine evokes the trajectory of Stevens’s entire opus, culminating in his final collections, *The Auroras of Autumn* and *The Rock*. “When the blackbird flew out of sight,” Stevens writes, “It marked the edge / Of one of many circles” (CP 76). It is through a consideration of the simultaneous absence and presence of the blackbird in this passage—that is to say, the blackbird’s remove from the perimeter of the visible, while remaining within range of imaginative grasp—that we can best understand Stevens’s poetic project over the course of his career. In the conceptualization of a movement by which the blackbird’s flight both delineates and transcends the boundary its

own flight path describes, Stevens points to a continuity of perspective that no longer contains a vanishing point, linear trajectory, or unifying center. By the time we have reached this moment in “Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird,” we have indeed travelled so far from the more restrictive eye evoked in the first section of the poem, that there is no longer any center at all, only movement. More than that, it is only the *process* by which that movement is represented that is now described. After this point in the poem—sections ten through twelve—the actual figure of the blackbird becomes even more abstract. In section eleven, for example, the blackbird is only a fearful misapprehension: “In that he mistook / The shadow of his equipage / For blackbirds” (CP 76).

Though section twelve installs us back more firmly in the autonomous perspective of a singular bird, it also introduces a strange perspectival vertigo, disrupting any presumed singularity: “The river is moving. / The blackbird must be flying” (CP 76). A complete reverse from the opening section’s fixed gaze is effected here, so that what becomes undeniably clear at this point in the poem is the contingency of perspective, and therefore our dependency on analogy, which serves to re-establish a language of equivalencies that will aid (or conversely upset) intelligibility and representation. Whereas in the first section, “the only moving thing / Was the eye of the blackbird” (CP 74), section twelve begins with the massive, incessant movement—unperceivable and unimaginable as a whole—of the river and only *then* works backwards to deduce that the blackbird *must also* be moving. It is this shift that results in a sort of vertigo whereby the reader must shift her focus from the movement of the river to the movement of the blackbird. This shift, which aims at restoring power to the autonomous gaze of the blackbird does not wholly succeed. The movement of the river evoked by the first line is too strong to be cancelled out by the shift to the blackbird. We know that the river is still moving even as we make the shift: that it has been and will continue to move, independent of the blackbird. Even as we are

repositioned in the eye of the blackbird, therefore, and asked to see the river's movement as a *cause* of the blackbird's motion, an unconquerable distance due to the antecedent introduction of the river has been introduced. We *know* that the power and range of the blackbird's perspective is ultimately unmatched to, and therefore leaves unchanged, the steady motion of the river.

So certain of this are we that, in the final, thirteenth section, when we are returned to the singular form of the bird in a singular tree, we meet him at quite a different level than we met the blackbird of the first section. The passivity of the blackbird in this final section underscores a temporal passivity established by the first three lines: "It was evening all afternoon. / It was snowing / And it was going to snow" (CP 76). By passivity I do not intend to suggest *weakness*, but instead the sort of supreme passivity that Maurice Blanchot, drawing on the writings of Emmanuel Levinas, describes in *The Writing of the Disaster*: "a passivity which is the *pas* ["not"] in the utterly passive, and which has therefore abandoned the level of life where *passive* would simply be the opposite of *active*. In this way we fall outside inertia" (13-14). Blanchot goes on to reflect that such true passivity can only be evoked in a language that "reverses itself." To write of suffering, for example, but in "reverse," taps into what Blanchot calls an "un-power, the I excluded from mastery and from its status as subject (as first person)—the I destitute even of obligation" (15). This "I," as Blanchot goes on to explain, effectively disappears not only from the text but from suffering itself:

[I]t is not borne into the present (still less is it experienced in the present). It is without present, just as it is without beginning or end; time has radically changed its meaning and its flow. Time, without present, I without I: this is not anything of which one could say that experience—a form of knowledge—would either reveal or conceal it. (15)

It is a similar “reverse” that is effected by Stevens’s “Thirteen Ways of Looking at A Blackbird”—as well as in his work as a whole. We are dislodged from the particular in order to access the abstract, the general—a space, that is, as cleared of the temporal present as it has been of the singular, totalizing or cohering “I.” As opposed to Stevens’s far less complex, “Anecdote of the Jar,” also from *Harmonium*—where the jar retains its fixity and manages to communicate most impressively *through* that fixity not the authoritative, but rather the arbitrary quality of its perspectival frame—the blackbird’s perspective continuously shifts, continuously disrupts any notion of a fixed center. In its *seeming* arbitrariness the blackbird actually suggests a far wider-ranging and authoritative perspective. But, just like the thirteenth and final section of Stevens’s poem, we are never able to escape the “arbitrariness” of singularity entirely. The lone blackbird remains in his tree, while all the while, “it was snowing and going to snow.” Everything is always happening and going to happen in Stevens’s poetry, and it is the extremity of this passivity, the establishment within the work of an ex-temporal “I without an I,” that is the definitive (dis)stance of Stevens’s work. What is remarkable in “Thirteen Ways” is that Stevens is, throughout all thirteen phases in which the perspective shifts and disbands, able to maintain—indeed, the passive “thirteenth” voice depends upon it—that original, autonomous, totalitarian gaze from whose perspective we began. Stevens’s feat, I argue, is that he is able to create a space in his work where the particularities and limitations of the “I” are maintained to such a degree that they are permitted to come into direct contact with the abstract—the ex-temporal “I without an I,” or “non-I.” This is effected through the careful elaboration of the figurative *process* of that representation. It is within this space of *figuration*, the elaboration of a middle-space *between* conception and form, that Stevens moves in a passive “pas” or “step” beyond the inertia of the singular into an ex-temporal

framework which includes the possibility—which *is* the possibility, perhaps—of contact with the Other.

A Redoubled Vision

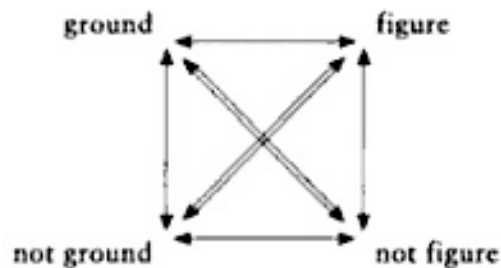
Similarly to the manner in which a visual artist endeavours not just to record the information of the physical world around her but bring it to life as if “whole” on the page, Stevens endeavours to shape through language an image of a consciousness that includes *both* reality and the imagination. He avoids, therefore, the figuration of any direct opposition between “reality” and the “imagination” in his work—as though the only avenue between them was a straightforward flight from point A to point B, then back again. Instead, what he often manages is a perspectival figuration comparable to what Rosalind Krauss refers to as a “redoubled vision: of a seeing and a knowing that one sees” (OU 19). *Between* the particular and the general, the fixed “I” and the “non-I,” Stevens affords a space of projection in which perspective can refract in multiple directions. Ultimately, therefore, it is not A or B, reality or the imagination, that is represented *as such* by Stevens, but rather the *process* of their interaction: the “pure presentness,” to again use Krauss’s terms, of the relation *between*.

Relying on the trope of vision so central to Stevens, consider the analogy of the flash of a baseball that Rosalind Krauss employs in *The Optical Unconscious*¹ in order to explain the process by which, in a moment of “pure vision,” the eye registers objects not in successive stages of their motion but in an “all-at-onceness that re-structures successiveness” (15). It is through this process that “the blur of that white smudge” (the

¹ Krauss relates a conversation she had with Michael Fried in which Fried asked, “Do you know who Frank [Stella] thinks is the greatest living American?” “Ted Williams” was the correct reply. “Ted Williams sees faster than any other living human,” Fried explained: “He see so fast that when the ball comes over the plate—90 miles an hour—he can see the stitches. So he hits the ball right out of the park. That’s why Frank thinks he’s a genius” (OU 7).

travelling baseball) may be transformed into “pure contact, pure simultaneity, pure optical pattern: vision in touch with its own resources” (7), and along similar lines that Stevens can be understood to re-structure the relationship between “reality” and the “imagination”—re-envisioning them instead in an “all-at-onceness” of their interrelation: in an image of “the whole man” (Stevens, CP 652)². Stevens takes up Benedetto Croce’s charge that man, considered in “wholeness” is not an *end* but “all nature in its perpetual labour of evolution”—as well as the charge that poetry, in its “triumph of contemplation,” might come to reflect, and even enact, through its process of perpetual re-presentation, precisely that “labour of evolution” (CP 652).

Krauss explains that it is, indeed, the “all-at-onceness” of vision that allows the possibility of perceiving any image *as a whole*, rather than as flat and “dumbly physical” (98). To illustrate this fundamental of perception Krauss elaborates the simple figure versus ground relationship, into a Klein group (figure 1)³



² As Peterson has suggested much of the impulse and the ambition behind Stevens’s poetry is for a “Re-statement of Romance” (CP 118). More specifically, for a “reassertion of Coleridge’s claim that the imagination ‘brings the whole soul of man into activity’” (Peterson 52). The re-structuring that takes place in Stevens’s work hinges on his ability to emphasize and *enact* within his poetry the “activity” described in the passage Peterson quotes from Coleridge’s *Biographia Literaria*. In this way, Stanley Burnshaw is right to have differentiated Stevens’s “sense poetry” from Keats. The stasis and autonomy of Keats’s Grecian urn “suffuse(d) [...] with subjective emotion” (Burnshaw 29) gives way to Stevens’s active, perception-driven “Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird” where experience itself is “objectified,” available to be looked at from various, continually shifting angles.

³ The Klein group, in mathematical group theory, is the smallest possible non-cyclic group (that is, the smallest possible group of relations made up of more than one element).

As this formulation shows, the governing principle (figure vs. ground) of vision, assures that, indeed, there is never any “erasure of terms”; instead, both “figure” and “ground” are simultaneously “preserved and cancelled. Preserved all the more surely in that they are cancelled” (OU 15). This means that the image seen actually *exceeds* the boundary of the empirical limit, and “outside and inside take on a deductive relation to one another” (OU 16). Indeed, Krauss explains, the fundamental principle of vision that the Klein graph illustrates is a “redoubled vision” that “dispenses with narrative” entirely (OU 19). This “redoubled vision” is illustrated by Stevens in the eighth of his “Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird”:

I know noble accents
And lucid, inescapable rhythms;
But I know, too
That the blackbird is involved
In what I know. (CP 75-76)

It is here that the perspective of the poem “doubles back” on itself: from this point on the singular perspective with which we began becomes self-conscious, “redoubled.” It is aware, now, not only of what it sees but of the fact that its ‘seeing’ is structured by and dependent on—“the blackbird”—its perspectival limitations.

Stevens’s exploration does not stop there, and neither does Krauss’s. Krauss goes on to explain that if the figure/ground axis is contrasted against the pair “not-figure/not-ground,” the Klein group that results consists instead of “double negatives.” It is this figuration that has allowed, according to Krauss, an “alternative” art history to develop over the course of the twentieth century, one that “flouted” modernist assumptions about optics and opticality, about “essences and purifications,” and above all, refused its concerns with “the presumed ontological ground of the visual (OU 21).” The *trompe-l’oeil* “precision optics” of Marcel Duchamp’s surrealist collage, Krauss argues, exemplify this “double

negative” effect, and result in the representation of a sort of “spacetime”—that is, a fusion of the temporal and the spatial. It is not surprising that Stevens was interested in the work of Duchamp given his own fascination with this effect, an exploration of which is prevalent in his own work: his conclusion, for example, in “Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird,” that “It was snowing and it was going to snow” (CP 76). As opposed to his forebears who were more interested in drawing time and space along different lyrical or narrative axes, Stevens was interested in depicting the integral “all at oneness” of their relation.

Indeed, the “redoubled vision” reflected in the final three sections of “Thirteen Ways” and throughout Stevens’s later work, should be understood in similar terms as the space explored by Duchamp’s work “*in-between*” figure and ground, the elaboration of which would serve to forever destabilize the art world’s traditional figure/ground relation.⁴ The “redoubled vision” effected by the final sections of “Thirteen Ways,” or still more stridently in a later poem like “The Poem that Took the Place of a Mountain,” “flouts” the literary equivalent of the figure vs. ground relation, which the modernist movement had largely maintained: a subject (figure) at odds with his world (ground). Stevens’s “redoubled vision” disrupts this relation: the “I” of the “same”— the speaker of the poem—transcending the bounds of subjectivity to be incorporated in an “enlarged vision,” *inclusive of* the “non-I” (the poem’s “object,” the poem itself, and the reader) in which the terms of the “I” and the “non-I” are effectively both “preserved and cancelled.”

⁴ In *Working Space*, Frank Stella argues against the accepted idea that contemporary abstraction in the visual arts finds its roots in Cubism, positing that its foundations can be traced at least as far back as Caravaggio, given his ability to “dissolve us into the space presented, the ability to make a domed mansion of the void, and the ability to establish a positive and definite sense of space” (19). “[T]he aim of art is to create space,” Stella writes. “Space that is not compromised by decoration or illustration, space in which the subjects of painting can live. This is what painting has always been about” (5). Caravaggio, according to Stella, prefigures modern abstraction in his concern for the creation of “internal space” in his work. “If there is one thing that can be said with certainty about Caravaggio,” Stella affirms, “it is that he was better at creating internal space, space among the figures constituting the action and subject of his pictures, than anyone that came either before or after him” (18).

“Intelligibility,” writes Levinas in *Totality and Infinity*, a word he further defines as, “the very occurrence of representation,” is what allows “precisely the possibility for the other to be determined by the same without determining the same, without introducing alterity into it” (124). What makes something intelligible, in other words, is its “representation,” and “representation” is always of that which is *other than the subject for whom the object appears*, as the “poem of the mountain” is to the prospective reader of “The Poem That Took The Place of a Mountain,” or as the “mountain” is to the poet for that matter. “Representation” is what allows the poet to perceive the mountain at all, and the reader the poem, from her *own* unique vantage point without either the mountain having to perceive the poet or the poem the reader. The reader can remain, that is, beside the book, overturned “in the dust of his table” (CP 435) just as the poet must, necessarily, remain beside the object that he wishes to represent. One must always, in this sense, be a little “beside oneself” in order to render that “self” and its perceptions intelligible. If one becomes too significantly absorbed within any particular experience, that experience will doubtless remain unintelligible, impossible for the individual to represent. We encounter the world through the very distance that we (the figure) are able to achieve from the observable scene (the ground). The “all-at-onceness” of our vision immediately establishes a kind of depth that is contingent on that oblique relation and eradicated were those lines of intersection either to merge or fail to intersect.

In the case of “The Poem That Took the Place of a Mountain” and other poems of a similar structure, what Stevens must remain at an oblique angle to is *representation itself*. But it is precisely this, his remaining “*beside*” representation, and being *conscious* of remaining beside it, that allows the possibility in the poem of a “pure vision” of his “unique and solitary home” (CP 435).

In opposition to a solipsistic interpretation of this “unique and solitary home⁵,” I propose instead that what is at work in this poem and in much of Stevens’s work is what Levinas calls “the free exercise of the same,” that is, the “disappearance, within the same of the I opposed to the non-I” (TI 124), in an “all-at-onceness” of “pure vision.” Instead of an isolated “I” that must be kept separate from the represented “other” (the mountain, the poem itself, the reader of the poem), the figuration of the *process of representation itself* creates a space in which the opposition between the subject and object functionally disappears. The collapse of distance in Stevens’s work between the “I” and the “other”—a collapse that, importantly, preserves (all the more) at the same time that it *cancel*s both terms—simultaneously generates the persistent desire in Stevens’s poetry to *bridge* that distance, while rendering that same desire *structurally* insatiable. As in “The Snow Man,” where what is desirable to “behold” is established not only at the distance of an absent “listener” (described as “nothing himself”), but by the double negative, “the nothing that is not there and the nothing that is”(CP 8), which seems to cancel out the territory of any sort of perceivable place at all. Or, to use again the example of “Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird,” where the continuously shifting perspective (which would seem to suggest a wide perspectival range) finds itself at odds with the poem’s framing apparatus, which is actually intensely narrow—the singular eye of the blackbird the poem’s “only moving thing” (CP 74). These poems illustrate through perspective and imagery what “The Well Dressed Man with a Beard,” a poem included in the 1942 collection *Parts of a World*, stipulates quite plainly: “It can never be satisfied, the mind, never” (224).

⁵ Though the emphasis on Stevens’s work as ultimately solipsist and escapist is palpably shifting, thanks to critics like John Logenbach, who convincingly brings to the fore the dominant social and political concerns that he sees especially evident in the early poetry, and Simon Critchley, whose philosophical investigation of Stevens’s work cast him instead as a concerned and engaged as well as a “legitimate” thinker, the notion that Stevens’s work remains aloof from, for example, Williams’s world of “things as they are,” and instead in the realm of a disengaged imagination, continues to persist.

For critic Simon Critchley, this statement indeed characterizes a “central motif” in Stevens’s work. “The mind’s desire will always exceed the beauty that the poetry can bring to reality,” he writes, and thus Stevens’s words “are chosen out of a desire that outstrips them” (TMA 81). This insatiability so critical to Stevens’s conception of the mind, stems not only, in Lacanian terms, from a fundamental lack at the root of human consciousness, but also (and not unrelated) at the root of language itself. “We are the obstacle,” writes Lacan, and thus, “a function of an optics we will never master” (quoted in Krauss OU 184). Stevens’s concern is for acknowledging himself, and his language, as the “obstacle” of his own poems—of acknowledging the primacy of an unmasterable “optics” to every process of perception, and therefore every representation. “But I know, too, / That the blackbird is involved / In what I know” (CP 75-76) is what opens up a space within Stevens’s poetry in which to perceive not only the “obstacle” itself (whether it be ourselves, the poet, or the poem) but the “endless projection” between these obstacles—the space in which we glimpse, in other words, the very processes by which representation continually shapes and re-shapes our perceptions, shared and unshared, of the world around us⁶.

⁶ Lacan’s discussion of “the gaze” is also pertinent here. In the second chapter of *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis* Lacan reflects on the phrase in Valéry’s *Jeune Parque*, “*I saw myself seeing myself*.” He writes: “What isolates this apprehension of thought is a sign of doubt, which has been called methodological doubt, which concerns whatever might give support to thought in representation. How is it, then, that the *I see myself seeing myself* remains its envelope and base, and, perhaps more than one thinks, grounds its certainty?” (80). Lacan goes on to argue that “it is quite clear that I see outside, that perception is not in me, that it is on the objects that it apprehends” without disallowing for the fact that the impression that one “*sees oneself seeing oneself*” is immanent in the subject’s perceptions. “The privilege of the subject seems to be established here from that bipolar reflexive relation by which, as soon as I perceive, my representations belong to me” (81), writes Lacan, explaining further that, “consciousness, in its illusion of seeing itself seeing itself, find its basis in the inside-outside structure of the gaze” (82). Painting, according to Lacan, always has a relation to “the gaze.” The painter’s object is to paint the gaze into the picture, to position it “at the centre” (100). A self-portrait should capture the gaze—the manner in which the artist looks back at himself—but this should be visible to other viewers as well. The artist should confront the viewer, should “impose himself on us” (100). There should be no “coincidence” between the gaze and the eye of either the artist or the viewer, instead there should be “a lure.” “When, in love, I solicit a look,” explains Lacan, “what is profoundly unsatisfying and always missing is that—*You never look at me from the place from which I see you*” as well as “what I look at is never what I wish to see” (103). But still, one continues to look—that is what Lacan means by “the lure” of the gaze.

Paradoxically, it is through Stevens's exploration of a "lack" and the corresponding "blindness" central to human consciousness and expression—as well as his perennial "as if," and the forever unnameable "thing"—that the reader is provided with the feeling that, at least in brief moments, the "thing"—though that "thing" is perhaps nothing other than the desire to name it—has *indeed* been named. What Dan Chiasson, in a review of the new *Selected Poems* (2009) calls Stevens's "abstracted abstractions" (61), function not, therefore, to ultimately *distance* themselves from the "thing" described, but instead to *assert* the manner in which the abstraction of that "thing" is integral to its constitution in perceived reality. As Stevens himself contends in *The Necessary Angel*, the fictive world is without a doubt a world of fact, but it is an *enlarged* world of fact—a system of *things as they are*, rather than an arrangement of *objects as such*⁷. The "mountain," therefore, as seen by the poet, is not a static land formation to be described from the fixed-point perspective of the viewer, which would be the same in any case, but is instead always inevitably engaged in a process of representation wherein the opposition of the fixed-point, the "I," and the unknown of the "non-I," disappear into the space of their relation. This "disappearance" of opposition is, as previously emphasized, not to be understood as a "sublime" transcendence outside of the realm of the immediate encounter, but to say, after Kant, that the thing that is sought is immanent within the object and the subject's relationality to the object itself.⁸ Stevens is too pragmatic for any genuine preservation of a

⁷ In his introduction to *The Necessary Angel* Stevens writes: "These are not pages of criticism nor of philosophy. Nor are they merely literary pages. They are pages that have to do with one of the enlargements of life. They are without pretence beyond my desire to add my own definition to poetry's many existing definitions" (640). Stevens's "modest" claim for the work ("to add my own definition...") is in fact crucial to his conception of how the truth: "things as they are" (that is, "as they are" directly experienced), may be represented and conveyed.

⁸ In his *Critique of Judgment*, Kant proposes that "things" are possible only as a "purpose," that they are always engaged in an active and interpretive system of cause and effect. "Seeing that a thing is possible only as a purpose requires that the thing's form could not have arisen according to mere natural laws, laws we can cognize by understanding alone as applied to objects of sense, but requires that even empirical cognition of this form in terms of its cause and effect presupposes concepts of reason. [Therefore] the form of such a thing is, as far as reason is concerned, contingent in terms of all empirical laws. But reason, even if it tries to gain

Romantic, pre-modern sense of transcendence in the work. In Stevens, it is “always the same that determines the other” (Levinas 124), while the same (the “I”) itself remains undetermined and unchanged. “Transcendence” for Stevens is achieved through a radical exteriorization of the “same” and the “other”; that is, the process is located neither in the subject nor in the object but precisely in their *relationality*. The figuration of this process in Stevens’s work is what I have already proposed as a “representation of representation”; it is a “transcendence” that remains a pragmatic relationship, where the “other” is determined and understood in the purely subjective terms of the “same.” It is this “subjective” relationality that constitutes the very essence of truth not only for the early pragmatists that influenced Stevens, but also for Levinas: “To be sure,” writes Levinas:

representation is the seat of truth: the movement proper to truth consists in the thinker being determined by the object presented to him, without weighing on him—such that the thinker who submits to what is thought does so “gracefully,” as though the object, even in the surprises it has in store for cognition, had been anticipated by the subject (TI 124).

Turning to another late poem, Stevens’s “To an Old Philosopher in Rome,” may give us a better idea of what Stevens means by the “enlarged” world of fact that poetry affords. The poem invokes the philosopher Georges Santayana, a former teacher and mentor of Stevens at Harvard, whose aestheticism and philosophical insularity Stevens had distanced himself from early on in his own career. James Logenbach remarks that, in the poem, “Santayana’s life, so narrow and so pure, represents a negative ideal for Stevens”

insight only into the conditions attached to the production of a natural product, must always cognize not only the product’s form but the form’s necessity as well. And yet in that given form it cannot assume that necessity. Hence that very contingency of the thing’s form is a basis for regarding the product as if it had come about through a causality that only reason can have. Such a causality would be the ability to act according to purposes (i.e. a will), and in presenting an object as possible only through such an ability we would be presenting it as possible only as a purpose” (CJ 248).

(300). The poem does less to engage with Santayana's ideas than to engage with the *idea* of Santayana's philosophical approach. "The old philosopher" becomes symbolic of the possibilities and limitations inherent to thinking, to "inquisition" in any form, in the face of a greater, and utterly unresponsive unknown (death). Nevertheless, that Santayana's traditional philosophical approach was more or less in direct conflict with Stevens's own is made clear not least through an emphasis on the word "total"—for Stevens, a dubious word at best—which is used three times by the end of the poem. As Logenbach relates, Stevens resisted an "oversystematized account" of his own methods and poetry, and in a late letter dismissed the idea of any such structuring notion. "I have no wish," Stevens wrote definitively, "to arrive at a conclusion" (L 710). But "To An Old Philosopher in Rome" can in no way be read as a condemnation of either Santayana, his philosophical approach, or his aestheticism. As Logenbach writes, the poem "remains poignant rather than judgmental," exposing the "seductions as well as (the) limitations"(301) of the old philosopher's world. This ambiguous relationship is expressed in Stevens's description of "a total grandeur at the end," where "every visible thing" would be "enlarged and yet / No more than a bed, a chair and moving nuns" (CP 434). Where there would be, that is, "no erasure of terms," but where the frame of each object would nonetheless exist "enlarged"—no longer bound by its "empirical limit." The world of objects, and their arrangement to one another are imagined by Stevens to, at last, "dispense with narrative" (Krauss, OU 19), to exist *as they are*, not "as such," not as indeed "total" at all, but—just as the fixed gaze of the blackbird in "Thirteen Ways" was systematically destabilized—in the very *continuous, imaginative* process of that "total construction." The "edifice" that is created within the poem is *total* not in the sense that it is "complete" or has been (or could be) "completed." Instead, the emphasis Stevens places on the objects in the poem—evoking their ordinariness and thereby suggesting that they might easily be substituted for others,

continually replaced—creates a matrix within which the ordinary and subjective details, qualities and experiences that are *not*, and *could not*, be named in the poem because they lie outside the philosopher’s as well as the poet’s ken, are nonetheless included. The “totality” that is suggested here is one founded *not* by what is included, or indeed what it would be possible *to* include in the poem, but by its excess.

The most important aspect of the “total grandeur” of the final form, however, and reminiscent of the concluding stanzas of “Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird,” is that it is *chosen* by the perceiver himself: “the total grandeur of the total edifice, / Chosen by an inquisitor of structures / For himself” (CP 434). It is knowingly *constructed* by he who is aware of, and inquisitive of, the fundamentals of that construction—by he who, in other words, in a “redoubled vision,” both sees and *knows* that he sees (Krauss, OU 19). It is upon this “threshold”—an awareness of both the “seductions and the limitations” of his vision—that the old philosopher, “stops...As if the design of all his words takes form /And frame from thinking and is realized” (CP 434). The very *processes of seeing and thinking*, as this conclusion avers, produce the structures of both mind and world. In placing the emphasis, once again, upon the imaginative process by which even a “total edifice” is realized, Stevens undercuts the value of the “total” entirely, establishing for the old philosopher (rather than any final product or *result*) a space of continuously generative thinking—a space that must be understood, according to Stevens, as proper to the life of the mind.

Stevens’s own misgivings regarding the perceived solipsism of Santayana’s philosophy and his own self-diagnosed “imagination-reality complex” add to the ambiguity of these final lines. That the “total grandeur” of the final form is realized by the thinker, the constructor of the form, “for himself,” supports a solipsistic interpretation that each individual mind, as the philosopher’s, may ultimately remain trapped within the delimiting

structure that he himself is responsible for maintaining, providing no opportunity for contact with the world beyond. But the fact that the structure is created by an “*inquisitor of structures*” is an important distinction, and one which at once both binds and frees the philosopher from the delimitation that the structure imposes. Also crucial to an understanding of this poem is the fact that thinking does not arrive at “form and frame” as either pre-existing or transcendent. At no point is structure *imposed* upon thinking; instead, it is thinking that is always already the source of any form or frame by which it is eventually represented. Rather than building an isolated structure within which to house the intellect, this figuration of thinking as *dependent* upon component parts that always *come before* point a way out of solipsism and the imagined autocracy of the mind.

“Form and frame” are to be understood here quite specifically—as “the design of all his words” makes clear—as language itself. Once more, therefore, we find ourselves, as in “The Poem That Took the Place of a Mountain,” within a space of “redoubled vision” where the words of the poet on the page (they themselves formed “for” himself by the structures of his own mind) *take the place of* the projected moment of the final “realization” of the philosopher’s thinking. Again, the revelation of representation as a process—continuously “projecting” in this way—serves to highlight not the solipsism of thinking but its endless generative force.

“There is,” as Levinas contends, “an absolute, creative freedom, prior to the venturesome course of the hand, which chances on to the goal it seeks” (TI 124-125). It is this always ever creative freedom of the mind that at once binds and liberates the subject—the “I” of the same—to “frame and form.” Even that “frame and form” by which the “I” represents the Other, or non-I (including in this respect his own subjectivity and thinking), is therefore arrived at secondarily and is contingent on a fundamental freedom from form which directs the processes by which form itself is eventually acquired and understood.

That form constitutes both liberty and constraint is reflected in the very doubleness of the word re-presentation. “Representation is...projection, inventing the goal that will be presented to the still groping act as won a priori. The ‘act’ of representation discovers, properly speaking, nothing before itself” (Levinas, TI 125). In other words, he who would represent either himself or the Other is always encountering the “obstacle” of his own “creative freedom,” “representation” itself already brought to light by the “vision of that goal (which) had cleared a passage for it” and which he had already “projected forth” (Levinas, TI 125).

The Pure Present

At the same time, it is this *a priori* “creative freedom” that allows for the dissolution of the obstacle and for the opposition between “I” and “non-I” (in both preserving their terms), to disappear in a moment of “total vision.” Seeming to echo Krauss’s analogy of the baseball—seen not in the successive stages of its trajectory but in an “all-at-onceness” of immediate perception—Levinas writes:

representation is pure present. The positing of a pure present without even tangential ties with time is the marvel of representation. It is a void of time, interpreted as eternity. To be sure the I who conducts his thoughts *becomes* (or more exactly ages) in time, in which his successive thoughts, across which he thinks in the present, are spread forth. But this becoming in time does not appear on the plane of representation: representation involves no passivity. (TI 125)

It is this “pure present” toward which Stevens, throughout his poetic career, aspired; a “pure present,” that could not possibly (“without even tangential ties to time”) retreat into a solipsism of the “I” that can only be understood temporally, but instead moves toward a direct a-temporal encounter between the “I” and the “Other.” This contact results not due

to a *collapse* of distance or transcendence into a realm where distance is no longer perceivable or relevant, but instead due to the radical exteriorization of both I and Other (an emphasis, that is, on their absolute difference). It is this realization of ultimate incompatibility that allows a shift in emphasis to the *relationality* between the two terms, and subsequently the (inherent) possibility of *bridging* the distance that relationality has incurred in an immediate, *spatial*, encounter.

Distance is a theme by which Stevens often works out precisely this question of the radical limits imposed upon the “optics” of subjectivity. In the first of “Two Illustrations That the World Is What You Make of It,”⁹ for example, which includes the significant subtitle, “The Constant Disquisition of the Wind,” the speaker remarks on his own sudden sense of the “distance of the sun” to the earth—a sense that he describes as “[t]he shadow of a sense of his own” (CP 436). The speaker acknowledges in this way the primacy of his own perception even over that of the outside, apparently objective, relation of objects in the world. Even the indisputable vastness of the distance between earth and sun is eclipsed by “a sense of *his own*, /A knowledge that the actual day was so much less” (CP 436, emphasis added). Through the acknowledgement, that is, of the very *smallness* of his own range of perception, the speaker asserts its constitutive power. “It is always the same that determines the other” (Levinas, TI 124); it is always “the same” that projects itself onto the objects of the world. It is therefore the speaker’s own perception of the “smallness” of that which is projected *onto* that world that corresponds to his perception of the “smallness” of the world itself (or rather his “sense,” in this case, of the smallness of the distance between sun and earth). He realizes that the world is but a “shadow” of *his own* projection. The sun is not, in this sense, either the “thing itself” or the true subject of the poem, but neither is

⁹ This poem is also from *The Rock*, the last collection published in Stevens’s lifetime.

the subject himself (this contrary to critics who would cast Stevens as a poet of the “act of the mind” [CP 219] with the emphasis on mind as *object* rather than *act*). Instead, and again via a *trompe-d’oeil* of the “double negative,” it is the space of the projection *between* the sun and the speaker that is the true subject of the poem, and where the boundaries between them ultimately disappear. Stevens renders this “in-between” space tangible through the elaboration of a third term: the wind—the *intangible* element in the poem that serves to spatialize and exteriorize the other two terms. It is the elaboration of this *third*, intermediate term (think also of “Blackbird’s” “I was of three minds” [CP 74]), that allows the poem at last to dissolve the “distance” between the “I” and the “non-I.”

The first section of the poem in its entirety reads:

I

The Constant Disquisition of the Wind

The sky seemed so small that winter day,
A dirty light on a lifeless world,
Contracted like a withering stick.

It was not the shadow of cloud and cold,
But a sense of the distance of the sun—
The shadow of a sense of his own,

A knowledge that the actual day
Was so much less. Only the wind
Seemed large and loud and high and strong.

And as he thought within the thought
Of the wind, not knowing that thought
Was not his thought or anyone’s

The appropriate image of himself,
So formed, became himself and he breathed,
The breath of another nature as his own,

But only its momentary breath,
Outside of and beyond the dirty light,
That never could be animal,

A nature still without shape,
Except his own—perhaps, his own

In a Sunday's violent idleness. (CP 434-435)

The “thought within the thought” depicted in the fourth stanza is what finally allows, then, for the “redoubled vision” by which a tangible interim space arises between the two opposing terms of self and world. What is resolved in “the appropriate image of himself,” is not, therefore, an image that is “his” (the speaker's, the “I”'s) alone, which would involve him in a (still oppositional) encounter with “another nature.” It is important to note that the “nature” the speaker experiences never *does* become his own. Instead, it remains “*as his own*,” just as the encounter itself remains necessarily “without shape—except his own.” It is crucial that the relationship never *does* succeed in taking concrete “animal” form, as doing so would annul the necessary intermediate space of the “momentary breath” by which the contact between terms was made possible. The form that is achieved, or represented as achieved, in stanza five, as “(t)he appropriate image of himself, / So formed, (which) became himself...” is one that is immediately re-imaged as “the breath of another.” “[H]e breathed/ *The breath of another nature as his own*” (CP 436, emphasis added) immediately displaces the achieved form of “himself” into that of “another.” The “form” of the speaker's subjectivity is here both achieved and displaced—or, rather, achieved through its very displacement. Through the illustration of the speaker's breathing “the breath of another nature as his own” the poem deconstructs not only an essentialized notion of subjectivity, but also the essentialized notion of form. What is “illustrated” in this poem is not any form or subjectivity in itself, or, conversely, its *lack*, but rather “the sense of the distance” necessary to perceiving or establishing either one¹⁰.

¹⁰ “What, or rather, who is the subject?” Asks Simon Critchley in *Ethics*, a critical examination of the works of Derrida, Levinas and others. He explains: “‘Subject’ derives from the Latin *sub-jectum*, literally, ‘that which is thrown under.’ Thus, the subject is that which is thrown under as a prior support or more fundamental stratum upon which other qualities, such as predicates, accidents and attributes may be based. *Subjectum* translated the Greek *hupokeimenon*, ‘that which lies under,’ ‘the substratum’; a term which refers in Aristotle's *Physics and Metaphysics* to that of which all other entities are predicated but which is itself not predicated of anything else. In a classical context, then, the subject is the subject of predication; the

Without the concrete establishment in the poem of this “sense of...distance” the “Sunday’s violent idleness” depicted in the poem would have to be understood—in *completed* object form—only in terms of the past. The conceptualization of a “sense of...distance” allows, in the evocation of a “pure present,” an encounter between two opposing terms. What results is therefore not a representation of either the self or the other, but a representation of the encounter between them, an a-temporal space of “wholeness” from which the possibility of representation itself arises.

But what is the possibility of an imagined (let alone real) “wholeness” for a poet who resisted an “oversystematized account” of poetry or of life for that matter, and who had “no wish to arrive at a conclusion” (L 710)?¹¹ In “Things of August,” from the notoriously abstract collection, *The Auroras of Autumn*, it is precisely this question that is taken up:

When was it that the particles became
The whole man, that tempers and beliefs became
Temper and belief and that differences lost
Difference and were one? (CP 421).

The reply, that “[i]t had to be / In the presence of a solitude of self, / An expanse and the abstraction of an expanse”(CP 421) establishes once again the negative-space between the “I” and the “Other,” in which the differences between them are—as the line above would suggest: “that differences lost / Difference and were one”—both preserved and cancelled. Through the repetition of the word “difference”—as well as the line-break prior to the second “difference” (resulting in its emphatic capitalization)—Stevens manages to

hupokeimenon is that which persists through change, the substratum, and which as a function analogous to matter (*hule*). It is matter that persists through the changes that form (*morphe*) imposes upon it” (51).

¹¹ This impulse toward representing inconclusiveness is much older than the “crisis of representation” by which Stevens’s modernist moment has been defined; it was registered most literally, for example, by Stevens’s forebear, Emily Dickinson, in “The World is Not Conclusion.”

emphasize that, though “differences” may be lost to become “one,” that “one” is incontestably made up of “Difference” itself. The poem continues:

When was it that we heard the voice of union?

Was it as we sat in the park and the archaic form
Of a woman with a cloud on her shoulder rose against the sky
And the sense of the archaic touched us at once
In a movement of the outlines of similarity?

We resembled one another at the sight.
The forgetful color of the autumn day
Was full of these archaic forms, giants
Of sense, evoking one thing in many men,
Evoking an archaic space, vanishing
In the space, leaving an outline of the size
Of the impersonal person, the wanderer,
The father, the ancestor, the bearded peer,
The total of human shadows bright as glass. (CP 421)

These shared “outlines of similarity” are nothing other than the route by which they are expressed—*language itself*. “We resembled one another at the sight,” yes, but it is only in the communication of that “sight,” that the “voice” of union is heard. The “archaic space” described here can be understood as the abstract space of language before it manifests itself in the “said”—that contains, therefore, in its negative-space of abstraction, “the impersonal person...the total of human shadows bright as glass” (CP 421). These multiple human “shadows” are what constitute the “particles” by which a “wholeness” might potentially be evoked through the very process of their *emerging* from the shadows: being *named*. “The wanderer, / The father, the ancestor, the bearded peer...” These are all possibilities that may be conjured into shared experience not through our ability to see and understand them in “particle” form, but by our ability to generalize and transform them into the abstraction of the “impersonal person,” “the *already said*”¹².

¹² “It is through,” writes Levinas, “the already said that words, elements of a historically constituted vocabulary, will come to function as signs and acquire a usage and bring about the proliferation so all the possibilities of vocabulary” (OTB 37). Later on we are reminded, however, that “every nameable identity can

The poem begins with the idea that amidst the cacophony of “locusts by day...crickets by night” there is an infinite array of new and ever-changing combinations and discoveries to be made between the notes that resound, and their different (potential) meanings: “Nothing is lost, loud locusts,” Stevens declares. “No note fails. These / Sounds are long in the living of the ear. / The honky-tonk out of the somnolent grasses / Is a memorizing, a trying out, to keep” (CP 417). What is at stake here, as in the rest of the poem, is the method by which we manage to make “sense” out of a process of sensory perception that is—for as long a duration as “the living of the ear”—always ongoing. “Nothing is lost,” but the question that is implied by the selective process—a “trying out, to keep”—referred to at the end of this section is of course, how and why do we keep what we keep? What do we, and how do we separate from the “saying” of language, that which is simply “*said*.” Similarly to the manner in which the “honky tonk out of the somnolent grasses” is “memorized,” retained within the “living ear” though not necessarily “*kept*,” Stevens writes further on, in section V of the poem:

The thinking as reader reads what has been written.
 He wears the words he reads to look upon
 Within his being,

.....

A finger with a ring to guide his eye
 From line to line, as we lie on the grass and listen
 To that which has no speech,

The voluble intentions of the symbols,
 The ghostly celebrations of the picnic,
 The secretions of insight (CP 419-420).

turn into a verb” but that this potentiality that must be understood within the “said” should not be understood to “reduce the difference between being and entities to a frivolous play of syntax [...] by interpreting the fact that essence exposes and is exposed, that temporalization is stated, resounds, is said, it is to not give priority to the said over the saying. It is first to awaken in the said the saying which is absorbed in it and, thus absorbed, enters into the history that the said imposes” (OTB 43).

Language, then, is figured as an infinite catalogue from which we have the opportunity to draw, a catalogue that is ultimately inclusive of “that which has no speech,” rather than restrictive to that which is “said” or even “sayable.” It is the “expanse and the abstraction of an expanse / A zone of time without the ticking of clocks, / A color that moved us with forgetfulness” (CP 421) *out of which* a *specific* expanse, the *specific* tick of a clock or the remembrance of a color,” may emerge, but which is inclusive of *all* things, all “voluble intentions” of experience or of expression of that experience. “The world,” then, “imagines for the beholder”:

He is born the blank mechanic of the mountains,
 The blank frere of the fields, the matin labourer.
 He is the possessed of sense not the possessor (CP 420).

The beholder is at last beholden *to*, that is, not proprietor *of* the steady influx of sensory data; he does not create the image of the mountains but remains *between* the image and its perpetual inscription on his senses. Just as the blackbird, in the penultimate section of “Thirteen Ways” flies over a river which we already know to be moving of its own accord, our perception is at last beholden to that which exceeds us and not the other way around. Also, that *perception* of the river—the actual sensory data received—is not what is ultimately shared or shareable. Were the river to remain in the autonomous eye of the blackbird, or the mountain in the eye of the poet as beholder, it would be the river and the mountains that had the last word. It would be the “world” alone that would and could imagine itself for us; differences would not “lose” difference to become—a space of “Difference”—“one” (CP 421). It is language—language not as the “said” but as the possibility of “saying”—that is responsible for the adherence of “particles” in the “the whole man,” or for the possibility of, as Stevens goes on to write in the penultimate section of “Things of August,” “a new text of the world”:

A scribble of fret and fear and fate,
 From a bravura of the mind,
 A courage of the eye (CP 421-422).

Note that the new “text” that Stevens imagines to be possible is one that requires both “bravura of the mind” and “a courage of the eye” indicating that what is lacking in the old text is nothing substantial—all the “particles” are there. It is the quality of attention or dedication to the possibilities inherent within these “particles” that is lacking. What Stevens reads as necessary is the courage and confidence to use our sensory and intellectual faculties in new ways that would break us out of the patterns of seeing and thinking that have been learned by rote, and allow new patterns, new “texts,” to develop—the meanings of which, as he goes on to say, will be “our own:”

In which, for all the breathings
 From the edge of the night,
 And for all the white voices
 That were rosen once,

The meanings are our own— (CP 422).

As if to emphasize this new-found self-reliance and confidence, Stevens follows this passage with the conditional, claiming: “It is a text that we shall be needing / To be the footing of noon, The pillar of midnight...” (CP 422). Stevens’s resistance to the imperative, present-tense positions the text in a space outside of the constraints of human knowing altogether—constraints that include, of course, any sense of regulated time, as well as language. By locating the “necessity” of the poem outside of its measured temporal structure Stevens casts the text at the remove “necessary” to the articulation of the “*required*” (CP 422, emphasis added) text, a text he describes in the poem as that which “comes from ourselves,

neither from knowing
 Nor not knowing, yet free from question,
 Because we wanted it so
 And it had to be,

A text of intelligent men
 At the center of the unintelligible,
 As in a hermitage, for us to think,
 Writing and reading the rigid inscription (CP 422).

The text is depicted as removed from the regular and regulated temporal and language structures of “men,” but at the same time it is shown to be integral to those structures: “Because we wanted it so, / And it had to be” (CP 422). The paradox that is inherent in this, the penultimate stanza of “An Ordinary Evening in New Haven,” underlines the paradox central to the entire poem, as well as to Stevens’s broader poetic project: the elaboration of a space within the text of his own poetry where we might understand the meanings to be at once both “rigid inscription” and “our own.”

Most importantly, though, it is *text*, or rather the possibility of a text: “a text of the new world” that becomes the all-inclusive intermediate space between “intelligent men / At the center of the unintelligible” at the end of the section. And what is the *possibility* of text but the idea of that text: the pure promise of language itself? The encounter between the two—the intelligible and the unintelligible—is not restricted to the abstract austerity of either the “outline of the size of the impersonal person” or to any singular person or thing (once it emerges and is named). Instead, the encounter brought about in Stevens’s poem between concrete representation, understanding and abstraction is bound up in the always-deferred, always-promised negative-space in between. As Levinas, in *Otherwise Than Being*, distances himself from describing “time consciousness, and consciousness as such,” in the phenomenological terms of Husserl, as within “the temporality of sensation”¹³ (32), so does Stevens ultimately distance himself in “Things of August” from the idea of consciousness contained *within* the flow of its own sensory experience. Though, as Stevens

¹³ Levinas explains that in Husserl’s thinking “time, the sensorial impression and consciousness” are inextricably linked so that “consciousness remains an intentionality” and this intentionality “is time itself.” (OTB 32)

writes, “the meanings are our own,” the text—that “rigid inscription”—is not. And so, as the final lines of “Things of August” depict, it is with time. The unnamed female presence that emerges in the last section can only be understood in terms of organic life and sex (“Here the adult one is still banded with fulgor, // Is still warm with the love with which she came”). She is, like the “text,” portrayed as existing, fatally, outside of time and continuance. She is said to have “given too much, but not enough. / She is exhausted and a little old” (CP 422), indicating that her efforts are un-absorbable into any ultimate temporality; she remains finite, ultimately exhausted and exhaustible. Consciousness and Being remain for Stevens, therefore, at the end of “Things of August,” definitively *outside* of any concept of temporality in an infinite mode. But it is by retaining in this way the conception of a finite consciousness that is ultimately *separate* from an infinite mode of Being that Stevens allows himself to conceive of the possibility of “wholeness” in his work. “The temporal modification,” as Levinas writes, “is not an event, nor an action, nor the effect of a cause. It is the verb to be” (OTB 34). “To be,” therefore, is a “saying” of being that is ultimately separate from the experienced, the effected, the “said.” In focusing on the division *between* the saying and the said, on the gap that exists necessarily within a consciousness that any “saying” will consistently miss its intended mark and reiterate only that which has been *already said*, Stevens opens up space in which to render the individual consciousness in its “wholeness”—in the “pure present” of its refraction between “reality” (the sensory, the said) and the “imagination” (making sense, saying). Were temporality absorbed into the consciousness of the “I” of the same, were sense impressions understood as that which “is other *within* identity” (OTB 32, emphasis added), there would be no possibility of representing consciousness in its wholeness as there would be no vantage-point from which such a representation might be either glimpsed or recorded. By establishing, instead, a space beyond the individual consciousness, a “sense of the archaic,”

from which the individual consciousness, sense, and language may be conceived to have emerged as parts (hence a space that is ultimately shared), Stevens retains the possibility not only of conceiving an individual as a “whole man” (given that any number of possible arrangements of those parts, though fatal in themselves, correspond to a greater body) but also introduces the Levinasian idea of genuine contact *between* individuals.

Just as temporality must, according to Levinas, be understood as verbal rather than eventual, effectual or causal, so in *Totality and Infinity* he argues that the encounter between the “I” and the “Other” is not “works”—not, that is, “actions, gestures, manners, objects utilized and fabricated” (176). If Being were to be understood in this way it would relegate the relation between “I” and “Other” to the world of labour and economy. Language, Levinas posits, so fundamental to Being, must be “instituted above and beyond works,” as “[t]he State which realizes its essence in works slips toward tyranny, and thus attests my absence from those works” (TI 176). It is through language that Being is afforded the possibility of coming to *presence* in its own right, through expression. “The word alone,” writes Levinas, “—but disengaged from its density as a linguistic product can put an end to this absence.” As long as, that is, language remains entrenched within a system of representation where A (I) represents B (other), it remains within an interior, phenomenal system that cannot result in any genuine encounter. Language constitutes the “unique possibility” of *bridging* that distance—of an existence for the “I” that would be “more than his interior existence” (TI 182). To return, via language, to this *exteriority*, then, is what Levinas refers to as “the straightforwardness of the face to face,” which places the “center of gravitation” of a being *outside* of that being, *toward* the other. “The surpassing of phenomenal or inward existence does not consist in receiving the recognition of the Other, but in offering him one’s being. To be in oneself is to express oneself, that is, already to serve the Other. The ground of expression is goodness” (TI 183).

Stevens's poetry, and especially his works from 1947 with *Transport to Summer* on, offers a figuration of expression understood in this sense: an active *return* from interiority to the exteriority of the face to face encounter, in which the center of gravity is oriented ultimately not inward, but outward—toward the Other—and finally where the ground of that expression “is goodness.” Where Logenbach argues that Stevens's later career is constituted by a retreat from the political realm, I argue that it is in these later books that Stevens's “abstracted abstractions” offer an exploration of language and representation as the very site of that engagement. Much of the exploration of this engagement is necessarily focussed on the manner in which the self is separated from the world with which it attempts to engage and represent, but this separation is one that language again and again offers to bridge. Such distance must not therefore be understood as an ultimate sentencing of the subject to solitude and solipsism but instead as a necessary step (an acknowledgement of that distance and a preservation of its defining terms) toward the “total vision” that expression might allow.

An “Essential Ambiguity”

That Stevens's work can often best be understood in terms of the concerns of the visual art world rather than the literary world that was contemporary to him is particularly clear when considering his intense focus on the relationship between *content* and *form*, as well as on (as has already been explored by looking closely at “Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird”) perspective and the manner in which that relationship is necessarily understood through, and contingent upon, the mechanics of vision. The questions that Stevens explores in *The Necessary Angel*, as well as in much of his poetry from *Harmonium* on, concerning “form versus subject” (McLeod 13) can be profitably compared

with the inquiries of his contemporaries—in particular Marcel Duchamp—in the New York visual art world. Duchamp’s friendship with Stevens’s old college friend, the wealthy art collector, Walter Arensberg, allowed Stevens—upon his visits to Arensberg’s New York apartment in the 1910s—to examine first-hand a notable addition to Arensberg’s collection: Duchamp’s “Nude Descending Staircase, No. 2” from 1912 (McLeod 13). The work was remarkable and even controversial at the time due to its incorporation of both a cubist concern for the object’s static form, and a futurist evocation of vibrant, kinetic energy. Duchamp himself acknowledged both influences, and he remarked of a similar painting, “Nude King and Queen surrounded by Swift Nudes” (completed shortly after “Nude Descending Staircase, No. 2”): “It is a theme of motion in a frame of static entities. In other words the static entities are represented by the king and queen, while the swift nudes are based on the theme of motion” (quoted in McLeod 17). This double concern for “stasis and motion,” which expresses “the interplay of imagination and reality,” is also one of “the principle themes” of *Harmonium*—a work published, as McLeod notes, at the height of Stevens’s engagement with the New York art world. Indeed, in the words of Michel Benamou, Stevens often presents within *Harmonium*, “conflicts of ideas as conflicts of forms and shapes” (quoted in McLeod 17)—the classic example being of course, “Anecdote of the Jar.”¹⁴ But a concern for an expression of both ideas and things in tangible form would continue throughout Stevens’s career, as “The Poem that Took the Place of a Mountain” makes clear, and it is perhaps Duchamp’s shift *away* from painted representation entirely, to a concentration on representation through the form of his famous “readymades,” that most closely parallels Stevens’s poetic concerns. Though the “readymade” took the shape of a formal object it was not about—or not solely about—a

¹⁴ The ordering properties of the jar placed on a hill in Tennessee—which “made the slovenly wilderness / Surround that hill” and “took dominion everywhere” (CP 60-61)—are well known.

question of that form itself. The “functionalism” of his readymades was, Duchamp avowed, *eliminated* by the fact that the objects had been removed from their worldly environment and re-situated on “the planet of aesthetics.” For Duchamp, then, the role of the artist was not restricted to the shaping and crafting of the art-object; art was, instead, as for Stevens, “an act of the mind” (CP 219).

Duchamp and Stevens’s shared concern for the *process* of selection, the active *choice* made by the artist in arriving at the object of his art¹⁵ discloses in both artists’ thinking a sympathy with the Levinasian view that:

expression does not manifest the presence of being by referring from the sign to the signified; it presents the signifier. The signifier, he who gives the sign, is not signified. It is necessary to have already been in the society of signifiers for the sign to be able to appear as a sign. Hence the signifier must present himself before every sign, by himself—present a face. (181-182)

Before any “face to face” engagement can occur, that is, which might allow a “surpassing of phenomenal or inward existence” there must first be this: the revelation of a face.¹⁶ In terms of the strictly visual, as Krauss avers, the artist must never “overlook” the base of the artistic medium itself. “There must be no self-forgetting,” she writes. The subjective interiority of the poets’ mind—like “the four corners of a sheet of paper”—constitute more than a “physical limit”; they are a “logical premise,” the very “conditions of possibility” for representation itself (OU 48).

¹⁵ As opposed, that is, to the imagistic concern, typified by Williams, for the manner in which an art object may come to, as fully as possible, represent an object *in itself*; an impulse articulated most famously perhaps in Williams’s maxim, “no ideas but in things.”

¹⁶ In other words, for a signifier to signify it first must be recognized as such; it must be established within a symbolic matrix.

But a focus, in this sense, on *signifier* rather than *signified* as the organizing principle of a work, introduces “an essential ambiguity” (McLeod 22) in Stevens’s poetry between the two—an ambiguity that is, as McLeod points out, as fundamental to Stevens’s “Earthy Anecdote” as it is to Duchamp’s “Fountain” (22). Stevens, of course, was well aware of this, and as his career progressed he became increasingly acceptant of, and dependant on, ambiguity as the key to his poetics. “One of the essentials of poetry is ambiguity,” he wrote once to R. P. Blackmur, and: “I don’t feel that I have touched the thing until I touch it in ambiguous form” (quoted in Holly Stevens’s *Flux* 773). It is this “essential ambiguity” that gives rise, of course, to the interpretation of Stevens’s work as “anti-realist ... solipsist ... escapist” (Chiasson 63), but it is *also* this “essential ambiguity” that gives rise to interpretations, like Logenbach’s, of the work as socio-economically and politically driven and engaged. I would prefer, rather than swerving too quickly in either direction, to explore instead the space of ambiguity itself, which Stevens—far more than any comprehensive political or aesthetic message—was so intent on providing. What is revealed in a focus on this “in-between” space of ambiguity in Stevens’s work is ultimately both an aesthetic *and* a political project intent on unsettling the rigidities by which each category has been traditionally conceived.

By emphasizing and formulating his own processes of perception and representation, Stevens offers us (the reader, the Other) a representation of his active “being” (Levinas 183), and in so doing highlights the process by which such expression offers the possibility of “disengaging” from the economic system of language and “works” in order to effect, through genuine *expression* grounded in what Levinas conceives of as “goodness,” a genuine contact with the Other: the “face to face.”

The ambiguity that is crucial to this exploration in Stevens’s work—between subject and object, self and world—is achieved, as in works like “The Poem That Took the

Place of a Mountain” and “Two Illustrations That the World Is What You Make Of It,” through an attention to the visual apprehension both of static form, and the kinetic motion inherent to *all* form. But again, this double concern in Stevens’s work moves past a simple dichotomy. It avoids the collapse, on the one hand, into the “dumbly physical” (Krauss, OU 98) and on the other, an escape from the physical world “by an angel’s flight” (Benamou 107) associated with the Romantic sublime. By grounding itself instead in “exactness,” Stevens allows for the “discovery” rather than the “imposition”¹⁷ of an “*inexactness*”: a “pure presentness” of total vision (Krauss, OU 7).

Put differently, a concentration on what Heidegger terms the “thingly character of the work of art” (PLT 19) makes room for a consideration of the equally integral space of difference that resides between the thing and the “something else over and above the thingly element (which) constitutes its artistic nature”(PLT 19). It is, indeed, precisely *this* space of distance—between thing and “something else,” between an *articulated* presence and that which *cannot* be articulated”—which Stevens elaborates as the ambiguous *in-between* space of “representation itself.” This space is also the grounds for demonstrating the *choice* that is inherent to artistic representation, which Duchamp draws our attention to with his ready-mades. The demonstrative “There it was, word for word,” that opens “The Poem That Took the Place of a Mountain,” gives way to a broader, more sweeping view not of what the opening lines indicate or demonstrate but of what they *do not* show, what we ourselves must discover or are already involved in the process of discovering through our interaction with the text. What is demonstrated in the poem, in other words, is exactly what

¹⁷ This in reference to Stevens’s critique of surrealism, that it: “invents without discovering. To make a clam play an accordion is to invent not to discover. The observation of the unconscious, so far as it can be observed, should reveal things of which we have previously been unconscious, not the familiar things of which we have been conscious plus imagination” (CP 919).

is first indicated by the demonstrative, “There it was, word for word” (CP 435) of the poem’s opening line. There is nothing in the poem that exceeds what is first introduced: “the poem that took the place of a mountain,” but the emphasis is not on the finality of the declaration, the “there it was” or the “word for word,” but instead on the active “*took the place*” (emphasis added). The process of substitution is ongoing. It is the reader, engaged in the “word for word,” that makes—through her own cognitive and imaginative processes—the substitution of poem for mountain possible. The distance that is introduced between the declarative introduction to the poem (which functions as if to say, “this is all there is of the ‘reality’ of this poem, only these words on the page—I have nothing more to offer you”) and the sweeping landscape that is revealed (not only of the “mountain” that the words evoke but also of the speaker as he gazes down and “recognizes his unique and solitary home” [CP 435]) is the distance within which the reader also “recognizes” for herself what is not and cannot be articulated by the poem. That is, the manner in which she is, herself, engaged with the systems of representation at work in the poem, and the limitations and possibilities of her own subjectivity—her own “unique and solitary home.” The “double-remove” effected by the poem reveals at least two “unique and solitary homes” then, thus indicating that the uniqueness and solitude of the vantage-point is less than it imagines itself to be. What is effected is not a “shared” moment between the reader and the subject of the poem, or reader and poet, but neither is it a moment of isolation. Instead it is a moment wherein the distance between reader and subject, subject and poet, language and image, reality and the imagination, is briefly revealed.

For Heidegger, whose phenomenology Levinas would ultimately distance himself from, but which would nevertheless remain fundamental to his own thinking—a “thing” is that which designates what is “not simply nothing.” A work of art, then, is considered a

thing insofar as it is, indeed, “not simply nothing.” To define the “thing” any further, however—in *positive* terms—requires a calculation for Heidegger of that “something else” which designates the thing in the first place as “*not* nothing.” This is a calculation that is effectively impossible, however, because the “something else” that requires *definition* for this purpose is, at least in phenomenological terms, the “*nothing*” itself. We arrive here, then, at a point at which we might declare, as Heidegger does in the opening pages of his essay, “The Origin of the Work of Art,” that “Anyone can easily see that we are moving in a circle” (PLT 18). It is precisely this circle, that, in Stevens, as in Heidegger, we are “compelled to follow”: “To enter upon this path,” writes Heidegger, is, indeed “the strength of thought” (PLT 18), and it is also upon this path (or the elaboration of this path through poetry, as Heidegger explores through his passionate analyses of the work of Hölderlin) that we may arrive sometimes at the impossible “nothing” by which the “something else” of art is defined.

Nearly ten years before “The Origin of the Work of Art,” in *Being and Time*, Heidegger had similarly stated that “what is decisive is not to get out of the circle but to come into it in the right way” (195). What Heidegger suggests, in other words, is that we are already, and will remain, necessarily, within the circular structure of creation and Being. What is required is neither resignation to this fact nor an exit strategy, but—instead—a method of *continually approaching* a realization of this circular structure of Being.

To approach Being through the conception of Language—an approach Stevens shares with Levinas—is one method of ensuring that this circular structure is retained at the root of our understanding and our approach to the question of Being. As Levinas writes regarding temporality, which he understands as “the verb to be”:

Language is...not reducible to a system of signs doubling up beings and relations: that conception would be incumbent on us if words were nouns. Language seems rather to be an excrescence of the verb. And qua verb it already bears sensible life – temporalization and being’s essence. The lived sensation, being and time, is already understood in a verb.” (OTB 35)

Language, Levinas admits, is also a system of nouns; also, that is, a manner of identifying and naming, of turning abstracts into particulars, of establishing outlines, of identifying shapes from the abstractions of inherited “archaic forms.” But it is language’s *verbal* mode—a resistance to being definitively and finally named, categorized as either action, effect, or event—that prevails and by which, ultimately, “the signification of saying goes beyond the said” (OTB 37). It is this—the continuous “going beyond” of language—that allows any rigorous exploration of it.

The exploration conducted by Stevens¹⁸ indeed retains within it this circular structure: there is no other way to approach language, his poetry continuously reminds us, other than to continuously *approach*. This continuity, along with the verbal resistance of Being to the named, is the explicit subject of another of Stevens’s late poems, “Looking Across the Fields and Watching the Birds Fly,” from *The Rock*. The “redoubled vision” that is effected by this poem is similar to that of “The Poem That Took the Place of a Mountain” in that the speaker is placed at a double-remove from the poem’s object: this time the remove is effected through the characterization of a certain “Mr. Homburg,” apparent author of an “irritating minor idea,” which the poem then endeavours to explore. This “irritating idea” of Mr. Homburg’s is— reduced to its simplest form—that there exists, outside of himself, a power greater than his own imagination. “To think away the grass, the

¹⁸ I mean this not, or at least not only, in any philosophical, theoretical sense, but in the practical sense, in terms of “The honky-tonk out of the somnolent grasses,” the very processes by which we arrive at “the said.”

trees, the clouds, / Not to transform them into other things, / Is only what the sun does every day” (CP 439) he reflects.

The sun, here conceived of as “free from man’s ghost, larger and yet a little like, / Without his literature and without his gods...”, leaves the man himself free to contemplate his own *conception* of the sun—and of himself. If there exists an imaginative power greater than man, that can “think away the grass, the trees, the clouds, (and) / Not...transform them into other things,” than man himself—though he may ultimately be “thought away” in his specificity—is indeed “a part,” integrated within that imaginative whole.

What we know in what we see, what we feel in what we
Hear, what we are, beyond mystic disputation,
In the tumult of integrations out of the sky,

And what we think, a breathing like the wind,
A moving part of a motion, a discovery
Part of a discovery, a change part of a change,

A sharing of color and being part of it.
The afternoon is visibly a source,
Too wide, too irised, to be more than calm,

Too much like thinking to be less than thought,
Obscurest parent, obscurest patriarch,
A daily majesty of meditation,

That comes and goes in silences of its own. (CP 440)

What the poem demonstrates is precisely the return of the mind (“Mr. Homburg’s” mind), from “interiority,” to “exteriority.” Where the poem is begun with an “irritating” thought that there exists a greater force outside “Mr. Homburg’s” own mind, by the end of the poem, he becomes a “a part of” that greater “discovery.” In other words, a contemplation of the fields that begins within, turns outward, until “Mr. Homburg” himself becomes a part of that “exterior” landscape. But once more we are returned *from* the field to an interiorized

thinking of the field: “We think, then, as the sun shines or does not. / We think as wind skitters on a pond in a field // Or we put mantles on our words because / The same wing, rising and rising, makes a sound / Like the last muting of winter as it ends.” Once more we are returned to “Mr. Homburg” himself, “The spirit comes from the body of the world, / Or so Mr. Homburg thought”(CP 440). There is no ultimate transcendence in the poem, but only an elaboration of the question of the “the circular structure of Being.” The abstract “spirit” is not denied—it instead constitutes a direct experience of reality, central to the poem. But its reality is finally, intrinsically, grounded in another reality: that of “the body of the world.” (“Or so Mr. Homburg thought.”) Our spirits, our thoughts, our bodies, our “Mr. Homburg’s,” are all a part of “the mannerism of nature” and therefore subjected to her “blunt laws”; they are not false, but neither are they ultimately transcendent, they exist in the middle-space elaborated here within the image of “a glass aswarm with things going as far as they can” (CP 440).

Heidegger’s “circular structure” of Being is thus revealed in Stevens’s work as a framework that can be—though never departed from entirely—understood, and “transcended” through the very knowledge of and acceptance of being “part” of that greater “body of the world” (CP 440). Just as Levinas would become discontented within his own thinking with the rigorous structure of Heidegger’s “circular structure” (which begins after several loops round to feel more like a trap than an exercise of Being) so Stevens would seek—without discarding that circular structure (“preserving” the term)—to seek a way out. He would continue, throughout his career, to push “toward a supreme fiction” that would serve as his own reply to the question of how to get in, as well as—and more aptly—*out* of the solipsistic loop of mere Being. Accepting that to a certain extent one remains, “caught in a glass,” and that replies to such a question remain “fictions” even when and if “supreme,” is the first and most essential step in effecting a move beyond that framework

toward the world beyond the “glass”—toward an ethics of the “Other,” and encounter with that “Other.” To be “caught in a glass” assumes that there *is* an outside of the glass, and therefore a method by which one may move there (or, at least, a perspective from which that move remains possible, whether or not the being caught within it is actually able either to perceive or effect it).

“Perspective is the visual correlate of causality—” writes Rosalind Krauss in “A View of Modernism,”¹⁹ “that one thing follows the next in space according to rule. In that sense, despite differences of historical development, it can be likened to the literary tradition of the omniscient narrator and the conventional plot” (123). But like the work of novelist Robbe-Grillet—which, Krauss argues, *disrupts* this conventional narrative tradition—Stevens’s poems (and “Looking Across the Fields” is testament to this) are often “constantly eclipsed by the point of view of the teller, holding up this point of view, turning it around, examining it, taking responsibility for it, never allowing either himself or the reader at any moment to be innocent about it” (Krauss, PI 127). Through his process of *figuring* the jar, in other words, Stevens breaks free of it—past a conception of a modernist tradition that would have him ensconced within his own omniscient narration.

Krauss’s description of Robbe-Grillet’s narrative strategy is in fact developed as a counter-point to her subsequent discussion on the work of sculptor Richard Serra, which—she explains— “makes a viewer realize that the hidden meanings she reads into the corporate body of the world are her *own* projections and that interiority she had thought belonged to the sculpture is in fact her *own* interiority—the manifestations, from the still point, of her own point of view” (127). As “Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird” explicitly shows, Stevens was, from the very beginning of his career, invested in a similar

¹⁹ The article, first published in *Artforum* 11 in September 1972, was later re-collected in Krauss’s retrospective, *Perpetual Inventory* (2010).

attempt to examine perspective not from the “interior”—from *within* the framework of a given perspective—but from without. Stevens remains, especially in his early poems, interested in a subjective examination and ordering of the world, but that interest is consistently accompanied by a related interest in establishing a vantage point where that subjectivity might be perceived and contextualized within a broader network of possible subjectivities and actions. This dual concern is again exemplified in Stevens’s famous “Anecdote of the Jar,” which begins with the clear establishment not only of a subjective perspective, but of a determinate act: “I placed a jar in Tennessee.” After the initial stanza of “Anecdote of a Jar,” the perspective zooms out from the initial fixity of the determinate subjective act and perspective to the sprawling wilderness around the jar. Anywhere the determinate object of the “jar” is placed will result similarly in a “sprawl” of wilderness (what is not “jar”) radiating from and ordered by that singular point. The latter stanzas of this short poem significantly shift the focus from the initiating “I” to the landscape supported by that “I.” It is not that the subjective framework is ever undermined or overthrown, it is just that the interest of the poem is in viewing the subjective framework from without. The framework itself is objectified, made “jar-like,” so that we are able to see and reflect upon the processes of perspective and representation integral to the poem’s focalizing point, and thus both reader and writer’s active engagement within the poem’s language and imagery. By establishing a constellation of perspectival “still points”—the “jar in Tennessee,” the blackbird at the beginning of “Thirteen Ways,” or the character of “Mr. Homburg”—Stevens delineates a vantage point from which the speaker often reads himself at the “interior” of the poem. The reader is thus prompted to read herself within this delineated “interior” space as well—exploring the manner in which her own perspective is intrinsically engaged in, and therefore expressed by, the work itself. It is this—enfolding of the reader into the text itself—that lends to Stevens’s work the

“wholeness” toward which he aspires. Without the gaze of an “Other”—who is obliged to remain outside of the “glass”—without the “all-at-onceness” of vision that such a perspective allows, constituting from the endless refractions between point A (reality) and point B (imagination), an *image*, the space of projection would remain flat and “dumbly physical” (Krauss *OU* 98). The “I” of the same would not be rendered individual—indeed, it would be no “I” at all, but would instead remain impenetrable and absolute. The words would not be made “whole,” thus lifted from the page.

It is important, however, that the “all-at-onceness” Stevens’s work aspires to and oftentimes affords *not* to be understood as the rather mystical variety of “all-at-onceness” evoked by Michael Fried when, in “Art and Objecthood,” he argues that modernist art must effect: “a continuous and entire presentness, amounting, as it were, to the perpetual creation of itself, that one might experience as a kind of instantaneousness”(845). Instead, Stevens’s “pure present” is established through the very acknowledgement of its being ultimately *bound* to the limits of and constraints of both time and perception. Just as the eye that registers the flash of the baseball as an “all-at-onceness” does *not* discount, and indeed is *dependent* on the successiveness of the baseball’s path in order to register that path at all (though it does not, in the end, register it as “successive”), Stevens’s most challenging work is dependent on the processes of perception and reception *inherent* to language and representation, and is intent on expressing that inter-dependency as well as the responsibility toward the Other that both take for granted. Like the eye, which, in the “all-at-onceness” of its vision retains multiplicity and successiveness without manifesting them in the *seen*, in the *image itself*, so language at all times retains within itself the multiplicity and successiveness of its *saying* in everything that is *said*. Stevens’s poetry functions at times like stop-motion film in that it reveals through an emphasis on each and various

perspectival “still-points” the manner in which, and the process by which, the particular comprises the “whole.” Also revealed through attention to this intermediate space of representation—that space *between* imagination and reality, the received and the seen, the saying and the said—is, of course, the integral role of the *tromp d’oeil*; that is, the way in which the viewer’s own perspectival assumptions, limitations and engagements constitute that “whole.” By taking the particulars of his own processes of perception, reflection and poetic construction, and holding them—and in this way the poem and the language of the poem itself—at some distance: “turning it around, examining it, taking responsibility for it” (Krauss, PI 127), Stevens offers his readers the same possibility that his “angel of reality,” in “Angel Surrounded by Paysans” (the final poem of *The Auroras of Autumn*) offers those who, for the briefest of moments, might glimpse her in the door: “in my sight,” the angel says, “you see the earth again” (CP 423).

Chapter Two: The Image

What we see in the mind is as real to us as what we see by the eye

—Wallace Stevens (CP 903).

That one might “see the earth again”—this “re-doubling” of vision offered by Stevens’s “Angel Surrounded by Paysans”—is the very promise of language. Language “doubles” the visible in order that it might be *seen again*, and communicated. Perhaps, then, it is language itself that is, most accurately, the “angel of reality,” which in Stevens’s poem bears this message:

I am the angel of reality,
Seen for a moment standing in the door.

I have neither ashen wing nor wear of ore
And live without a tepid aureole,

Or stars that follow me, not to attend,
But of my being and its knowing, part.

The “re-doubling” of visible and experience-able Reality through representation—both in image and language—is inseparable for Stevens’s from the experience of Being itself. It is this indivisibility that creates the “apparition-like” quality—the presence-as-absence—that Stevens’s consistently depicts as the “voice” of a Reality he understands as a confluence of both the visible and the invisible, the concrete and the imagined.

I am one of you and being one of you
Is being and knowing what I am and know.

Yet I am the necessary angel of earth,
Since, in my sight, you see the earth again

[...]

Am I not,
Myself, only half of a figure of a sort,

A figure half seen, or seen for a moment, a man
Of the mind, an apparition appavelled in

Apparels of such lightest look that a turn
Of my shoulder and quickly, too quickly, I am gone? (CP 423)

From the very first, with *Harmonium*—where for the speaker in Stevens’s “The Snow Man,” for example, “nothing” exists not because it is negated, but because *it is*

validated: “And nothing himself beholds/ Nothing that is not there and the nothing that is” (CP 8)—absence exists in Stevens’s work not in dichotomous *opposition* to presence, but in dialectic relation. Each term is “both preserved and cancelled. Preserved all the more surely in that they are cancelled” (Krauss OU 15). Absence, that is, is not coterminous with the “nothing” that is evoked in “The Snow Man”; instead, as the poem builds through a progressive process toward a realization of “*the nothing*,” it achieves an autonomy of its own. The use of the definite article is essential to a conceptualization of “the nothing *that is*” as an autonomous state of being which *includes* an “absence” that, at once, both *is* and *is not*.

This dialectical relation constitutes the “enlarged” territory in which Stevens undertakes to “discover” through his poetry the relationship between subject and object, content and form. The territory that is subsequently opened through this exploration is, therefore, *essentially* ambiguous—poised uniquely between the *exactness* of the Imagist “thing” and a sublime *inexactness*: an escape from the “thing” to the “something else” that exists *beyond*. It is a space of exactness *from which* the subject’s inexactness might, as Stevens states in “The Poem That Took the Place of a Mountain,” “discover, at last, the view toward which they had edged” (CP 435), a territory of “see(ing) the world again” (CP 423); of “seeing and a knowing that one sees” (Krauss OU 19).

The emphasis in Stevens’s later work shifts away from visual perception as the primary method of understanding the world without, however, diminishing its importance to the overall processes of representation. Paramount for Stevens are those cognitive processes that align visual perception (reality) with intelligible understanding (literally, the imagination)—with, that is, the *process of representation itself*. What is “an image” or a process of (literal) “imagination,” but that which is rendered intelligible from the sensory information available to the eye? If the original sensory experience is removed and the

image is recreated at the distance of some remove—a photograph, for example, or a metaphor—the process by which it is constituted is not much altered, at least conceptually: the “image” is still constituted by the eye’s perception and recognition of the *material* elements of the sensory experience to which it is exposed (as well of course by the language and technology that mediate the image in literal, as well as figurative, ways). In *Totality and Infinity* Levinas writes¹:

Vision presupposes light. The eye does not see the light, but the object in the light. Vision is therefore a relation with a “something” established within a relation with what is not a “something.” We are in the light inasmuch as we encounter the thing in nothingness. The light makes the thing appear by driving it out of the shadows; it empties space. It makes space arise specifically as a void (189).

In keeping with Levinas’s analysis, the “in-between” space of “re-doubled vision” in Stevens’s work—in which is figured *the very process of figuration* (understood through the dominant senses of vision and touch)—can be conceived of as analogous to the “light” that “makes space arise specifically as a void.” By understanding it thus, we avoid confusing Stevens’s efforts with a *construction* of an autonomous space of absence to an already-self-evident *presence*, and instead focus our attention on the way Stevens explores the creative process of representation itself.

By “emptying space” around the “thing,” both “thing” and the “something else” beyond it are *simultaneously exposed*. As Levinas writes in *Otherwise Than Being*: “For

¹Like Stevens, and diverging from Heidegger’s interpretation of Being as that which there is and could be no beyond, the “essence” of Dasein residing in its very existence (B&T 42), Levinas conceives of Being as a “something” of which there is *necessarily* a beyond. This “something” can, however, only be understood in negative terms. This negation, or “lack” that is so central—so “taken for granted” in Stevens’s poetry—is not, as Randall Jarrell would have it, “automatically supplied” as though it were a supplementary “thing” but instead is uncovered as a *fundamental aspect* of our conception of Being. Jarrell, otherwise sympathetic to Stevens’s work, had written in a 1951 edition of *The Partisan Review*: “His poetry is obsessed with lack. A lack at last almost taken for granted, that he himself automatically supplies; if sometimes he has restored by imagination of abstraction or re-creation, at other times he has restored by collection, almost as J.P. Morgan did—Stevens likes something, buys it (at the expense of a little spirit), and ships it home in a poem” (336).

subjectivity to signify unreservedly, it would then be necessary that the passivity of its exposure to the other not be immediately inverted into activity, but expose itself in its turn; a passivity of passivity is necessary” (142-143). It is this “passivity of passivity”— the passive *exposure* to the Other, rather than the *activity* of representation— that contains for Stevens, as for Levinas, the possibility of poetry, of a regenerative “saying” rather than the prosaic “already said”:

Saying is this passivity of passivity and this dedication to the other, this sincerity. Not the communication of the said, which would immediately cover over and extinguish or absorb the said, but saying holding open its openness, without excuses, evasions or alibis (Levinas OTB 143).

Like the Dutch artist Piet Mondrian—whose art and the thinking behind it provided Stevens at last with the inspiration, according to McLeod, to “come to terms with the abstract tendencies of his own art” (120)—Stevens’s conception and representation of “reality” was dependent not on the depiction of either the “I” or the “Other,” the “thing” or the “something else,” but on making evident the *relationship* between them. As Mondrian would write: “Colour can exist only through other colours, dimension through other dimensions, position through other positions that oppose them. That is why I regard relationship as the principal thing” (as quoted in Reynolds, 154). Only, that is, via a depiction of *the relation* between the “thing” and the “something else” might the reality that would be *inclusive of both* be exposed.

In the final section of “Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction,” where Stevens reflects: “Fat girl, terrestrial, my summer, my night, / How is it I find you in difference” (351), Stevens provides just one of many examples that illustrate his interest in expressing this relationship between “things,” and exploring through this emphasis how the *very possibility of representation* is derived through relationship. Each “image,” each object that is rendered intelligible to the eye, is, of course, necessarily extracted from a larger

background to which that object *exists in relation*. Think again of “The Snow Man” where “the nothing that is not there and the nothing that is” is arrived at through the establishment of the “listener” having already been established as “nothing himself.” The crucial revelation of presence-as-absence in this poem’s “the nothing that is” is made possible only through the establishment of a relationship between the speaker, reader, and “listener” wherein “nothing” is *already understood* in positive terms. Stevens calls on the reader in the opening line to clear a space for this positive sense of “the nothing” by declaring, “One must have a mind of winter...” It is up to the reader, the poem suggests, to create the space wherein the dual presence of “the nothing that is not there and the nothing that is” might be (as for the “listener”) arrived at in the final line. Each moment of intelligible understanding for both speaker and “listener,” poet and reader, is only—as the speaker in the final Canto of “Notes” attests—part of “a moving contour”; “a change not quite completed.” “Notes” explores perception—through the use of a string of metaphors that depict the speaker’s various “imaginings” of earth²—in its widest sense. The “change not quite completed” by which the singular image is described in the poem must be understood accordingly as fundamental to the processes of “imagination” and representation itself.

This idea, that the process of representation is permanently incomplete, develops from the previous Canto with its emphasis on “repetition.” In Canto IX, all moments—all expressions of moments—are conceived of as “mere repetitions” (350), but each of these repetitions: “the going round / And round and round, the merely going round” are, in themselves, “a final good.” That is, it is not each to itself, but each to itself *in the process of its repetition* that is understood as a final good, because the process of repetition *as a whole* is understood that way. Representation is a moment of intelligibility grasped in

² “...When I think of you as tired/ Bent over work, anxious, content, alone,/ You remain the more than natural figure.” From Canto X, “Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction” (CP 351).

“difference” from a larger context of that which is always changing. The image is therefore always partial, but at the same time always *what it is*— intelligible in itself: “That I should name you flatly, waste no words, / Check your evasions, hold you to yourself” (CP 351). For an object to be “held to itself,” to be named, rendered intelligible to the eye, it must be already “familiar,” it must exist in relation to something previously intelligible to the subject. In other words, the only reason that an object is intelligible in itself is because it is *implicitly* understood as a part of a larger whole. Representation, therefore, is always a process by which the eye “distorts” the sensory information (light, absence of light, material, absence of material) into recognizable form (“absence” is not “seen” except in relation to what is). In this way our “Reality” is always created from that which exceeds it, from that which exceeds, that is, the representation of that reality as “image.” Just as the path of a baseball is rendered invisible by the single, momentary, flash with which it is registered as a singular object by the eye, every image is established from material that exceeds our cognitive or optical ability to express it as an autonomous form.

A photograph provides a useful material example of the process by which the image is established *against* that which is and must be excluded from the frame. The function of the photograph is to transform the sensory information to which it has, in the negative, been exposed, to a positive—a “presence” in direct oppositional relation to the “absence” of the actual “thing” it comes to represent. The ability to continue to represent a “thing” (that which is figured in the photograph) by virtue precisely of its *absence* makes the photograph particularly relevant to the discussion of representation in Stevens’s poetry. A photograph both *preserves* and *cancel*s the terms of “presence” and “absence” for the figure it represents and, just so, Stevens *preserves* and *cancel*s these terms in his exploration of subjectivity. He elaborates a negative-space where the opposition between the “I” and the

“non-I,” which Levinas describes as disappearing in the process of representation, is instead preserved (TI, 124). It is this apparent emphasis in Stevens’s work on *preserving* division and opposition that provides the possibility of *cancelling* that difference: of an ethical contact across that divide.

The Close-Up and the Letter as Such

The seismic philosophical shift that took place in the Seventeenth century—from a static conception of fixed Reality outside the “I” to a subjective reality within, which Kant would define a century later as a shared and ultimately contingent system of representation³—was rendered tangible in a peculiar way by the advent of photography in the mid-nineteenth century. With the photograph, it became possible for a flickering moment of time to be rendered formal and inert, attesting at once both to the Reality of its Being as well as to the fundamentally elusive nature of that Reality. In this way, the photograph was, from its beginnings, implicitly and necessarily understood, as part of “shared system of representation” rather than as the “thing in itself.” The key here, which would be fundamental to Stevens’s poetics, is the term “shared.” Far from driving the subjectivity into a static conception of a fixed reality within himself, a philosophical emphasis on *subjective* reality emphasized for Stevens the way the “I” of the same is fundamentally related to the “Other.”

“No doubt we live beyond ourselves in air,” he writes in “Looking Across the Fields and Watching the Birds Fly”—indicating that subjectivity remains *uncontained* by its form. But his next line, “In an element that does not do for us, / So well, that which we do for

³ “It is therefore from the human point of view only,” attests Kant in his *Critique of Pure Reason*, “that we can speak of space, extended objects, &c. If we depart from the subjective condition, under which we alone can obtain external intuition, or, in other words, by means of which we are affected by objects, the representation of space has no meaning whatsoever. This predicate [of space] is only applicable to things insofar as they appear to us, that is, are objects of sensibility” (26).

ourselves” (CP 439), indicates equally that it is ultimately the return to “ourselves,” to the *exteriority* of the body, that constitutes “goodness” and that is our true “element.” Though the (importantly, plural) subjectivity may be unmoored, “beyond ourselves in air,” Stevens inevitably returns to the collective choice of “that which we do for ourselves”—of “imagery, belief,” and language itself as a method of expressing both. In returning to this notion of the collective, “shared system of representation” that underlies representation, Stevens encourages a conceptual shift *past* a pre-cognitive space “beyond ourselves” to a cognitive space in which we may communicate that *shared* experience.

The elaboration of the relationship *in between* subject and object, “I” and “non-I,” which the poem traverses *in order to effect this return* (an “enlarged” *spatial* field, excerpted from time) functions here as the negative-space out of which the “duration” and “limitation” of a specific subjectivity might be exposed. It is via “abstraction,” in other words, that the speaking “I” is located within a broader governing framework of his relations with the “Other,” rather than having that relationship absorbed in the moment of identification and representation. What is effected is a “close-up” of the singular, which works to expose the literal “platitude” of representation, allowing the particularizing “I” to “transcend” its perceived bounds. As Joseph N. Riddel puts it, it is via “abstraction” that we—as readers of Stevens’s work— may also, within that governing structure, “find *ourselves*” (11).

“With the close-up, space expands,” wrote Walter Benjamin in 1935 in “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction.” “With slow motion,” he continues, “movement is extended. The enlargement of a snapshot does not simply render more

precise what otherwise was visible, though unclear: it reveals entirely new structural formations of the subject” (236). Benjamin’s presentation of the temporal moment of the photograph in spatial terms is indicative of his ambitions toward the development of a critical vocabulary *freed* from conventional notions of temporal linearity. His efforts at elaborating a *space* between subject and object within which “new structural formations” might be discovered can be profitably compared to Stevens’s efforts in the “double-remove” poems: “The Poem that Took the Place of a Mountain,” for example, or “Looking Across the Field and Watching Birds Fly.” By rendering *language* itself spatial through a focus on the *letter as such*, Stevens—like Benjamin’s close-up photographer—reveals and explores *an enlarged structural territory* within the subject itself. In “The Motive for Metaphor,” for example, it is the close attention paid to the poem’s signifying elements, its “A B C of being” (CP 257), that demonstrates the poem’s necessary conformity to the limits of its own signifying terms, and allows the poem to approach, and move past in its final lines, the “vital, arrogant, fatal, dominant X” (CP 257). It is important that this “dominant X,” in this case, as well as other instances in Stevens’s poetry where the letter “as such” arises, should be understood simultaneously in two different but highly interconnected ways: first, as abstraction itself—in Lacanian terms, as “the real thing, the unattainable X, the object-cause of desire” (Žižek 96)—and second, as the concrete visual imprint of the letter itself as “thing” on the page.⁴ In “Motive for Metaphor,” which in keeping with “Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction” can be seen as a concerted effort on Stevens’s part to develop and articulate a theory of poetry that would break through the limited strictures of the past, these two interconnected interpretations of the letter importantly converge. Indeed, it is through an emphasis on the concrete *figuration* of the

⁴ This should be understood as separate from the morphological sound-form of the signifier per se, but yet cannot fully be separated from the reader’s personal associative connections (morphological or otherwise) to the visual imprint of the signifier on the page.

letter X as *object*, as “thing in itself,” that Stevens simultaneously signifies “the object-cause of desire.” The X understood in terms of fundamental and unattainable desire, in other words, is paradoxically attained in “The Motive for Metaphor” through the realization of its being *perpetually unattainable*. “[B]ecause,” writes Žižek, “the Real itself offers no support for a direct symbolization of it—because every symbolization is in the last resort contingent—[...] the only way the experience...can achieve its unity is through the agency of a signifier, through reference to a ‘pure’ signifier” (97).

It was just such a search for the “‘pure’ signifier,” by which the “Real” itself might be achieved and expressed, that led Stevens to concentrate on the structure of language and the letter as such, and that contributed to the development of his own, very particular, notion of “pure poetry.”⁵ “Poetry is the subject of the poem,” Stevens famously asserts in “The Man With The Blue Guitar,” published in 1937—a claim that he would elaborate upon in a letter of 1940, in which he explained to Hi Simons: “here poetry is used as the poetic, without the slightest pejorative innuendo. I have in mind pure poetry,” (L 363). This idea was anticipated by the description he supplied of his own work for the jacket of *Ideas of Order*—a description that, in the American literary circles of and around 1936, was about as far away as you could get from *à la mode*: “The book is essentially a book of pure poetry,” Stevens wrote. “I believe that, in any society, the poet should be the exponent of the imagination of that society” (151). For Stevens, “pure” does not indicate something supremely or sublimely removed from a blunt reality, as in the French Symbolist sense of the term, but instead in the semiotic sense implemented by Žižek in the passage quoted

⁵ It should be kept very firmly in mind that Stevens’s “particular” take on, and interest in, what he termed “pure poetry” has little in common with the “pure poetry” developed by the French Symbolists, and in fact Stevens’s conception of the term is in direct opposition to the Symbolist vocabulary of stock tropes and images, which subjective meaning was invited to transcend.

above: rather than a “heightened” experience, the “pure” is the essential element at the very root of any experience at all.

“The difference between Stevens and the French tradition,” as Michel Benamou has explained, “hinges on the metaphysical meaning of the word pure. It is a contrast between feeling purity in the world, and reaching purity out of this world by an angel’s flight” (as quoted in Logenbach 187). The “pure poetry” that Stevens endeavoured to produce in *Ideas of Order* is perhaps better expressed in the oft-quoted opening line to “Of Modern Poetry” in *Parts of the World* than in his introduction to the previous collection: “The poem of the mind in the act of finding / What will suffice.” It is not the achievement of a “sufficiency” itself—understood as a “thing” outside itself, a supplementary product, and therefore a *remove* from the processes of the realities of the poem and its language, or the real experiences and realities of the mind that produced it—but instead the “act of finding” that sufficiency, with an emphasis on *act*. It is the active, reflective “light,” which each individual brings to bear *upon* his experiences and by which they are “illuminated,” and not out of the experience as “thing” in itself (which would without “light” remain in shadow) that all experience is perceived and represented, and therefore all reality ultimately constructed and conveyed.

“It has to be living,” Stevens insists, “to learn the speech of the place. / It has to face the men of the time and to meet / The women of the time. It has to think about war / And it has to find what will suffice” (219). An *active* pursuit of “what will suffice” is not by any means, therefore, a *retreat* from the world, but an active, living engagement that endeavours to explore living realities, and—as Stevens would write in “The Necessary Angel”—the “pressures” of that reality.

Notably, this phrase of Stevens’s—“the pressures of reality”—would become central to the Abstract Expressionists who, a generation later, saw their art as a part of a

tradition of “noble resistance” to those pressures (McLeod 140). The poem, understood as a representation of an “act of the mind” (CP 219) must also be understood as an effort to find the point of “exactness” that Stevens would later articulate in “The Rock”—a point from which the subject’s “inexactness” could “edge” toward a more comprehensive “view” of the territory in which both “exactness,” the I, and “inexactness,” the non-I, might intertwine. Stevens’s poetry is a call for engagement *within*, rather than a retreat *from*, the boundary between self and other, *Real* and *Live*, world and thing.

The Real and the Live

In *Camera Lucida*, Barthes writes that it is the very *immobility* of the photograph that results in “a perverse confusion between two concepts: the Real and the Live. By attesting that the object has been real, the photograph surreptitiously induces us to believe that it is alive, because of that delusion which makes us attribute to Reality an absolutely superior, somehow eternal value” (79). The photograph, like the poem, is not, of course, alive. It is, instead, as Barthes writes, “*flat*, platitudinous in the true sense of the word” (106), and so its space, not being *Live*, can claim no “Reality” other than its own immediate space of representation; its flatness. This flatness—the *image-as-such*—must function for the photograph as the *Real*, but this particular “reality” is one that must now be understood to exist in direct opposition to any “superior, eternal value”; it is within (upon) this circumscribed space of the “Real” that the photograph is obliged to announce, and to *restrict*, its meaning.⁶

⁶ In his remarkable essay on the two available versions of Roger Fenton’s iconic photo of the Crimean War, “The Valley of the Shadow of Death,” Errol Morris writes “Photographs [...] are nothing more than silver crystals arranged on paper or, in the case of digital photography, nothing more than a concatenation of 1s and 0s resident on a hard drive. Yet, when it’s a portrait, a person looking back out at us from a photograph, we could believe that the photograph has captured something of the sitter’s essence—something of the stuff that is in his head. I, too, look at the two Fenton photographs and try to imagine what Fenton’s intentions might have been. It’s unavoidable. People have been programmed to do so by natural selection—to project

Similarly, of course, language can be understood to split the Real and the Live. Attesting to a “Reality” beyond itself—an “absolutely superior, somehow eternal value”—it simultaneously remains arbitrary, certainly not-living: a “platitudinous” configuration of space on the page. In Stevens’s poetry it is the conflict between the Real (what the poem is actually able to say—the real words used, that is, which correspond to real things; for example, the depicted objects in *Transport to Summer’s* “The Motive for Metaphor”: “trees in autumn...the single bird, the obscure moon” [257]) and the Live (what the poem is unable to say—the absence, that is, of the things that the poem describes; for example, the absent and disembodied “you” to whom “The Motive for Metaphor” is addressed) that often produces the “in-between” space of “double-remove” through which it achieves its goal as an “an act of the mind” (CP 219). In “Motive for Metaphor,” the conflict results in a concretization of this “in-between” space in the form of a “pure signifier ... in short... ‘a signifier without the signified’” (Žižek 99), by remaindering, in material form, what must remain unsaid:

The obscure moon lighting an obscure world
Of things that would never be quite expressed,
Where you yourself were never quite yourself
And did not want nor have to be. (257)

It is this, the “unsaid” of the poem—that which can be described as that which is “never quite expressed” yet is no longer content to be described that way, or at all; that which is no longer content to remain caught, as in the stanza quoted above, between the realm of the “Real” and the “Live”—that is, in the final line of this poem, literalized in “the vital, arrogant, fatal, dominant X” (257). Though still entangled in the “perverse confusions” of the “Real” and the “Live,” the poem works toward a literalization of the contradiction

ourselves into the world—and to imagine Fenton’s world as we imagine ours. We want to know where we end and the world begins. We want to know where that line is. It’s the deepest problem of epistemology (37).

inherent in the very form of the X, emphasizing the delineation in “thing” form of that that “something else” that exceeds the “thing”—that exceeds, therefore, even the fatality and finality of the signifying X.

Though, indeed, it is through abstraction that Stevens allows that we may come to “find *ourselves*” (Riddell 11), both Stevens and Barthes run up against a similar problem in that neither photograph nor language cannot possibly *say* “what it lets us see” (Barthes 100). The photograph, like a poem, points always and necessarily to the “pressures of reality” *beyond* the circumscribed frame of image or page. It can therefore never name that reality exactly or represent it entirely. Instead, the photograph is indexical: it points toward a space *beyond* the subjective frame. For the mute photograph, this dilemma is fairly straightforward: the tension is between what the absent image once *really* said and what it can *no longer* say, a distinction independent from any potential viewer. With poetry the tension becomes much more subtle and ambiguous. It is a tension no longer between what the poem can and cannot say—a simple question of yes and no—but between what it may *desire* to say and what it is *able*, or *perceived to be* able, to say. It becomes a question, in other words, of the way that desire is intuited, taken up, and responded to by first the poet, then by the reader or listener.

“The Never-Rounding O”

In his book *The End of The Mind*, Desales Harrison explores the way Stevens works to push past intelligibility into an intuitive reality *beyond* the mind and, therefore, beyond the conventional bounds of communication—a territory in which we learn what we “cannot learn, cannot know, cannot do with words” (68). “Stevens,” Harrison says, “dedicates himself to the task of determining how his writing can preserve a degree of

‘imagelessness,’ of hesitation on the brink of representation” (76)⁷. He does so by resisting any attempt to *describe* “imagelessness,” instead attempting to *enact* or embody it (77). In “Montrachet-le-Jardin,” included in *Parts of the World*, for example, Stevens describes the wind as a “never rounding O” (237); Harrison asserts that the challenge for any poet is to preserve within the letter—as, he argues, Stevens has successfully managed in this poem—an “attribute of voicelessness, of the zero, or the surd” (77).⁸

Stevens’s use of “alphabetical elements” (Harrison 77) indeed denotes in his poetry not specificity but, instead, ultimate abstraction. In this way, these purely signifying “elements” mimic the fate of the photograph—which, due to its extreme ability to signify an object in all its specificity, ultimately loses its grasp on significance *entirely*. As Roland Barthes reminds us in *Camera Lucida*, with photography the following question becomes primary: “of all the objects in the world: why choose (why photograph) this object, this photograph, rather than some other?” (6).

What “[t]he A B C of being” (CP 257), as expressed in Stevens’s poem “The Motive for Metaphor,” identifies is the “literally *literal* ‘here’ of speech,” in which Stevens seeks to locate what Harrison calls the “primary nakedness” of language (77). At the end of poem, the “vital, arrogant, fatal, dominant X” (CP 357) serves precisely to signify this

⁷ It would not be a mistake to read this impulse in Stevens’s work as a reaction against the literal pictorialism of the Imagists. Stevens was wary of the totalizing power of the image. He wished instead to emphasize the processes by which the image is (continuously) re-imagined.

⁸ This “zero degree” that describes not an achieved quantity but an ever-generative force has much in common with Lacan’s “drive,” a concept he developed from the work of Freud. Freud had maintained that certain elements of every surface or field were “invested as drive.” As Lacan explains, “this investment places us on the terrain of an energy—and not any energy—a potential energy, for—Freud articulated it in the most pressing way—the characteristic of the drive is to be a *konstante Kraft*, a constant force. He cannot conceive of it as a momentane Stosskraft (momentary impulse)” (164). Lacan goes on to explain that the drive can only be satisfied by reaching one’s aim, but that “[t]his satisfaction is paradoxical” and when we consider it “something new comes into play—the category of the impossible” (166). Lacan’s subsequent discussion of this new category is also interesting in the context of our current discussion, and his advice should be kept in mind as we continue: “This function of the impossible is not to be approached without prudence, like any function that is presented in a negative form. I would simply suggest to you that the best way of approaching these notions is not to take them by negation. This method would bring us here to the question of the possible, and the impossible is not necessarily the contrary of the possible, or, since the opposite of the possible is certainly the real, we could be lead to define the real as the impossible” (167).

“primary nakedness”—the *blankness* Stevens both turns toward and resists, again and again, in his poems. It expresses, again in Harrison’s words, a “tear or pucker in speech,” the expression of which can be managed only by “*writing X* instead of *saying* what *X* stands for” (80). It is in this way that the *poem itself*—not the letter or the word, but the effect of the poem as a whole—serves as image, as *letter as such*, manifesting in itself the same “absence-as-presence” identifiable in the photograph.

But, as Harrison further points out, “The *X* is not a site to be filled with any number of possible substitutions, but the site of a removal, a fundamental absence, by definition undecipherable, imageless, a ‘never-rounding’ O” (80). The *X*, that is, is ultimately also “platitudinous” (Barthes, CL 106), its “reality” composed of and constrained by that flatness; its status as “thing” (as that which is “*not* nothing”) may be rendered immediately perceivable, but any further examination of the form will necessarily reveal that there is “nothing to discover.” “Nothing” here, however, can be understood to possess a certain value—to exist as an “enactment” of a “fundamental absence”: “nothing” as *thing*, a designation that necessarily renders it “not simply nothing” but rather a “nothing that *is*.” Thus rendered, “nothing” here serves to delineate more profoundly the “something else” of which that “nothing” (as “thing”) is constituted, therefore providing access to that more fundamental nothing (as “something else”), which otherwise it would be impossible to signify. The “nothing that is” does not become simply *object*, knowable, a “thing in itself,” but instead—existing in an abstract, present continuous, state of being—it exists in a constant *process* of its own being and becoming. This continuousness is often evoked in the images that Stevens chooses: “the jar was round upon the ground” (61); “the aureole above the humming house...” (224); “Fat girl, terrestrial...” (351). The “roundness” of these images, and the continuousness that they help to suggest, is explored as the very condition of language in “Large Red Man Reading” from *Auroras of Autumn*:

[T]he outlines of its being and its expressing, the syllables of its
law:
Poesis, poesis, the literal characters, the vatic lines,

Which in those ears and in those thin, those spended hearts,
Took on color, took on shape and the size of things as they
Are
And spoke the feeling for them, which was what they had lacked (365).

That “feeling” the “literal characters” in Stevens’s poem lack is, of course, precisely the “something else” that constitutes their “artistic nature.” Importantly, though—as both Heidegger and Stevens are intrinsically aware—that which is lacking, that *artistic nature*, does not, *cannot* lie in the “something else” alone, just as it cannot be found in the literal character of the “things themselves.” It must, instead, exist in the *space between*—*not* in the circle, but, as Heidegger would have it, in the process of the circle’s approach.⁹ Stevens’s use of the word “vatic”—stemming from the Latin *vātēs*, meaning “prophet”—serves to further emphasize the continuousness of this approach. It introduces to the discussion of language the *temporal* relationship between the present and the future. In imagining for the present a manner in, or a vocabulary with, which one might describe or predict the future is to understand the present as part of a “moving contour” (CP 351)—curving toward the unknown, the not yet achieved. It is to wrest both language and time from a vocabulary of stasis and linear causality and present them as engaged in a continuous *process of approach*. It is the representation of this *process of approach*—the maintenance of the “never rounding O” of *language itself* as both vacuum and source—that Harrison identifies as the “true challenge of the poet” (77). He explains: “As vacuum, [the O] draws description toward itself, though it can never be filled. As source, it resembles a white-hot solar origin, like ‘the inconceivable idea of the sun’” (81).

⁹ Recall here Heidegger’s charge that, “What is decisive is not to get out of the circle but to come into it in the right way” (BT 195)

Similarly, the photograph refers endlessly to its own absence, thus creating its own “vacuum of referentiality” that it can never substantially fill. “The Photograph,” writes Barthes, “mechanically repeats what could never be repeated existentially. In the Photograph, the event is never transcended for the sake of something else: The Photograph always leads the corpus I need back to the body I see; it is the absolute particular, the sovereign contingency, matte and somehow stupid, the *This* (CL 4). However, it is due to the specificity, the very extremity of the “this-ness” offered to him by the Winter Garden Photograph in which his recently deceased mother is shown as a young girl, that Barthes finally stumbles in *Camera Lucida* on what he calls the “lineaments of truth” (100).¹⁰

It is also toward an ultimate “this-ness” that the “dominant X” in Stevens’s poetry points: the “absolute particular...the *This*” (Barthes 4), which is also—both literally and figuratively—the “major abstraction” (336) that constitutes Stevens’s “supreme fiction.” This simultaneous specificity and vagueness is characteristic to the sort of ambivalence that Stevens cultivated in his work. In “Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction” he speaks of “a peculiar potency of the general” (CP 343)—as a poetic technique this is perhaps most strikingly demonstrated in Stevens’s own work in the closing lines of “The Man on the Dump”: “Where was it one first heard of truth?” The reply, on which the poem concludes is simply: “The the.” (186).

Again, it is the very *extremity* of the designation that allows a retreat from designation entirely. Just as “the nothing that is” turns around the definite article—the “the” designating for “nothing” an autonomous space of being—so “the the,” in going one step further, designates an autonomous space for designation and thus representation itself.

¹⁰ The “truth” that Barthes hits upon certainly extends in a sense beyond the subjective “truth for me.” In articulating the “truth” obtained “for (himself)” Barthes has communicated that “truth” to others. In Derrida’s *Work of Mourning* he writes that Barthes’s mother, so lovingly and convincingly depicted “smiling back” at Barthes from the Winter Garden Photograph also smiles “in” him (36)—the image, “the radiant invisibility of a look,” or in Barthes’s terms, “the truth” itself, is thus made palpable, it inhabits.

Following along similar lines, consider the opening of “The creations of Sound,” which begins:

If the poetry of X was music
So that it came to him of its own
Without understanding, out of the wall

Or in the ceiling, in sounds not chosen,
or chosen quickly, in a freedom
That was their element, we should not know

That X is an obstruction...(274).

Here, *not* knowing that X is an obstruction indeed indicates a fluid reception of sound and its subsequent translation into meaning. Stevens’s project is thus *not* to write the “poetry of X,” where X would disappear into pure receptivity, but to write the X and to know the X, in writing it, as an obstruction, and to *make it known* as one. To *make it known* that, just as Heidegger writes of the “thing” in “The Origin of the Work of Art,” so too for language

[i]n any case (the) first interpretation of the thingness of the thing, the thing as bearer of its characteristic traits, is not as natural as it appears to be. What seems natural to us is probably just something familiar in a long tradition that has forgotten the unfamiliar source from which it arose. And yet this unfamiliar source once struck man as strange and caused him to think and wonder (PLT 24).

To write X—that is, to write poetry—is to write not from within (to use Barthes’ photographic formulation) the *studium* of a given language that will go unquestioned and unexamined, but in a language instead of the *punctum*¹¹—a language that may serve to

¹¹ Barthes could not think of any French word that could adequately convey his meaning, and so he chose from the Latin. *Studium* is used to describe a sort of “average affect” in a photograph and *punctum* for that which “breaks” or “punctuates” the *studium* (26). Some photographs are “even speckled with these sensitive points; precisely, these marks, these wounds are so many points,” writes Barthes. Explaining further, he writes: “*punctum* is also: sting, speck, cut, little hole—and also a cast of the dice. A photograph’s *punctum* is that accident which pricks me (but also bruises me, is poignant to me)” (CL 27).

“prick” or even “bruise” us at times. A language that, as Stevens writes in “Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction,” may allow us to “... share, / For a moment, the first idea...It satisfies Belief in an immaculate beginning // And sends us, winged by an unconscious will, / To an immaculate end. We move between these points...” (CP 330-331).

Though the *X* in Stevens’s work—like the subject of a photograph—remains fundamentally unattainable, it signifies through that perpetual unattainability its own *approach*, that which is fundamental to its *being at all*. Perhaps it can still best be understood as the ever-shifting focalizing perspective offered in “Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird”—the point that is continuously “circled around” but refuses to be named. The *X* signifies the very *process* of that continuous “circling” drive, by which *it is itself encircled* in a “never rounding O.” The *X* defines, that is, the very “structural formation” of the drive—that generative space *between*—managing, at times, through its “peculiar potency of the general,” to expose those same “lineaments of truth” that Barthes touched upon in regarding the Winter Garden Photograph. Simultaneously freed from, and bound to, the constraints of its material form, the *X* marks but cannot *express* “the real thing” (Žižek 96). What it *can* express, however, is the point at which the circle may again be approached, in order that it may, perhaps, one day be entered “in the right way.”

Again: it is not the circle itself, but the circle’s *approach*, or rather the circle *as* approach, that is, according to Heidegger, the very “strength of thought” (Heidegger PLT 18), and it is precisely this space of *approach* that Stevens’s poetry valuably affords. The push “past representation,” which Harrison suggests for Stevens’s poetry, is never achieved, and that is precisely the point. Such a project is, Stevens’s poetry demonstrates, ultimately impossible, doomed to fail. Stevens is forever conscious of this—of the way that he must remain within the circle, within the bounds of both language and representation. His is not, as Harrison argues, an effort to move *beyond* the frame of

representation and language itself, but to enter into it “in the right way,” as an outward-facing and engaged “act of the mind” (CP 219). By elaborating the process of the mind’s active and continual “approach” to its reality, Stevens illuminates the “exactness” and the “inexactness” by which that “reality” is necessarily comprised—just as light, which “empties space” and drives the object from the shadows, illuminates both the presence and the absence of a form that was always present, though unseen.

“Le Vrai Espace”

“The visible brings the world to us,” writes John Berger, “But at the same time it reminds us ceaselessly that it is a world in which we risk being lost. The visible with its space also takes the world away from us. Nothing is more two-faced” (50). Similarly, it is the representation of the distance *between* what a poem is able to “see” and represent and what it is not that creates a spatial sense within Stevens’s poetry. It is through the “obscure moon” in “Motive for Metaphor,” for example, and its relation to the “obscure world” that we are able to imagine an equivalent distance between what can and cannot be expressed in the poem. Both the moon and the earth remain “obscure” due to the quality of the moon’s own “obscure” reflective light (though it does manage to shed some light, it does so only on the “obscure world / Of things that would never be quite expressed”[257]). The moon, at any rate, has none of the—autonomous, illuminating—power of the sun, which might (the poem seems to negatively suggest) elicit from the earth some frank expression. Because of this the moon acts as an ideal metaphor for the “human ambiguity of the visible” described by John Berger, an important part of which is “the visual experience of absence, whereby we no longer see what we saw” and where we face “a *disappearance*” (50).

But even in the experience of such a loss, we are not absolved of the knowledge of what we saw, and therefore of a persistent faith in the *Reality* of what we saw. Like a

photograph, our “inner eye” (50), as Berger calls it, preserves the image of the *Live*, and intimates through its preservation the *Real*, while at the same time allowing the *Real* to remain wholly imaginary and ephemeral. This, according to Berger, is what promotes the development of the imagination, that “inner eye” where we are to some degree able to protect the *Live* image in an interiority of such an *Unreality* that it “may be forever partly protected against the ambush of space, which is absence” (50).

A corresponding exploration of this “ambush” of space, creating absence, this time in specifically literary terms, is undertaken in Gaston Bachelard’s *The Space of Poetry*. Elaborating a line from a poem by Henri Michaux, “L’espace, mais vous ne pouvez concevoir, cet horrible en dedans-en dehors qu’est le vrai espace,” Bachelard asserts that the “space” evoked by the poet is one of such ambiguity that “the mind has lost its geometrical homeland and the spirit is drifting” (216-218). Importantly, however, the poem’s heavy reliance on imagery conversely *grounds* the ephemeral and ambiguous nature of the anguished being in the brief moment that the encapsulated space of the images provide. This allows the abstract emotion of anguish to be *tangibly* addressed in the *moment of its being* rather than in the linear and causal trajectory that is assigned to it by more philosophical approaches. “Phenomenology can learn a lot from the brevity of the image” (219), writes Bachelard, “because of the way that it can act as a little piece of experimental folly, like a virtual grain of hashish without which it is impossible to enter into the reign of the imagination” (219). It is this possibility of entering into a realm beyond the seemingly restrictive particular of an image, thereby achieving further clarity, that liberates poetry from any final ambiguity and aligns it, as Alain Badiou has powerfully suggested, with mathematics. For Badiou, mathematics “is the science of being qua being” in that “logic pertains to the coherence of appearance” and (as “formalized” by Hegel but

earlier established by Plato) “it is of the essence of being to appear” (15). Mathematics and poetry are aligned in their concern for the “coherence of appearance” but also in their commitment to a “transcendental order” where “being qua being” might be revealed. As Badiou claims for mathematics, poetry does not postulate or theorize, it “speaks,” it “says,” and in doing so it “teaches us about what *must* be said concerning what *is*; not about what it is *permissible* to say concerning what we *think* there is” (Badiou 16). Badiou’s statement, that “mathematics does not understand the meaning of the claim ‘I cannot know,’” also holds true for poetry. Like “the mathematical realm” the poetic realm “does not acknowledge the existence of spiritualist categories such as those of the unthinkable and the unthought, supposedly exceeding the meagre resources of human reason; or of those sceptical categories which claim we cannot ever provide a definitive solution to a problem or a definitive answer to a serious question (Badiou 16).

In his essay, “The Effects of Analogy,” Stevens writes, “[e]very image is the elaboration of a particular of the subject of the image. If this is true it is a realistic explanation of the origin of images” (CP 720). But this “realistic explanation” of the particular, from which the image stems, constitutes only that *particular* “from which it is possible to enter into” the generative, *abstract*, “reign of the imagination.” “Thus poetry becomes and is,” concludes Stevens, “a transcendent analogy composed of the particulars of reality, created by the poet’s sense of the world, that is to say, his attitude, as he intervenes and interposes the appearances of that sense” (CP 723). The “poet’s sense” is one that, refusing to acknowledge the “unthought” or “unthinkable,” instead manipulates and exaggerates the particulars of appearances, the available “reality,” in order to reveal the Reality (“being qua being”) within. This intense focus or exaggeration on the particular in turn presents the double possibility of personalizing that experience and exploring it at a level of remove—avoiding the tendency that Bachelard describes toward the reduction of

image and experience. “With space images, we are in the region where reduction is easy, commonplace,” Bachelard explains. “There will always be someone who will want to do away with all complications and oblige us to leave as soon as there is a mention of space—whether figurative or not—or of the opposition of outside and inside” (CP 219).

Exaggeration—the territory of that “irrepressible revolutionist”: the imagination (CP 736)—most importantly allows room for the distinction between what Bachelard calls “reflexive reduction” and “pure imagination” (219). The imagination, in short, allows room for the concept of the infinite. It resists the concept’s “reduction” by refusing to conceive of it *as*—or as *subservient to*—language or metaphor. For poetry, the infinite is both real and realizable, if not always or immediately within reach—because of this poetry and the “realm of mathematics” and inextricably intertwined. As Badiou writes, it is on the basis of the concept of the infinite that mathematics allows “for an immanentization of the infinite, separating it from the One of theology” (18). Rather than establishing a fixed and static figure of “Truth,” mathematics, or what Badiou calls, “the mathematical revolution—the rendering explicit of what had always been implicit within mathematics since the time of the Greeks, which is to say, the thorough-going rationalization of the infinite” is always and will always be “yet to come”(18). “Nevertheless,” Badiou assures us, “we do know why mathematics radically subverts both empiricist moderation and elegant scepticism: mathematics teaches us that there is no reason whatsoever to confine thinking within the ambit of finitude. With mathematics we know that, as Hegel would have said, the infinite is nearby” (18). But any engagement with mathematics, as any engagement with poetry, is one that “must constantly be reconstituted” because—for both—“the idea of the infinite only manifests itself through the moving surface of its [...] reconfigurations” (18). It is on this point that Badiou disagrees sharply with the great Symbolist poet, Stephane Mallarmé. In *Igitur* the speaker confronts the “mathematical realm” directly, announcing: “Infinity is

born of chance, which you have denied. You, expired mathematicians—I, absolute projection. Should end in Infinity.” “The idea is clear,” Badiou expounds:

Mallarmé accuses mathematicians of denying chance and thereby of fixing the infinite in the hereditary rigidity of calculation. [...] [W]hat Mallarmé has failed to see is how the operations through which mathematics has reconfigured the conception of the infinite are constantly affirming chance through the contingency of their recommencement. It is up to philosophy to gather together or conjoin the poetic affirmation of infinity drawn metaphorically from chance, and the mathematical construction of the infinite, drawn formally from an axiomatic intuition. As a result, the injunction to mathematical beauty intersects with the injunction to poetic truth. And vice versa. (19-20)

Bachelard also suggests an alignment between poetry and rigorous mathematical or scientific investigation, and once again the analogy is made not in order to suggest for either “realm” a fixity in process or results, but precisely the opposite. Bachelard proposes for philosophy a route (inspired just as equally by the poets as by the “man with the microscope” [155]) first and foremost, of *admiration*. After first immersing ourselves within this primary poetic element, we may—he assures us—resort once again to our more customary habits of reduction and criticism (219). The ambition of this approach lies precisely in its interest in reducing what Bachelard perceives as a geometrical schism between inside and outside. It suggests instead an expanded concept of space-composition where geometrically “opposed” faces might reflect off one another. The resulting refraction would reduce the possibility of the more rational “examination” of the structure of the object and its constituent parts (inside, outside, top, bottom) and lend itself instead to an overall appreciation of their integration—their prismatic glow.

“A philosopher of the imagination,” Bachelard writes (providing an apt term for describing Stevens’s approach to the poem as “an act of the mind” [CP 219]), “should follow the poet to the ultimate extremity of his images, without ever reducing this extremism” (220). He should—following Rilke—“really live a poetic image” (as quoted in Bachelard 220); he should inhabit the very space of it as one might inhabit the space of a photograph. He should forget, in the moment of looking, the “platitudinous” divide between the Real and the Live, between finitude and infinitude, and exist, instead—for the moment—in the apparition, “*being qua being*” (Badiou 15), of *the image itself*.

“The cure of the ground”

In elaborating the subtitle of the second section of the title poem of his last collection, “The Rock”: “The Poem as Icon,” Stevens writes: “It is not enough to cover the rock with leaves.” The poem, Stevens argues, must *become the rock itself*. This is not in order to obscure the imaginative realm, the “poet’s sense,” but in order to create a space in the “fiction” of the rock and the leaves that is *ultimately inclusive* of the imaginative as well as the concrete and factual elements of the poem from which the imaginative realm necessarily stems. “The fiction of the leaves is the icon // Of the poem, the figuration of blessedness, / And the icon is the man” (CP 446). All of these elements are “figured” as one, not in an effort to transcend or escape their respective bounds, but to realize them each—individually—more completely, not to escape into any “distance” beyond the limits of the human, but “to be at the end of distances, // The body quickened and the mind in root” (CP 446). It is in this “rooted” space—where the imagination is at last understood as an accepted, structural part of the man: the imagination, the poem and the man as one—that the “cure / Of leaves and of the ground and of ourselves” (CP 447) is constituted. When we

are able, that is, to really “live” the image—a process that Stevens “figures” palpably in this poem—we “learn to know, in one of (the image’s) tiny fibres, a becoming of being that is an awareness of the being’s inner disturbance. Here being is so sensitive that it is upset by a word” (Bachelard 220). We sense precisely this delicate absorption of word, poem, body and mind in Stevens’s poem when he writes:

These leaves are the poem, the icon and the man
These are the cure of the ground and of ourselves,

In the predicate that there is nothing else.
They bud and bloom and bear their fruit without change.
They are more than leaves that cover the barren rock. (446)

What these two stanzas approach, or seek to approach, is the absolute zero degree of the real, that which cannot be reduced any further, and yields no further explanation. The concern is therefore not for what can be described or explicated but for what simply *is*. But to be “concerned with,” to “approach,” or “seek to approach,” is to *necessarily* describe, *necessarily* explicate. It is, precisely, to “predicate.” These lines subtly make use of this apparent contradiction. “In the predicate that there is nothing else” establishes and conveys the *perception* of an “absolute zero degree of the real” while at the same time establishing or acknowledging that this “real” is predicated upon *perception itself*. The poem can thus be understood as “predicated” on the subjective perception of the speaker—“that there is nothing else.” The *constitutive elements* of the poem (the leaves, the icon, the man—each of which maintains an equivocal and direct relationship to that which simply “is”) must duly, therefore, be understood this way, too. By this route, the poem establishes that which “is,” the zero degree of the real, in the territory of the subjective and linguistic. The poem continues:

They bud the whitest eye, the pallidest sprout,
New senses in the engendering of sense,
The desire to be at the end of distances. (CP 446)

The continuity of the cyclic formulation, “New senses in the engendering of sense” is directly counter-balanced by “The desire to be at the end of distances.” The by now familiar impulse in Stevens’s poetry toward the elaboration of a process of *continuous approach* is offset by an equally strong impulse to be “at the end” of any sort of—imagistic, descriptive—elaboration. Rather than plunge into the interior of the circular formulation that he himself establishes, Stevens is, like Bachelard, instead intent on a *surfacing*, on the “stern particular(s)” (CP 447) of sensory experience, rather than on the depths of, or the “roots” of the image, on the (active) “engendering of senses” (CP 447) rather on the reliance of any (static) information gathered by them.

The image itself, Bachelard argues—any image—has no doubt already been entrenched with so much metaphoric value (think of Stevens’s moon in “Motive for Metaphor”) that it is precisely the “roots” (222) of the image that the philosopher of the imagination should be required to avoid. A phenomenology of the poetic imagination, therefore, rather than plumbing the depths allows the philosopher to explore being as *surface*. It is in that space of *surfaces*, “where being wants to be both visible and hidden,” that it becomes enterable, accessible, and that “the movements of opening and closing are so numerous, so frequently inverted, and so charged with hesitation, that we could conclude on the following formula: man is half-open being” (Bachelard 222).

It is into this “half-open” space that Stevens enters in his poem “Description without Place” (296). As the title suggests, the poem describes a *non-place*, but it is a *non-place* that exists as place, nevertheless—substantially enough, that is, to be described. It exists not in reality, but in the space of Berger’s “inner-eye” where it is protected from the “ambush of space, which is absence” (Berger 50). In that protected space it able to exist in

all of its frequent “inversions” and “hesitations” *between* the Real and the Live—in a state, that is, like that of a photograph, not of being, but of *seeming to be*.

It is possible that to seem – it is to be,
As the sun is something seeming and it is,

The sun is an example. What it seems
It is and in such seeming all things are. (296)

Here the sun counters the “obscure moon” of “The Motive for Metaphor”—it unquestionably announces itself: “What it seems it is” (296), and no apologies are made for any discrepancies that might be read into those lines. But the “reality” of both images is always *displaced* by the image itself, as it is that image that points to the limit of its own power to “throw light” on the phenomenon it attempts to represent or describe. “One is taught to oppose the real to the imaginary,” writes Berger, “as though the first were always at hand and the second distant, far away. This opposition is false. Events are always at hand” (72). By reversing the formula and positioning the imaginary at hand, the real at a distance, Stevens explodes the “false opposition” that Berger describes. In Stevens, “what it seems” (the imaginary) becomes “what it is” (the real). This is demonstrated further a few lines down in the same poem: “Her green mind made the world around her green” (CP 296). Here we see quite clearly that it is the *mind* that makes the world real by exerting a power over it capable of effecting *real change*: “In the seeming of the summer of her sun/
By her own seeming made the summer change” (CP 296).

Either way the opposition is constructed, however, it remains an opposition. Imaginative “events are always at hand” in Stevens’s poetry, but the reality they refer to is necessarily displaced. According to Berger, it is the “coherence” of these “at hand” events (“which is what one means by reality” [72]) that is “an imaginative construct. Reality always lies beyond” (72). This is clearly seen in Berger’s example, where “real” events are

necessarily interpreted through the imagination, so that their “reality” is necessarily displaced from the event itself into the *beyond* of the imagination. The difference when the opposition is reversed is that we *begin* from a position of abstraction, from *within* an “imaginative construct,” so that the “reality beyond” exists within the poem itself—not in any substantial form, but as an allowance made for a space of *absence*. The pure signifier is, after all, only that element which “holds the place for a certain lack, which is in its bodily presence nothing but an embodiment of a certain lack...perceived as a point of extreme plenitude” (Žižek 99). Having commenced within a *non-place* of the imagination, within the “inner-eye,” the image in Stevens’s poem is—as Berger describes—protected from the imposition of space-as-absence as it imagines *within itself* a space of absence capable of absorbing the “reality beyond” without needing to go outside of itself to obtain it. In other words, like a photograph, the poem contains its own negation.

Though Stevens had, at the beginning of his career, considered his tendency toward the abstract a weakness, by the end of his career he had not only fully come to terms with this tendency but began to consider it (as described above by Berger in terms of the visual image) a fundamental structural element of his poetry. This shift in perspective was due largely to the ascendancy of the abstract expressionist movement in the visual art world—a movement that Stevens himself had helped to inspire with his categorical declaration in “Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction” that: “It Must Be Abstract.” By the time he wrote “Notes,” Stevens no longer guiltily perceived “abstraction” as an evasion of the “real world.” Inspiring generations of artists and poets who followed, Stevens began to view “abstraction,” instead, as a valuable method by which to *access* the Real.¹²

¹² American abstraction gained popularity after World War II over regionalism and social realism with the emergence of the Abstract Expressionists. As James Logenbach has observed: “It is not merely coincidence

In a letter to José Rodríguez Feo, of June 20, 1945, Stevens wrote: “Reality is the great fond, and it is because it is that the purely literary amounts to so little. Moreover, in the world of actuality ... one is always living a little out of it” (CP 949). He goes on to quote what he tellingly refers to as a “precious sentence” from Henry James—a sentence that could indeed be understood to express the poetic principle at the root of Stevens’s poetry—especially that of his late career: “To live *in* the world of creation—to get into it and stay in it—to frequent it and haunt it—to think intensely and fruitfully—to woo combinations and inspirations into being by a depth and continuity of attention and meditation—this is the only thing” (CP 949).

Stevens’s acknowledgement in his letter to Rodríguez Feo, however, that despite one’s best efforts at accessing the sort of immediacy of experience and “actuality” that James describes, “one is always living a little out of it,” confirms that even during this latter phase of Stevens’s career—characterized by an unabashed embrace of abstraction—he would never give up what he had once dubbed his “reality-imagination complex.” For Stevens—even, or perhaps especially when he turns more notably toward abstraction—the two: a concrete “reality” and an abstract “imagination,” are inextricably tied. He would remark, for example, in admiration of the use of abstraction in the modern art of the day, that “the physical never seems newer than when it is emerging from the metaphysical” and that a “momentum toward abstraction” often serves to produce in the viewer the opposite effect: an increased, rather than dispersed or deflected, intensity of feeling (Logenbach 265).

that Stevens chose the terms *abstract* to describe his own poetic aims at this particular historical moment. There is a significant relationship between these parallel developments in American painting and poetry.” (104).

This marriage of the physical and metaphysical, a momentum on the one hand toward the abstract, and on the other toward a distilled intensity of feeling, is once again rendered curiously tangible through the consideration of photography. Perhaps one of the most striking reflections contained within Barthes's *Camera Lucida* centers around a nineteenth century photograph that depicts a young inmate awaiting execution. "I observe with horror," Barthes writes of his experience regarding the photograph, "an anterior future of which death is the stake. By giving me the absolute past of the pose (aorist), the photograph tells me death in the future.... In front of the photograph of my mother as a child, I tell myself: she is going to die: I shudder...*over a catastrophe which has already occurred*. Whether or not the subject is already dead, every photograph is this catastrophe" (96). Each photographic image, Barthes contends—in simultaneously containing futurity and historicity, a "*this will be and this has been*" (96), within a single frame—is constituted fundamentally by a space of absence (or, in Barthes' interpretation: a space of death). Could this empty space be the "new structural formation of the subject" that, according to Benjamin, photography reveals (236)? To talk, uncannily, about an "anterior future" is really to talk about temporality per se. The spatial vocabulary that photography lends should not be equated to a genuine shift from a discussion of the temporal. The ideas presented and explored by Barthes and Benjamin through their discussions of photography—"space of absence," "space of death"—are still, of course, in the largest part metaphorical. It is to temporality, to *tense*, and more specifically to a perceived *belatedness*, that these spatial metaphors refer. The point is not to discredit this vocabulary, or to criticize it for an insufficient attention to the "properly" spatial, but instead to raise the question about the ways in which temporal and spatial language and conceptions are mutually dependant, and that therefore *any* representation of space "spans" a representation of time, and temporality of the subject, and vice versa. Any representation of time

circumscribes a particular spatial territory: it is this spatial circumscription of the temporal that is literalized by photography.

It is true that the close-up snapshot, slow motion film and a microscope all allow an image to become “new” due to the revelation of “new structural formation(s) of the subject” previously undetectable to the human eye, but in each of these cases what is “new” is, of course, still only *the image* of the subject—not (as Benjamin seems here to suggest) the subject itself. The structural formations may reveal themselves through technology as more complex, but there is no separate substance, or reality, to be discovered in attending to the subject more closely that did not already exist (if undetected) prior to its close examination under the microscope or the stilled frame. “Alas, however hard I look, I discover nothing,” writes Barthes as he searches for some evidence of the “truth” of his mother in her childhood photograph: “If I enlarge, I see nothing but the grain of the paper: I undo the image for the sake of its substance; and if I do not enlarge, if I content myself with scrutinizing, I obtain this sole knowledge, long since possessed at first glance: that this indeed has been: the turn of the screw has produced nothing...Such is the photograph: it cannot say what it lets us see” (100).

The space of the poem, enacted as a photograph—as a territory of *seems*—also produces “nothing,” but it is precisely this “nothing” that creates an imaginative spatiality—a *non*-place situated in the schism between the arbitrary signification of language and its meaning, a “reality...beyond” (Berger 72) what it is able to *say*—within which the poem is able to let us *see*. In order to do this, however, the poem must develop a space of perfect *insignificance*, which might serve to reverse the opposition between the real and the imaginary, as the following excerpt—again from Stevens’s “Description Without Place”—manages to do:

And another breath emerging out of death,
That speaks for him such seemings as death gives.

There might be, too, a change immenser than
A poet's metaphors in which being would

Come true, a point in the fire of music where
Dazzle yields to clarity and we observe,

And observing is completing and we are content,
In a world that shrinks to an immediate whole,

That we do not need to understand, complete
Without secret arrangements of it in the mind. (298)

The “seeming” that Stevens evokes in this passage expresses the “space of absence” within the speaker’s consideration of death. It expresses, that is, not *death itself*, but a space of *breath*—a space of possibility that *emerges* from death, which arises from a subject that no longer exists *as such*. By following the poet to the “ultimate extremity of his images” (222) as Bachelard encourages us to do (in this case, past the subject itself into an absence of the subject, into an absence even of the death of that subject: what is breath that arises *out of* death, but a transgression of the limit of death itself?), we are able to perceive the world as “an immediate whole, that we do not need to understand...” (298). The “ultimate extremity” to which we are obliged to follow Stevens in this and many other of his poems is the extremity of his conditionals. As in the passage above where the grammar fixes the hypothetical “There might be, too, a change immenser...” to the conditional, “than / A poet’s metaphors in which being would / Come true.” This construction seems to literalize Badiou’s claim that linguistic expression is “ultimately no more than a superficial translation” of the transcendental logic of mathematics (15). Stevens’s phrases are often formulated in this way—their cumulative hypotheses, subjunctives and conditionals reading like linguistic variables in a (constantly “reconfiguring”) mathematical equation.

As Bachelard suggests, it is the intense exaggeration of any image that allows a glimpse into the empty spaces contained within the structure of the image itself. Similarly, Stevens's "close-up" attention to language—his emphasis, for example, on "the letter as such" and the compound-conditional—allows us to "glimpse" the "abstraction" not *within*, or at the "root" of language, but at its surface. Stevens's "reveal" is not of the spaces or gaps between meaning or signifying units but of language *as* language. It is not a descriptive or metaphorical space, but instead a space of the "is." This "is," as always, is predicated on the conditional and the subjective, but that does not disallow, and in fact *creates the very conditions for*, the sort of unconditional, objective certainty achieved in moments when, as in the passage above, "dazzle yields to clarity" (298).

It is true that through the "microscope" as through Stevens's poem, we have not discovered anything "substantially" different, but we have looked at the subject "*as though* it were quite new" (Bachelard 155). We have therefore allowed the enlargement of the small—that which has been exaggerated to a point of its absence—to stand in for the whole, providing a way of imagining and thinking about the immensity of the subject without reducing it in size or complexity. As Stevens writes in "Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction": "The freshness of transformation is / The freshness of a world." For him, poetry was a method of effecting that transformation, therefore of renewing "the world." In the poem—as in the photograph—the small contains the possibility of becoming immense,¹³ absence contains the possibility of presence, and negative-space contains the possibility of effecting a *positive*-space of meaning. "The reality...beyond" (Berger 72) is encapsulated in

¹³ As Susan Stewart writes in her study, *On Longing: Narratives of the Miniature, the Gigantic, the Souvenir, the Collection*, "our transcendent viewpoint makes us perceive the miniature as object and this has a double effect. First, the object in its perfect stasis nevertheless suggests use, implementation, and contextualization. And second, the representative quality of the miniature makes that contextualization an allusive one; the miniature becomes a stage on which we project, by means of association or intertextuality, a deliberately framed series of actions [...] and hence a narrativity (54).

the reality within, but only as the precise space where the subject-image is demarcated against a larger space.

“The being-here is maintained by a being from elsewhere. Space, vast space, is the friend of being,” writes Bachelard. “How much philosophers would learn, if they would consent to read the poets!” (208). It is, Bachelard argues, through the poetic imagination that immensity itself may be enlarged, “magnified through contemplation” (210), lending a reality to the experience of that immensity which would otherwise be reduced by psychology, or declared “ephemeral” (Bachelard 210). “Poems are human realities,” Bachelard writes. “They must be lived in their poetic immensity” (210). But that immensity is not, in keeping with Stevens’s sense of his own poetic project, something that exists necessarily “beyond”: “Immensity is within ourselves. It is attached to a sort of expansion of being that life curbs and caution arrests, but which starts again when we are alone. As soon as we become motionless, we are elsewhere; we are dreaming in a world that is immense. Indeed, immensity is the movement of the motionless man” (184).

Consider this in relation to Stevens’s “The House was Quiet and the World Was Calm,” from *Transport to Summer*: “The reader became the book; and summer night / Was like the conscious being of the book” (311). It is the reader’s very motionlessness—the stillness of subject and surroundings—that allows him to *become the book* and thereby access the “conscious being” of the night itself, and of the world. The stillness and the quiet are a “part of the meaning, part of the mind: the access of perfection to the page” (312); it is stillness that allows the reader to absent himself so as to make room for meaning, which can only apparently assert itself when “there is no other meaning” (312). The reader must forfeit any of his own personal meaning before he is able to become the book, but it is through this very process that meaning returns to him:

And the world was calm. The truth in a calm world,

In which there is no other meaning, itself

Is calm, itself is summer and night, itself

Is the reader leaning late and reading there (312).

By effecting a now familiar “double remove” within this poem, Stevens creates a *space of absence* for “the reader,” and thereby permits an entry for meaning. The “reader’s” being, always “half-open” (Bachelard 222), has in this case swung the door wide. And, although the language of the poem again points to a “reality...beyond” (Berger 72) which the poem itself can take us (we remain grounded in the image of the “reader leaning late and reading there” [312]), we are able to create our own “truth in a calm world” by becoming that reader; by becoming, that is to say, *ourselves*. The circular model that is often adopted in Stevens’s imagery is here drawn so tight as to become almost a still-point. It is within this tightly circumscribed space that we confront “ourselves,” our own readerliness. Having been directed toward a “truth” *beyond* the frame of the poem as it is presented on the page (a “truth,” importantly, that we as readers cannot access: this inability to access the “reader’s” book or experience his “calm world” is what points us beyond it) we discover that we *ourselves* are the “reader”—that the “book” is the one we have open in our hands.

A “Double Ineffableness” and the Face to Face

“The boon of language,” writes Berger, “is that potentially it is complete, it has the potentiality of holding with words the totality of human experience—everything that has occurred and everything that may occur. It even allows space for the unspeakable” (95). “The House Was Quiet and the World Was Calm” contains just this potentiality of completeness. It holds the possibility of both the immensity “beyond” and “within” as it directs our attention both to the unknown and un-embodied other and to ourselves. It is what it is able to say: “The truth...is the reader leaning late and reading there” (312), and

also (because the imagined reader has entered a world that remains unuttered in the poem) what it is unable to say. By incorporating the latter, the poem provides a space of blankness onto which the reader herself creates meaning, imposing her own experience as reader onto the page; an experience that the poem as such *cannot know*, and cannot *speak*, but can, nevertheless, contain. What is presented, then, is not what is or could ever be contained, but the *container itself*—though the relationship between the two must here be understood as dialectical rather than oppositional.¹⁴

This space for what the poem *cannot* contain, *cannot* say, exists through a constant tension in the poem between the image's motion and motionlessness. As Bachelard explains, the image must be "active in both directions...the direction that enlarges and the direction that concentrates" (171), and it is through a maintenance of this tension that the poet is able to keep the image "from becoming motionless" (171), thereby creating within the poem the very condition of daydreaming: what Bachelard calls "the movement of motionless man" (184).

As in Stevens's final lines of "Man Carrying Thing"—"We must endure our thoughts all night, until / The bright obvious stands motionless in the cold" (306)—the "bright obvious" is an image that is at once the enlarged, exaggerated, "unspeakable," and also the concentrated, motionless object of our poetic attention and imagination. "Man Carrying Thing" provides us with an excellent example of not only the divergence between

¹⁴ Think here of Heidegger's jug, which, as he describes in his essay "Das Ding," "remains a vessel whether we represent it in our minds or not. As a vessel the jug stands on its own as self-supporting. But what does it mean to say that the container stands on its own? Does the vessel's self-support alone define the jug as a thing? Clearly the jug stands as a vessel only because it has been brought to a stand. This happened during, and happens by means of, a process of setting, of setting forth, namely, by producing the jug" (PLT 165). Later on, Heidegger is brought up short by the realization that "we failed to give thought to what the jug holds and how it holds. How does the jug's void hold?" He asks. The answer: "The void holds in a twofold manner: taking and keeping" (PLT 169). In so "containing" its own void, and thus also the possibility of the "gift" of a poured substance—whether or not the substance is actually at any moment *contained*—the jug "presences as a thing" (PLT 171): "The thing stays—gathers and unites—the fourfold" (PLT 178), which Heidegger defines as "earth and sky, divinities and mortals" (PLT 175-176). Further: "The thing things world. Each thing stays the fourfold into a happening of the simple oneness of the world" (PLT 178).

the enlarged and concentrated image, but also the “poetic event” as defined by Giorgio Agamben in *The End of the Poem*: “the divergence between intellect and language” (38). In fact, the first lines of this poem describe Agamben’s thesis quite plainly: “The poem must resist the intelligence / Almost successfully” (306). It is precisely there—in the not-quite-successful resistance to intelligence—that the poem happens: in a “double ‘ineffableness’...in which the intellect cannot grasp (‘end’) what language says and in which language does not ‘completely follow’ what the intellect comprehends” (Agamben 38). Both language and intellect, in this way, go above and beyond what the other is capable of comprehending, so there exists a gap that is not so much an *absence*, but rather a *hyper-presence*—that “supreme plenitude” (99) that Žižek ascribes to the abstract (both the unspeakable and the unthinkable).

It is precisely this “double-ineffableness” that is made tangible by the photograph, providing us with an excellent model for understanding Stevens’s poetic imagination. Substitute “the image” for “language” above and we see that the same formula applies: “in which the intellect cannot grasp (‘end’) what (the image) says and in which (the image) does not ‘completely follow’ what the intellect comprehends” (Agamben 38). What Barthes describes in *Camera Lucida* as the photograph’s *punctum* is precisely that aspect of the photograph that *cannot be “grasped”*: “The *punctum*, then,” writes Barthes, “is a kind of subtle beyond—as if the image launched desire beyond what it permits us to see...toward the absolute excellence of a being, body and soul together” (59).¹⁵ The image itself, its “Live” aspect, can in no way “completely follow” what the intellect, in receiving the image, comprehends as “Real”; in this way the photograph literalizes the “double ineffableness” of

¹⁵ As previously noted, the *punctum* “pricks,” it wounds. It is the site of an uncomfortable or painful affect that jolts the subject from his ordinary patterns of being-in and seeing the world. It is in this way that he enters the “subtle beyond,” permitting him to see the world anew. This could be anything from the simple experience of being suddenly, unexplainably moved by a photograph, to the sort of visionary seeing Barthes describes in the text quoted above.

the poetic event described by Agamben, where “language speaks without comprehending” and “the intellect comprehends without being able to speak” (39). It is just as language struggles to free itself through a comprehending body that comprehension struggles to free itself in an expressive language, and they are able to “communicate with each other in their limitation, such that...their imperfection actually coincides with their perfection” (Agamben 39). In just this way, going back to “The Poem as Icon” from *The Rock*, the incongruity between the rock and what it is called to stand in for as “icon” constitutes its generativeness as an image: “In this plenty, the poem makes meanings of the rock, / Of such missed motion and such imagery/ That its *barrenness* becomes a thousand things” (CP 447, emphasis added).

Where Berger speaks of the poetic moment as a split between the imaginative and the real, however, Agamben is concerned with the dichotomy between sense and sound. In every “genuine poetic enunciation” (41), according to Agamben, there is a simultaneous movement on the one hand of language to sense, and on the other of comprehension to sound, without either reaching its destination (for the former that destination would be the achievement of prose, and the latter would be the achievement of “pure sound” [Agamben 41]). “Instead,” explains Agamben,

in a decisive exchange, it is as if, having met each other, each of the two movements then followed the other’s tracks, such that language found itself led back in the end to language and comprehension to comprehension. This inverted chiasm—this and nothing else—is what we call poetry. This chiasm is, beyond every vagueness, poetry’s crossing with thought, the thinking essence of poetry and poeticizing essence of thought (41).

Think again of Stevens’s articulation of this in “Man Carrying Thing” and the illustration he provides for the poem’s necessary *almost-successful* resistance to intelligence:

A brune figure in winter evening resists
Identity. The thing he carries resists

The most necessitous sense. Accept them, then,
As secondary (parts not quite perceived

Of the obvious whole...(306)

The *resistance* to sense articulated here—the “brune figure’s” ability to remain “brune,” vague, and undefined; the object that it carries to remain an object, a poetic gesture, rather than *a thing itself*—allows the poem to cohere, from its “parts,” the “poetic enunciation” of the last lines: “We must endure our thoughts all night, until / The bright obvious stands motionless in the cold” (306). Put another way: it is the sensible alignment of parts to an “obvious whole” (“the thinking essence” [Agamben 41] of the poem) as it crosses paths with the pure “sonority” (“the poeticizing essence” [Agamben 41] of the poem) that results in the “bright obvious” of the final line.

Where at first the “obvious whole” is depicted as “obvious” because it is only *sensible* that parts cohere to a whole, the “bright obvious,” which “stands motionless in the cold,” is no longer that which is sensible but that which has been *remaindered* by the interchange between *both sense and sound*, between the poeticizing and the thinking essences, by the real and the imaginary, the “Real” and the “Live.” It is this created blankness—this photographic platitude (“in the true sense of the word” [Barthes 106]) upon which “dazzle yields to clarity” (Stevens 298)—that produces poetic meaning. The intellect immediately comprehends the “vital, arrogant, fatal, dominant X” (CP 257), the ideal formulaic expression of that which “resists intelligence almost successfully” (CP 306): it enacts a “double remove,” what Agamben calls a “double ineffableness,” whereby the intellect is unable to understand the significance of *X* and at the same time *X* is unable to fulfill itself, condemned to remain forever the signifier, never the signified.

Again, it is attention to the literal “sense” of the poem that acts in the same way that a powerful close-up would for a film, or a microscope for a cell, revealing “entirely new structural formations” of the subject. Only when this sense of the *Real* of the poem (its *X-ness*) is crossed with the *Live* of the poem (an absolute inability for that *X* to contain the poetic meaning that the mind immediately comprehends) is the poet able to achieve what Bachelard refers to as “the poetic phenomenon of pure liberation, of absolute sublimation” (69). In this state, “The image is no longer under the domination of things, nor is it subject to the pressures of the unconscious. It floats and soars, immense, in the free atmosphere of a great poem” (69). It is important that this chiasmic “crossing” of the Real and the Live is understood as such. The *X* is not a crossing-out, a *chasm* of meaning, but a crossing-over—a *chiasmus*. But that is not to say that the restrictions imposed by the *X* are not extreme, more even than if it could be understood as a negation. Meaning is suspended between two poles, between the *contained* and the *container*; it becomes in this way, “thing,” existent within its form—but, like Heidegger’s jug, only “insofar as it things” (PLT 175). That is, it exists as “thing” only insofar as it presences itself “from out of the worlding world” (PLT 178); only insofar as it makes legible the “dif-ference” (PLT 199) between objective form that “stands before us and can be seen” and the “ever-non-objective to which we are subject as long as the paths of birth and death, blessing and curse keep us transported into Being” (PLT 43).

The “liberation” that can be achieved by a poem, according to Bachelard, is proportional to the “repose” from which the image frees itself. When the poem originates from the “narrow gate” of an initially constricting imagistic space the “liberation” it achieves can be extreme. Bachelard explores, for example, the role of corners, nests, shells, drawers, and other imagined spaces from which the poet is able to “open up” the world

(Bachelard 155). “The more concentrated the repose,” he writes, “the more hermetic the chrysalis, the more the being that emerges from it is a being from elsewhere, the greater is his expansion” (66).¹⁶

The attention that Stevens pays in “The Motive for Metaphor” to the limiting structures of the medium of language, indeed offers precisely this opportunity for “liberation.” It is through the “close-up” attention to detail, to the ‘X-ness’ of its language, that a blankness is rendered available in the poem, becoming a signifying space in its own right. Always “half-open” (Bachelard 222), we are able, in the instances of such poetic liberation, to “open (our) doors to the world” (Bachelard 69). It is within this created space of openness, of immensity, that it becomes possible to glimpse—if only for a moment—“the bright obvious” that stands before us: “motionless in the cold” (Stevens CP 306).

Transcendence, according to Levinas, “consists in speaking the world to the Other...The generality of the word institutes a common world” (TI 173). It is toward “the generality” of this “common world” that Stevens tends, but importantly it is a generality manifested through the particular: through the word, which constitutes Stevens’s “peculiar potency of the general” referred to in “Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction.” Consideration of

¹⁶ The “condensation” by which Freud argues a dream is constructed could prove an interesting model for thinking about the contrast between the “repose” and “expansion” of poetic images discussed here by Bachelard. “The content of the dream is given as it were in the form of hieroglyphs whose signs are to be translated one by one into the language of the dream-thoughts” (211), writes Freud in chapter six of *The Interpretation of Dreams*. He continues on to say that “[w]e would obviously be mis-led if we were to read these signs according to their pictorial value and not according to their referentiality as signs” and also warns against the premature assumption that a dream has been interpreted in its entirety. “Even when the solution seems satisfying and complete,” he counsels, “it is always possible for a further meaning to announce its presence through the same dream. *The quota of condensation* is thus, strictly speaking, indeterminable” (212). But, “how does this condensation come about?” (214). Contrary to what might be assumed, condensation of dream material does not arise through *exclusion* but rather through a consistent process of *over-determination*. “Whatever dream I submit to this kind of analysis,” writes Freud, “I always find the same principles confirmed: the elements formed into the dream are drawn from the entire mass of the dream-thoughts, and in its relation to the dream-thoughts, each one of the elements seems to be determined many times over” (217).

the word as object, as “generic” form, draws attention in Stevens’s work to what Levinas calls the “primordial putting in common” that language affords. That is, the “transcendent” space of the poem that Stevens conceives of—a space achieved not via any achieved signification but via the very signifyingness of language and representation—is the intimate, primordial space revealed through a “double ineffableness” between the “I” and the “non-I.” What is this “double ineffableness” but the poetic (*poesis*) moment in which there is a simultaneous movement toward intelligibility (sense) on the one hand (the absorption of the “Other” into the “I” of the same in the moment of representation) and to sensibility (sound) on the other, and where in the midst of this double movement, in which neither reaches its destination (either pure sense, or pure sensibility) but each is led back to itself there exists a chiasm “beyond every vagueness” in the “I’s” relation to the “Other,” a negative-space constituted, similarly to Agamben’s definition of poetry, by “the thinking essence of poetry and poeticizing essence of thought” (EP 41).

The process of delineating this relationship, exposing the lines by which this “double-movement” occurs, allows the “I” to transcend its own bounds and effect an ethical movement toward the “Other.” Without the exposure of the “lineaments” of representation—attention to the platitudinous (“in the true sense of the word”) “face” of the image, the word, or the human being (“I” or “the Other”)—there can be no possibility of transcending those bounds. “The ‘vision’ of the face,” writes Levinas, “is inseparable from this offering language is. To see the face is to speak the world. Transcendence is not an optics, but the first ethical gesture” (TI 174). Through a poetry intent on traversing this negative-space and therefore remaining in the territory of the “saying,” rather than “ending” itself in the “said,” Stevens’s project is “thus to make signs of (the) very signifyingness of the exposure; it is to expose the exposure instead of remaining in it as the act of exposing” (TI 143). This impulse toward an exposure of *exposure itself*, the figuration of *figuration*

itself, is what constitutes Stevens' ethical drive—a drive past “optics,” past exposure or figuration itself—toward (“passivity of passivity”) the perpetual signifyingness of that which is always-already exposed.

Chapter Three: The Word

The word must be the thing it represents otherwise it is a symbol. It is a question of identity

—Wallace Stevens (CP 907).

Proposita:

1. God and the imagination are one.

2. The thing imagined is the imaginer.

The second equals the thing imagined and the imaginer are one. Hence, I suppose, the imaginer is God

—Wallace Stevens (CP 914).

But what is this gesture? Toward what does it move us? In many ways, Levinas's expression of language as a "primordial donation"—emphasizing the material fundament of human interaction and exchange at the root of all language—does not seem to move us very far from the circuitous formulation that Heidegger offers us in his 1950 essay, "Language." "Language itself is language, and nothing else besides" (PLT 188), Heidegger writes. But though this may appear "an empty tautology" (PLT 188), Heidegger attests that his formulation expresses the fact that, when it comes to the question of language: "... [w]e do not *want* to get anywhere. We would like only for once, to get to just where we were already" (PLT 188, emphasis added). Indeed, it is the fundamental *passivity* that this statement points to that Levinas's interpretation of language as a transcendence of the *face-to-face* is able to—more substantially—articulate. A similar passivity is expressed by Stevens when, in a 1948 interview with the *Partisan Review*, he wrote that, "poetry is nothing if it is not an experiment in language" (CP 823); nothing, that is, if it does not bring us back to the fundamental question of representation that language poses, and endeavour to test the limits it *imposes*. Poetry, in this sense, does not "want to get anywhere." Its active "experimentation" with language purposes to reveal nothing other than the experience of "language itself."¹ "The poet records his experience as poet in subjects and words which are part of that experience," Stevens further explains in the *Partisan* interview. "He knows that nothing but the truth of that experience means anything to him or to anyone else. Experiment in respect to subjects and words is the effort on his part to record the truth of that experience" (CP 823).

The year 1948—one year after the publication of Stevens's most concerted effort to delineate a theory of his own poetics with "Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction" in *Transport*

¹ "Experiment" according to the Oxford English Dictionary: "To have experience of; to experience; to feel; suffer" (Vol. III 431).

to Summer—marked a crucial turning point for Stevens. The two collections which follow, *The Auroras of Autumn* (1950), and *The Rock* (1952), embark from the theoretical point of departure established by “Notes” and constitute Stevens’s most successful attempt at incorporating and expressing language’s dual—both figurative and material—nature. For Stevens, the question of form penetrated far beyond the poem on the page. It was a question, instead, of the approach to the *question* of the poem on the page. In an essay presented at the American Federation of Arts Convention in October 1954, Stevens declared that “[f]orm alone and of itself is an ever-youthful, ever-vital thing” (CP 875). By “form” Stevens somewhat confusingly intends here not any tangible achieved *result* in the arts—painting, poetry or music—to which he explicitly refers, but instead, what might be more aptly called, a “will to form.” In any case, Stevens’s emphasis is clearly not on material object-ness and its relationship to the arts, but on what he calls an inherited “vigor of art,” which “is itself formless.” This amorphous energy can only be passed on, he explains, from “those in whom the principle (of art) is active, so that generations of form come from generations of men” (CP 875). It would seem that Stevens is connecting the tangible material “form” produced by particular artists to the conception of a larger super-structure, the energy and influence of which helps to *shape* individual artistic efforts—and therefore their results—but is itself necessarily *un-formlike*, *un-formed*. As usual for Stevens, the idea is worked out far more convincingly in poetry. The opening—title—poem of *Auroras of Autumn* begins: “This is where the serpent lives, the bodiless.” And a little further along, in stanza four, Stevens writes:

This is form gulping after formlessness
 Skin flashing to wished-for disappearances
 And the serpent body flashing without the skin (355).

The governing “principle” beyond all form is—we see here, with the help of the “serpent body” image—“formlessness.” The ambiguity introduced by the word “after” (does “form

gulping *after* formlessness” connote that “form” is desirous of some future “formlessness” or, instead, that form’s “gulping” occurs in the wake or as a result of “formlessness”?) is important in the sense that it results in a nearly chiasmic intersection between form and formlessness where the directionality is purposely obscured, but it does nothing to interrupt or obscure the line’s—and indeed the poem’s—central concern. It is only by remaining active according to the poem’s “principle”—remaining, indeed, always one step ahead of anything *fixed*—that “form” may, in fact, be constituted at all; that it may, in “gulping after”—toward, or as a result of—“formlessness” that its own “wished-for disappearances” *appear* to us at all. The visual formation of this apparition is expressed quite plainly in “figure/ground” terms in stanza five:

This is the height emerging and its base
 These lights may finally attain a pole
 In the midmost midnight and find the serpent there,

In another nest, the master of the maze
 Of body and air and forms and images,
 Relentlessly in possession of happiness (CP 355).

What is the “snake” but our perception of form itself? What is its “poison” but that “we should disbelieve”—given our knowledge that even the center, the “midmost midnight,” will not hold?

“Poesis”

In “A Collect of Philosophy,” Stevens argues that what he terms “poetic” philosophical concepts should not be degraded or dismissed for their “poeticism” as this is *precisely the point*. Philosophy *is* poetry (*poesis* stemming from the early Greek variant for “a making, creation” [OED, Vol. VII 1042]): the first sensory, then cognitive *process* of making sense of the world. “According to the traditional views of sensory perception,” Stevens writes in this lecture, “we do not see the world immediately but only as the result

of a process of seeing and after the completion of that process, that is to say, we never see the world except the moment after...The material world, for all the assurances of the eye, has become immaterial. It has become an image in the mind” (CP 857). Just as the “form” of the world—what is formally visible to us from moment to moment, is always, in this way, arising from and “gulping after formlessness,” so, too, is language.

Indeed, language as expressed in “the word,”² is nothing other than the “expression” of man’s—always belated—formal “experience.” The elaboration of a space of language as “language itself” provides, for this reason, an ideal space for an exploration in Stevens’s poetry of both perception and representation. Language is, of course, “in itself” a literal “visualization of form,” but it is also—due to the blatant disconnect between signifier and signified contained within the space of the *letter itself*, much like Barthes’s “platitudinous” photograph—a simultaneous “visualization” of formlessness. Poetry, as Stevens had asserted, is nothing if it is not an “experiment” within that space—between form and formlessness—of language. A space where, “the cancelling, / The negations are never final” (CP 357) as Canto IV of “The Auroras Autumn” puts it.

Language is always, for Stevens, “A Description Without Place,” where—as that poem, from *Transport to Summer* begins—“It is possible that to seem—it is to be /As the sun is something seeming and it is” (CP 296). This “seeming” of course is a major theme that runs the course of Stevens’s poetry from the early days of *Harmonium*—most notably perhaps in the conclusion to “The Emperor of Ice Cream” (a poem that was a particular favourite of Stevens[CP 768]), where we are permitted to “[l]et be be finale of seem” (CP 50). Though an emphasis on the subjective or inconstant nature of Being persists in

² This belatedness is indeed inscribed within “The Gospel According to St. John,” which begins: “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. The same was in the beginning with God. All things were made by him; and without him was not any thing made that was made” (*The King James Bible*, St. John 1, 1-3). “The Word” can here be understood to exist inextricably from the Creator, *as* the Creator, and prior to all form.

Stevens's work, the marked shift in the later poems could be expressed in terms of a reversal of "The Emperor of Ice Cream" formula, where we are no longer permitted to "let be be finale of seem," or in fact to "let be be finale" of anything at all. In Stevens's late collections, particularly in *The Auroras of Autumn*, we are, indeed, deeply within the territory of *seems*—which is also, of course, the territory of the surface-value of the word, and of language itself. "It is a theatre floating through the clouds" begins Canto VI of the collection's title poem:

Itself a cloud, although of misted rock
And mountains running like water, wave on wave

Through waves of light. It is of cloud transformed
To cloud transformed again, idly, the way
A season changes color to no end,

Except the lavishing of itself in change,
As light changes yellow into gold and gold
To its opal elements and fire's delight,

Splashed wide-wise because it likes magnificence
And the solemn pleasures of magnificent space (CP 359).

We are no longer in "A Description Without Place" here, but in the "place" of "description" itself. "Poetic form in its proper sense is a question of what appears with the poem itself," Stevens had commented in his *Partisan Review* interview. This question—pertaining to style, sound, rhythm, and finally to the nature of language itself—was one that Stevens must have posed to himself as he undertook the project that would result in his collection, *The Auroras of Autumn*. If poetry, the collection as a whole seems to ask the reader, is an experimentation with language, and such experimentation is a worthwhile pursuit—as Stevens was always thoroughly convinced that it was (in keeping with Heidegger: "We would like only for once, to get to just where we were already" [PLT 188])—what, then, *is* language? Where, indeed, *are we*? From what point does language speak? What point, in speaking, do we find ourselves *already* and so would like to either return or remain?

Unlike Heidegger, however, who posits, “...we shall do well to find something spoken purely” (PLT 192),” for Stevens, especially in *The Auroras of Autumn*, his first collection post-“Notes to a Supreme Fiction,” there is no possibility of a “purely.” Language is instead always *poesis*; a *making*, the *process* of making. Whatever is spoken is necessarily, therefore, tied to the process of its being spoken at all, the words—the *spoken itself*—impossible to extricate from their speaking. Though Stevens himself had dubbed his work “pure poetry” what he intends is that the emphasis in his process is on the *process* of the poem, and not on the poem as a product or end in itself. What is “pure” in the poetry is not the *spoken* (noun) but an active, verbal *speaking*. To write and to read are a thinking through for Stevens—“through” here intended in both senses of the term. They chart a course, or particular line of thought, through a larger and more continuous process of contemplation, and are themselves a part of that process. It could be said that they constitute the “temporal” measure of the a-temporal—immeasurable and un-recordable—structure of subjective experience and its contemplation. In Canto VIII of “The Auroras of Autumn, Stevens declares that “[t]here may be always a time of innocence,” but that there is never “a place.” The refusal to designate a “place” for “innocence” while maintaining an abstract and idealized idea of a larger, ever-generative, ever-vigorous “principle” in opposition to the spatial sets up a clear distinction in the poem between a limited temporality that remains *tied* to specific measure and location, and a temporality that exceeds these limitations. The establishment of an excessive, abstracted temporality removed from “objective” measurement is in fact crucial to Stevens’s ultimate dismissal of any notion of an *objective*, achievable, “purity.” The Canto continues:

There may be always a time of innocence.
 But there is never a place. Or if there is no time,
 If it is not a thing of time, nor of place,

Existing in the idea of it, alone,

In the sense against calamity, it is not
Less real. For the oldest and coldest philosopher,

There is or may be a time of innocence
As pure principle. It nature is its end,
That it should be, and yet not be, a thing

That pinches the pity of the pitiful man,
Like a book at evening beautiful but untrue,
Like a book on rising beautiful and true (CP 361).

The layers of perceptual remove that are introduced in the opening stanza of this Canto serve to establish any notion of “pure principle” on such shaky ground that we are not surprised when in stanza five it is described as “a thing of ether that exists /Almost as a predicate” (361). This is not Heidegger’s “purely spoken,” but instead the *speaking* itself, but that does not make it any “less real.” It is, we will not be surprised to be reminded here, the *poem itself*, replete with its gaps and rhetorical failures, which is the “pure principle.” It is the always-potential, always abstract “promise” of language that serves “almost as a predicate” for form itself. That the “nature” of this principle can only be described in terms that are—simultaneously—conditional (“That it *should* be...” dialectical (“and yet not be”; “.beautiful but untrue,/...beautiful and true”) and symbolic (“*Like* a book at evening...”) (361, emphasis added) is significant. These are, of course, the terms of the “pure principle” itself. The closest we come in the poem to defining the “principle” directly is as “a time of innocence”—that is, a temporality that would be detached from limited spatio-temporal terms. At first, the equation is introduced as one maintained only by “the oldest and coldest philosopher” [361]), but a few stanzas later it is affirmed that this “principle,” this “time of innocence”—this temporality that exceeds all limits and measure, even (properly) of language—“exists, / It exists, it is visible, it is, it is” (361). That this is finally communicated only in the stutter, “it is, it is,” underscores both the promise of language—

its engagement in a continual process of “cancelling, / “(where) [t]he negations are never final,” and its limited ability to fulfill that promise.

As opposed to Heidegger, to whom, “what is spoken purely is that in which the completion of speaking that is proper to what is spoken is, in its turn, an original,” for Stevens, there is no “completion of speaking.” However; it is precisely *because* there is no completion of speaking that there would seem to be a point of agreement between Heidegger and Stevens: For Stevens, “[w]hat is spoken purely is the poem” (PLT 192), *not* because the poem is or could ever be “original” in the sense of having a univocal meaning or fixed form, but because of an underlying energy, and impulse forward...: “poesis.”

In “Large Red Man Reading” from *The Auroras of Autumn*, Stevens writes: “the outlines of its being and its expressing, the syllables of its / law: / *Poesis, poesis*, the literal characters, the vatic lines... ” (CP 365). It is the process of the poem—which is, for Stevens, the poem itself—that is always original, generative and new. Though the route by which it arrives at its “purity” is importantly, and fundamentally, different, the result for both Heidegger and for Stevens, is that poetry allows language to exist as “language and nothing else besides” (PLT 188); allows, that is, *language itself to speak*. Stevens’s conception of this process as constituted by an endless process of “cancellings” and “negations” rather than the “peal of stillness” that Heidegger describes³ (PLT 205) (and which is also evoked in the poetry of the High Romantics as well as in unquestionably post-Romantic poetry, most overtly of course in Eliot), is crucial to an understanding of the manner in which Stevens works to shift the orientation of Western “poetic concepts” *away*

³ “Language speaks as the peal of stillness. Stillness stills by the carrying out, the bearing and enduring, of the world and things in their presence. [...] The peal of stillness is not anything human. But on the contrary, the human is indeed in its nature given to speech—it is linguistic. The word “linguistic” as it is here used means: having taken place out of the speaking of language. What has thus taken place, human being, has been brought into its own by language, so that it remains given over or appropriated to the nature of language, the peal of stillness” (Heidegger, PLT 205).

from any still-point, to an endlessly variegated and shifting process of “permanent realization” (CP 366). It is precisely this type of realization that is expressed in the exquisite “St. Armourer’s Church from the Outside,” from *The Rock*:

This *vif*, this dazzle-dazzle of being new
And of becoming, for which the chapel spreads out
Its arches in its vivid element,

In the air of newness of that element,
In an air of freshness, clearness, greenness, blueness,
That which is always beginning because it is part
Of that which is always beginning, over and over (CP 449).

Similarly, in Stevens’s important essay, “The Irrational Element in Poetry,” he encouragingly explains: “You can compose poetry in whatever form you like. If it seems a seventeenth-century habit to begin lines with capital letters, you can go in for the liquid transitions of greater simplicity; and so on. It is not that nobody cares. It matters immensely. The slightest sound matters. The most momentary rhythm matters. You can do as you please, yet everything matters” (CP 789). I believe that this last line, “You can do as you please, yet everything matters,” could serve as a short-hand for Stevens’s approach to both poetry and the world. In it is maintained the paradoxical relationship between freedom and responsibility, world and thing, reality and the imagination, that Stevens was intent on sustaining in his work. A fixation on the idea of pleasure is also implicit here, as well as the literal connotation of the word “*matter*,” which is of course suggestive of Stevens’s fascination with, and emphasis on, the phenomenal reality of the world. “Of what one sees,” he writes in “Note on Moonlight,” also from *The Rock*, “the purpose that comes first, / The surface, is the purpose to be seen” (CP 449).

Language *speaks* not to have been spoken, but to exist, “in its vivid element ... always beginning, over and over” (CP 449). It is the process of communication *between* subjects, or *between* the subject and himself as he translates “what [he] sees” (the *material*

content of the phenomenal world), into *language*—that form that is forever “gulping after formlessness” (CP 355). An elaboration of this split within language itself—between form and formlessness, or between the *freedom* that language grants to “do as you please” and the *promise* that “everything matters”—provides Stevens with the space to explore, with increased intensity as his career progresses, the “pure poetry” of language.

Stevens’s conception of “pure poetry,” removed as it is from the “stillness” of Heidegger’s interpretation, as well as the sublime heights of the Symbolists, is perhaps more in line with Walter Benjamin’s conception of a “pure” state of language, which he develops in his 1923 preface to his translation of Baudelaire. The translator, Benjamin contends, should accomplish the bringing to light not *of meaning* but of the existence of *language as such*; a “pure” state, which would extend *beyond* the limits of any one specific tongue’s content or expression and achieve a unity between “literalness and freedom” (82), just as in the “original language.” Though the result may, Benjamin argues, be the same, the manner by which this “unity” is achieved *through translation* must be considered very differently than the unity (already) existent in the original language. In the original language, “language and revelation are one without any tension” (82) because language is immediately subsumed by an *excess* of meaning. In *translation* this same unity should occur, but for the much different reason that language has been *freed, purified* of that excess in order to exist in its “original” state as *language itself*. Through the process of literal translation that Benjamin recommends, language should be rendered not “transparent” but *opaque*, objectified (similarly to Shklovsky’s charge, the poet’s must be an effort to “make the stone stony again” [16]) *as language*, and therefore “structurally reinforced by its own medium” (79).

Considered in this light, Stevens's penchant for using words from foreign languages—especially French—in his poetry, as well as adding his own “tintinnabulations” (CP 789) from made-up words of his own, is particularly interesting. In an effort to free the text from “excess” meaning, Stevens reveals what Heidegger in his famous section 32 of *Being and Time* calls the “as-structure” of understanding and interpretation. Though there is no reason to suspect that Stevens was familiar with this section, it is clear that he was keenly involved with his own, concurrent investigation into this underlying structure of interpretation. First, consider a section from Heidegger's analysis:

In dealing with what is environmentally ready-to-hand by interpreting it circumspectly, we ‘see’ it as a table, a door, a carriage, or a bridge; but what we have thus interpreted need not necessarily be also taken apart by making an assertion which definitely characterizes it. Any mere pre-predicative seeing of the ready-to-hand is, in itself, something which already understands and interprets. But does not the absence of such an ‘as’ make up the mereness of any pure perception of something? Whenever we see with this kind of sight, we already do so understandingly and interpretatively. In the mere encountering of something, it is understood in terms of a totality of involvements; and such seeing hides in itself the explicitness of the assignment-relations (of the “in-order-to”) which belong to that totality (189).

Stevens's poetic efforts can be understood, as Helen Vendler has suggested, as a telescopic consideration of this process of perception and understanding. In Stevens's poetry it is the “as if” that, Vendler writes, “forms a bridge between perception and reflection: we stop the film to analyze it” (174). The “opacity” of foreign and fabricated words in his poetry work to expose the “mereness of any pure perception of something” as well as the “mereness” of language itself. They function, as Vendler suggests, to stop the

“film” between perception and reflection, thus illuminating an *in between* space of their “interpretation.” Also, and in keeping, again, with Benjamin’s “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction,” they work like an “enlargement of a snapshot” not simply to “render more precise what otherwise was visible, though unclear,” but to reveal “entirely new structural formations of the subject” (236). In “freeing” language from its “excessive” meaning, Stevens works not to absolve language of its tensions, but, conversely, to bring it to such a vibrating tautness that its “structural formation” is stretched and revealed in order that it may be “analyzed”—“taken apart” in such a way that, in Heidegger’s words: “we concern ourselves with it in accordance with what becomes visible through this process” (BT 189). Stevens looks at language as something that can, indeed, be “circumspectly taken apart...taken apart with regard to its ‘in-order-to,’ and taken apart as such—(which) has the structure of *something as something*” (189).

It is within this interstitial space of language and interpretation itself—the “*something as something*”—before, that is, meaning has been established and fixed, where, according to Heidegger, “we are already” (PLT 188), and that Stevens would have us “return.” Our natural abode is “inconstancy...thus the constant,” as Stevens writes in section II of *Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction*.

Violets, doves, girls, bees and hyacinths
 Are constant objects of inconstant cause
 In a universe of inconstancy. This means

Night-blue is an inconstant thing. The seraph
 Is satyr in Saturn, according to his thoughts.
 It means the distaste we feel for this withered scene

Is that it has not changed enough. It remains,
 It is a repetition. The bees come booming
 As if—The pigeons clatter in the air (337).

“*That it has not changed enough*” is crucial here. The world appears to us in the form of perceivable, nameable things from that which is “environmentally ready-to-hand” (Heidegger BT 189): “Violets, doves, girls, bees and hyacinths.” The speaker perceives these items immediately in terms of their phenomenal “surface” value, but retains a “distaste” for what he refers to as the “withered scene” constituted only by these “constant objects.” He insists upon a greater, and presumably more deeply satisfying, “inconstant cause” behind each object, which constancy, “hide(s).” What “remains”—besides the materiality of the “constant objects” themselves (the bees, the pigeons, and the industrial noise that is associated with them)—is also the “as structure” of language: at bottom, it is *language* that is fundamental to an “understanding and interpretation” of the objects and the noise, that “remains...a repetition” (CP 337). This “as-structure” is never more explicitly revealed in Stevens’s work than in the line, “The bees come booming/ As if—”. The aposiopesis affords the possibility of a new descriptive beginning: “The pigeons clatter in the air” without having established what the bees’ “booming” corresponds to metaphorically. The “as if” is left unanswered, exposed both to its possibilities as well as to its improbabilities. The space of this exposure, if it could be figured, is precisely that “in-between” space of representation between form and formlessness with which Stevens is primarily concerned. It is a space that can be easily obscured, “hidden” in an “excess” of meaning. Usually it *is* hidden this way due to our ability to immediately apprehend objects, as well as the language that familiarly corresponds to them, “understandingly and interpretively...in terms of a totality of involvements” (Heidegger BT 189). “Pure” language, or poetry, in Stevens’s conception of it, is a recovery of—a revelation of—language stripped of this excess, and revealed to be simultaneously substance and process, absolute freedom, and absolute “matter.”

Another Heideggerian concept may be useful in order to elaborate upon this simultaneity: the distinction between *world* and *thing*.⁴ If *world* is understood in the sense of significance and meaning, and *thing* in the sense of the sign or the word, we can understand language as constituted by the constant and mutual movement between these poles, which can never result in “a fusion.” Instead, and thus moving *outside* of the realm of paradox, language traverses that intermediary “middle” space where sign and signification “are at one” (Heidegger PLT 199). Within this space they may be considered to be “intimate,” but importantly, this intimacy is always achieved via *what remains a fundamental incompatibility*; by what Heidegger calls the “division (that) prevails: a difference” (PLT 199). Significantly, however, this “difference” is not to be understood as either “distinction” or “relation,” but instead must be considered as “*dimension for world and thing*” (PLT 200, emphasis added); a dimension, that is to say, within which language speaks, and that the poem, not in having *been* spoken (which would seem to suggest that it had already weighted itself toward the “thing”) but *in speaking*, may also be understood to dwell.

A third method that Stevens develops in his work for elaborating this “opaque” textual space where language may be revealed as “language and nothing else besides” (Heidegger PLT 188) is the use, again, of the *letter as such*. What may have begun in *Harmonium*’s “Anecdote of Canna” (“Huge are the canna in the dreams of / X, the mighty thought, the mighty man”) as a straight-forward one-to-one relation—that, though it disrupts the poem on the level of informational content, does not interrupt the meaning of the poem, or the relation between signifier and signified—develops over the course of Stevens’ career into a more elaborate interruptive textual mark, resulting in the “never

⁴ Recall that “world” should here be understood as that which is “the ever non-objective” (PLT 43) where “thing” should be understood in direct opposition to this, as utterly objective “formed matter” (PLT 26), or “whatever is not simply nothing” (PLT 21).

rounding O” of “Montrechet-le-Jardin” from *Parts of A World* and “Motive for Metaphor” from *Transport to Summer*’s “vital, arrogant, fatal dominant X” (257). The delineation and elaboration of the “opaque” space of the letter-as-such in these two important examples opens up, within Stevens’s work, as well as more broadly within twentieth century American poetry, a new territory of exploration within the “structural formation” of representation itself.

“The infinite symbol”

“The letter is in essence analytic,” writes Roland Barthes, in his 1973 essay, “Erté, or À la lettre.” Quoting French poet Paul Claudel, he continues: “Every word it constitutes is a successive utterance of affirmations which the eye and the voice spell out: to the unit it adds, on the same line, another unit, and the precarious vocable is created and modified in a perpetual variation” (RF 119). This description reveals what Barthes deems the “strictly poetic path” of the element of the “letter as such”—a path that does not lead necessarily “to discourse, to the logos, to the (always syntagmatic) *ratio*,” but instead, to “the infinite symbol” (RF 119). “Such,” Barthes writes, “is the alphabet’s power: to rediscover a kind of natural state of the letter. For the letter, if it is alone, is innocent: the Fall begins when we align letters to make them into words” (RF 119).

The context of Barthes’s analysis is an essay that focuses on the work of the Russian born French artist, Romain de Tiroff—whose pseudonym, Erté, stems from the phoneticization of his initials, R.T. Erté’s eclectic body of work, extending into the realms of fashion, jewellery, interior and graphic design, includes a graphic alphabet. In each of the twenty-six works, one for each of the letters of the Roman alphabet, the *denotative* letter is signified not simply by an arrangement of graphic lines but a diversity of *connotative* graphic images as well. “Z,” for example, is achieved by the form of a woman

who, kneeling and leaning back with her arms extended, takes on that letter's form. "E" is comprised of two winged angels—overlaid, one a little higher than the other—whose wings, extending narrowly backwards, form the two upper horizontal lines of the E (the third, lower, line is formed by the bent knees of the angel in the foreground, as well as the cloud upon which the two figures are apparently suspended).

What does it mean to describe Erté's letters as "poetic"? Barthes explains: "The 'poetic' is, very exactly, a form's symbolic capacity; this capacity has value only if it permits the form to 'depart' in many directions and thereby potentially to manifest the infinite advance of the symbol, which one can never make into a final signified and which is, in short, always the signifier of another signifier" (RF 124). For this reason, Barthes does not propose—indeed, he deems it impossible—an Ertéan "thematics" ("only banalities are susceptible of being thus inventoried" [RF 124]) but instead asserts that it "suffices to affirm the *departure potential* of [Erté's] forms. This potential is *also* a potential for returns, however, since the symbolic path is circular. What Erté leads us *toward*, in other words, is perhaps the very thing *from which* invention of the letter is established" (RF 124).

This description of "departure potential" aptly elucidates the intention behind "the never rounding O"—as well as (though in a less straightforward fashion) the "vital, arrogant, fatal, dominant X." Clearly, in endeavouring to establish a point from which we may understand the letter to both *depart and return*, Stevens, along with Barthes, aligns himself with a concept of the "purely spoken," which is also a space from which, according to Heidegger (in being "in its turn an original" [PLT 192]), we are constantly venturing to both depart and return. The "purely" poetic is what serves to uncover this originary structure—"originary," that is, in the sense that we have already established in terms of Stevens's work: an always changing, always re-generative force, or in other words, process

itself. It is “the literal characters, the vatic lines,” as it is expressed in “Large Red Man Reading,” that constitute the “law” of “*poesis, poesis*” (CP 365); of a “making” that (though it results in form, in the “constant objects” [CP 337] of “literal characters,” in “syllables”) stems in fact from an “inconstant” and “infinite” cause. Indeed, the repetition of “*poesis*” here is essential—not only to the poem, but also to Stevens’s developing “theory” of language.

The description of what Barthes, in “A Rustle of Language,” calls the “strictly poetic path” of speech is also worthy of note here. “Speech,” he writes, “is irreversible, that is its fatality. What has been said cannot be unsaid, except by *adding to it*” (RL 76). These “singular annulations-by-addition” Barthes refers to as a “stammering,” and he makes the comparison here to the “knocks of a motor,” which serve to indicate that a machine is no longer functioning properly; the “stammer,” that is, is “an auditory sign of failure” (RL 76). Conversely, however, Barthes goes on to explain that when the machine is working *well* this “good functioning ... is displayed in a musical being: the rustle” (RL 76). This “rustle” is what Barthes terms, a “limit-noise,” something that in terms of auditory awareness has *no noise* at all. “To rustle,” writes Barthes, “is to make audible the very evaporation of noise: the tenuous, the blurred, the tremulous are received as the signs of an auditory annulations” (RL 77). But, Barthes asks, and this next question is crucial to our current considerations: “can language rustle?” (RL 77). No, he replies: “Speech remains condemned to stammering; writing to silence and to the distinction of signs: in any case, there always remains too much meaning for language to fulfill a delectation appropriate to its substance” (RL 77).

The stammered repetition of the words, “it is, it is” (CP 361) with which Stevens affirms that the “pure principle” of a “time of innocence” exists in Canto VIII of “The Auroras of Autumn,” would seem to agree with Barthes’s conclusion that language cannot

“rustle”; that it is condemned to “too much meaning” for that. This is evidenced not only in the verbal stammer itself (which additively cancels itself), but in the very fact that Stevens feels compelled in the poem to insist on averring the existence of a “thing of ether,” or of what is making meaning of that “ether,” though the poem gives no indication that meaning is necessary, or indeed even possible—save, that is, for the speaker’s own desire to enunciate it for himself.

Still, the space of the question: “does language rustle?” is carved into the whole of Stevens’s work just as it is into this poem. It is indeed Stevens’s stammer, his insistence on the rhythmic repetitive quality of language as *language itself*—that is, as something that can be “taken apart” rather than existing within an exterior and unassailable system of the “in-order-to”—which opens up the possibility of a “rustle” of language at least as “pure principle,” as in section VIII of “The Auroras of Autumn,” where “lights” become not a “spell of light, / A saying out of a cloud, but innocence” (CP361). In this passage, “lights” are permitted to exceed the contractual language agreement (where each word is obligated to illuminate the object to which it corresponds), existing beyond paradox and agreement. “Innocence” is established as a pre-linguistic state, but is certainly not conceived of as a silence; instead, the “time and place” of innocence is one in which there would be no end to movement, singing, breath, and noise:

An innocence of the earth and no false sign
 Or symbol of malice. That we partake thereof,
 Lie down like children in this holiness,
 As if, awake, we lay in the quiet of sleep,
 As if the innocent mother sang in the dark
 Of the room and on an accordion, half-heard,
 Created the time and place in which we breathed...(361)

Despite the fact that this “innocence” is, in high-Romantic mode, associated with the quietness and holiness of little children, Stevens’s repeated “as if’s” interrupt this silence

and construct a series of removes from the High Romance of the scene, so that instead of a sublime centre what we get is a continual, stammering, spinning-out, away from any idea of a centre. In the end, the “idea of innocence” is neither arrived at nor defined. Perhaps it does not exist at all except in the single insistence of the speaker’s, “it is, it is”—the repetition of the affirmation serving, simultaneously, to undercut its assurance. In effect, what we arrive at is once again a figuration of the perceptual *process* of the speaker’s imagination of this time of innocence; revealed are the layers of his own inherited imagination and his cognitive processes as he sifts through the layers of these images and constructs through words another, continuously shifting image of his own “understanding and interpretation” of the world. That the stanza, and therefore also the entire Canto VIII of “The Auroras of Autumn,” ends with an *ellipsis* is of course crucial to the representation of the continual “as-structure” of the speaker’s world. The ellipsis also sheds light, retrospectively, on the opening lines, which we have already briefly considered: “There may always be a time of innocence. / There is never a place” (CP 360). Stevens has wrenched the “sublime” away from that which is and must be conceived of *outside* of time, and established it firmly within a repetitive, stammering, human temporality—which, even by the end of the Canto, *refuses to resolve itself*. He maintains the “pure principle” but entrenches it within the “stammer” of human process and endeavour. Or, perhaps more aptly, he *raises* the stammer to the level of “pure principle.” But he also readily concedes that there may be “no time” at all: “Or if there is no time, / If it is not a thing of time, nor of place ...” (CP 360)—that it may be that our human systems of scientific or mechanical measurement in terms of an anti-sublime, quotidian human scale, may be just as arbitrary as the imaginative measurement of the Romantic sublime. For all the speaker’s stumbling uncertainty as to the details of the measurement and location of “innocence,” however (having just retracted his declaration: “[t]here is never a place” with the allowance, “[o]r

if...” in what Barthes would call a “singular [annulation]-by-addition” [RL 76]), he assertively declares of that “innocence” that “it is not / Less real” (CP 361). In other words: if there is neither a human conception of time nor of space for the “pure principle,” for the “idea of (innocence), alone” as that which is separate and remote from the “calamity” of interpretation, that idea is “not / Less real.” Rather than limiting himself to the “stutter” of a singular voice, Stevens in this way allows the stutter to direct him *past* the limitations of a direct correlation between word and meaning to the “rustle” of a “pure principle” of movement and sound.⁵

To put this again in terms of the essential disjuncture between Heidegger’s “world” and “thing,” we see that what Stevens is essentially working out here is the manner in which the *world*, to which the *thing* of language (the letter or the word) is directed is always in excess of the *thing* (always escapes its own naming):

Its nature is its end,
That it should be, and yet not be, a thing

That pinched the pity of the pitiful man,
Like a book at evening beautiful but untrue,
Like a book on rising beautiful and true (CP 361).

We see the way that the “pure principle” is articulated here in terms of an ultimate incompatibility where “it should be, and yet not be, a thing,” and can exist at once—and without agreement, but also without paradox—as both “true” and “untrue.” The doubled, “Like a book” emphasizes the “stutter” inherent to language but also underscores the

⁵ In Chapter Thirteen, “He Stuttered,” of Deleuze’s *Essays Critical and Clinical*, the achieved effect of the “stutter” within a written text is discussed as a mark of literary acumen and originality. The successful “stutter” is an example within a text of “when *saying is doing*” (107). “This is what happens,” Deleuze explains, “when the stuttering no longer affects pre-existing words, but itself introduces the words it affects; these words no longer exist independently of the stutter, which selects and links them through itself. It is no longer the character who stutters in speech; it is the writer who becomes *a stutterer in language*. He makes the language as such stutter: an affective and intensive language, and no longer an affectation of the one who speaks” (107). Deleuze continues on to write, “Creative stuttering is what makes language grow from the middle, like grass; it is what makes language a rhizome instead of a tree, what puts language in perpetual disequilibrium: *Ill Seen, Ill Said* (content and expression). Being well spoken has never been the distinctive feature or the concern of great writers” (111).

dialectical rather than oppositional or temporal relation introduced by these terms. Though temporality is introduced through the differentiation between “at evening” and “on rising” the repetitive structure diminishes the temporal, foregrounding the immediacy of their relation. Ultimately, it is not only the “pure principle” that is shown here to be in excess of language—which falls into the inarticulable space of the “dif-ference” between world and thing—language itself (“like a book”) is revealed to be always in debt to the meaning that *it itself provides*. It is this that results in the ultimate, intimate, incompatibility of Heidegger’s “dif-ference”(PLT 199)—and this “dif-ference” that can be understood as the generative “principle,” or “departure potential,” of Stevens’s poetry. Just as Barthes’s avowal that it is impossible for speech to *avoid* “stammering” is countered by his assertion that “what is impossible is not inconceivable,” Stevens’s poetry builds on the intermediate space between sense and sound, as though he is constantly testing the boundaries between the two, and asking the question, “does language rustle?” Or, at a further remove: “Who am I even to be asking this question, to be perceiving and acknowledging these categories at all?”

“The Auroras of Autumn,” certainly works within the space of this question—the voice at a constant unease with itself as it oscillates between the definitive statements that reflect its perceptions of the world and the de-centering “Or’s” and “as if’s” with which it spins further and further away from a stable place from which to speak. The conception of a subjectivity that would be firm and fast, where one might exist like “Danes in Denmark all day long” (CP 361), comfortable with both one’s own and the “other’s” identity: “And we knew each other well, hale-hearted landmen, / For whom the outlandish was another day // Queerer than Sunday” (CP 361), gives way to a sweeping collective that knows neither the relationship to “brother,” country, race, nor finally to language itself, and disappears into “a haggling of wind and weather” (CP 363). Our “fate” is revealed to exist

at such an extremity to the “drama that we live” that even the distinctions between life and death, human cruelty and the cruelty of nature itself, are blurred:

Shall we be found hanging in the trees next spring?
Of what disaster in this the immanence:
Bare limbs, bare trees and a wind as sharp as salt (CP 362)

The world is not a human world: it is always in *excess* of the meaning that we would seek from it or impose upon it. Though the poem’s subjects were a moment ago as “Danes in Denmark,” they may well be African-Americans lynched by an angry mob “next spring.” This is not by any means a political or moral treatise; it resists what Stevens might have called, along with Nietzsche, the “stupidity of moral indignation”(37), and gestures toward a space *beyond* the human appellations of “good and evil.” The appearance of the Rabbi in the final Canto of the poem (“An unhappy people in a happy world-- / Read, rabbi, the phases of this difference” (CP 362) is of particular interest, if, as Susan A. Handelman writes:

Rabbinic interpretation never dispenses with the particular form in which the idea is clothed. The text, for the Rabbis, is a continuous generator of meaning, which arises from the innate logic of the divine language, the letter itself, and is not sought in a non-linguistic realm external to the text. Language and the text are, to use a contemporary term, the space of differences, and truth as conceived by the Rabbis was not an instantaneous unveiling of the One, but a continuous process of interpretation (as quoted in Jarraway, 151).

For Stevens, the impossible *is* conceivable. It is conceived in the limitations and possibilities of “the letter as such,” in the exploration of “language and nothing else besides.”

The word “happy” around which Canto X revolves, should, of course, be understood in terms of sensory pleasure, but it must also be considered in terms of its root word, “chance,” which—derived from the Latin, *cadentia*, “falling”—is linked to the idea both of *cadence*, rhythm, and of the “the falling out or happening of events [...] (one’s) hap, fortune, luck, lot (OED, Vol. II 263). “A happy people in an unhappy world— / It cannot be ...”, Stevens writes. And why? “There’s nothing there to roll / On the expressive tongue, the finding fang” (CP 362). It is, the poem finds, impossible to reverse the relationship between the “unhappy” fated human (understood here in the sense of an ultimate *fatalità*) and the “happy” world of chance (indifference, continuity). Any attempt at resolution between these two directional pulls meets with immediate failure. Were the human able to assert any final authority over the world, to conceive of an “idea of order” that was truly solipsistic (where, that is, his own pleasure trumped the “happiness” of the world) there would be indeed “nothing there to roll on the expressive tongue, the finding fang” as there would be no longer “a space of differences” that could result in the “continuous process of interpretation” that is language itself; there would be nothing “real” for language to sink its teeth into.

The same of course is true of the next (impossible) formulation suggested: “A happy people in a happy world.” We are here swung fully in the opposite direction and hopelessly entrenched within the realm of the imaginary: “Buffo! A ball, an opera, a bar” (CP 362). For Stevens, once again, what is essential is the interplay *between* these two—*between*, that is, reality and the imagination, order and chance, the opaque letter and the transparent word:

Turn back to where we were when we began:
 An unhappy people in a happy world.
 Now solemnize the secretive syllables (362).

The “turn” here is inevitable for Stevens. The “space of difference” that he seeks to explore is inevitably a space of repetition, of stammering. But there is also a sacredness to this space, as the entreaty to the Rabbi indicates: “Read, rabbi, the phases of this difference” (CP 362). The sacred text that we are asked to return to and “solemnize” is *not* conceived of outside of language, or as revelatory of a truth that would be “an instantaneous unveiling of the One.” Instead, what we are offered is precisely the opposite: an opaque incantation of “secretive syllables.” These syllables are not definitely attached to any meaning or even any desire for meaning, but exist apart in a “utopic state”—a sort of Barthesian *rustle of language*. The double-sense of “secretive” is important here. It refers both to the “secretive”—what is or could be kept secret, hidden, and to what is “secreted”—the secretion of syllables through the stammering process of language. The conceptual “space” between these two meanings can be understood as the “space of difference” so critical to Stevens’s poetics, as well as to Barthes’s utopic “rustle” of language. According to Barthes, the “rustle” becomes possible when language becomes (and think here of Benjamin’s description of the innovative, “utopic,” space of the close-up): “enlarged, I should even say denatured to the point of forming a vast auditory fabric in which the semantic apparatus would be made unreal” (RL 77). This semantic “unreality” needs to be achieved, however, *without* meaning being “brutally dismissed”—and this, admits Barthes, “is what is difficult” (RL 77). It is at this juncture—between the *conceivable* conception of the “utopic state” of language and the *inconceivable* “semantic unreality” that refuses to “brutally dismiss” meaning—that Stevens poises himself in “The Auroras of Autumn,” and indeed where he remains poised for the remainder of his career.

The “utopic” space that both Barthes and Stevens conceive of is a space where *world* and *thing*, meaning and sound, can exist together in an intimate space of “dif-

ference.” The *thing*⁶ of the word would here be no longer subsumed by a *world* of meaning, but nor would it be “fused” with it. Instead, it would be freed within a mutual inter-space of penetration, so that—just as the “rustle” of a machine is only the “absence of noise,” that is, the absence of any “sign of failure”—the resulting “rustle of language” would connote “an exemption of meaning or—the same thing—that non-meaning which produces in the distance a meaning henceforth liberated from all the aggressions of which the sign, formed in the ‘sad and fierce history of men,’ is the Pandora’s box” (Barthes, RL 78). Understood in these terms, “meaning” is always potential, always possible—it becomes a question, just as it was for Stevens, not of whether meaning exists or does not exist, but of the manner by which it is apprehended as it arises, and at a necessary distance, through the stammering, ever-generative processes of the poetic, of words. Think of the “listener” from “The Snowman” who “beholds” in only “the sound of the wind, / In the sound of a few leaves” what amounts to the clearest articulation of “everything” I have yet to encounter: “The nothing that is not there and the nothing that is” (8).

Once again, we see resurfacing in Barthes’s thinking—just as it continuously does in Stevens’s poetry—the notion of a “pure” language, which might “conceivably” at least be released from the tyranny of the sign and allowed to exist in the space of “language itself.” “Denoted meaning passes for true meaning, a law,” Barthes writes in his essay 1976 essay “On Reading,” collected within *The Rustle of Language*—adding, in

⁶ Once again, recall that “thing,” in Heidegger’s sense of the word, is that which “stands before us and can be seen” as opposed to the “ever-non-objective to which we are subject,” which he defines as “world” (PLT 43). This definition must be understood as distinct from the “thing” Lacan posits as “the central lack” (FFC 77) at the heart of desire—the “*objet a*” that desire repeatedly attempts to seize upon but that is ultimately only a place holder for the ultimate object of desire that remains impossible to seize, let alone conceptualize—but not entirely. The “thing” that Heidegger posits as that which “can be seen” is also a place-holder of sorts—“the thing things” only by presencing itself from “*out of the worlding world*” (PLT 178, emphasis added). The “thing,” according to both Heidegger and Lacan’s interpretation, therefore, is an image, an apparition, constituted from, and ultimately subservient to that other—non-objective, non-conceptualized, and finally un-graspable—element.

parenthesis, “how many men have died for a meaning?” (35). *Connotation*,⁷ on the other hand—and it is this which Erté’s letters, and a poetry of language’s “opacity” is concerned—allows for “positing a law with multiple meanings,” thereby liberating the text from any *denotative* law (which might “cover the original”; “block its light” [Benjamin 79]), and providing, instead, a spaciousness within which a “pure” translation of the text may be read “between the lines” (Benjamin 82). It is “between” the lines, indeed, that the rabbi of “The Auroras of Autumn” must read.

Read to the congregation for today
And for tomorrow, this extremity,
This contrivance of the spectre of the spheres,

Contriving balance to contrive a whole,
The vital, the never-failing genius,
Fulfilling his meditations, great and small.

In these unhappy he meditates a whole,
The full of fortune and the full of fate,
As if he lived all lives, that he might know,

In hall harridan, not hushful paradise,
To a haggling of wind and weather, by these lights
Like a blaze of summer straw in winter’s nick (CP 363).

It is within the unwritten, ever-interpretive and interpretable space of the text, the “letter itself,” that the possibility of empathy: “as if he lived all lives” ever-generatively remains. But it is important to remember that this infinite *connotative* power—though it opens onto an in-between space of “pure” language ultimately and thoroughly resistant to

⁷ In D.A. Miller’s essay, “Anal Rope,” connotation is defined “in contrast to the immediate self-evidence” (123) of denotation, however ultimately de-constructible that “immediate self-evidence” may prove to be upon closer scrutiny or reflection. “Connotation,” Miller explains, “will always manifest a certain semiotic insufficiency” (123-124). Where denotation will always seem to be pointing to something literal and *true*, connotation will always appear, “doubtful, debateable, possibly a mere effluvium of rumination. [...] The dubiety, being constitutive, can never be resolved” (124). Where denotation is the closing of possibility in proof, and thus in a singular event, connotation is the opening of that same possibility into a multiplicity of conceivable options. Connotation “excites the desire for proof,” but does not supply it. Instead—as long as the *desire* for proof “develops within the connotative register”—it enlists every signifier into “what nonetheless remains a hopeless task. Hence,” Miller further explains, “the desire assumes another, complementary form in the dream (impossible to realize, but impossible not to entertain) that connotation would quit its dusky existence for fluorescent literality, *would become denotation*” (129).

denotative law, remaining ever open to interpretation and therefore even to the conception of the “impossible,” an empathetic collective, the “whole”—is a space that can only be accessed through attention to the opaque, the obscure, the literal. As Benjamin writes, arguing in favour of literal translation: “We say of words that they have emotional connotations. A literal rendering of the syntax completely demolishes the theory of reproduction of meaning and is a direct threat to comprehensibility” (78). As counter-intuitive as this may originally seem, this demolition of readily reproducible meaning is precisely what Benjamin calls for. After all: “How many men have died for a meaning?” (Barthes ROL 35)

Similarly, in an essay on the work of André Masson, Barthes writes that what Masson’s work demonstrates is that, “for writing to be manifest in its truth (and not in its instrumentality), it must be illegible” (RF 155). He explains that whereas written texts must continue to rely and “stammer” on with “an apparently signifying substance (words)” what Masson’s art achieves through its involvement, instead, with the “non-signifying practice” of painting⁸ is what the written text also longs for but *cannot* achieve: utter incomprehensibility, the “utopia of the text” (RF 156).

The Trace of Language

⁸ Barthes misleads us in an interesting way by referring to painting as “non signifying.” According to the classical mimetic tradition, painting does not – and cannot – ‘play’ with the signifier the same way that poetry can. This is because poetry is a temporal art, rather than a spatial one. The truth-effect of painting is achieved due to its fixity in spatial terms, a fixity which the written text can never achieve. The limitations of poetry, therefore, are based on this failure to achieve stasis, or stillness. Crucially, poetry fails to represent the *spaces between* the very chain of signifiers it employs. The limitations of painting on the other hand, as Derrida’s consideration of Van Gogh’s “Old Shoes With Laces” in *The Truth in Painting* makes apparent, are based on the significantly restricted range of interpretation, or “connotation” offered by any given pictorial sign, or “denotation.” Derrida reflects on Van Gogh’s shoes: “Their detachment is obvious. Unlaced, abandoned, detached from the subject (wearer, holder or owner, or even author-signatory) and detached/untied in them- selves (the laces are untied)” (261).

But to construe things in this way, to even “conceive” of a “utopia of the text,” or a “pure” resonance of phonetics and meaning in a musical “rustle of language” (albeit one dependent on an extreme illegibility), is still to suggest precisely the sort of reliance on the idea of the “transcendental”—a watch-word of sorts for postmodern and poststructuralist writers and thinkers. Even as Jacques Derrida and other deconstructionists, for example, have sought specifically to destabilize any idea of the “pure” or the “transcendental” in language or interpretation, their project has been in turn criticized by those who would claim that “deconstruction” was not in fact a definitive break, or even much of a departure, from the metaphysics and Structuralism that it sought to depose. It is this sort of debate that revolves around the “meditative whole” evoked and addressed in Stevens’s work. Where one camp would claim that all such Romantic or seemingly “transcendental” rhetoric is ironically intended—calculated to undercut the very language it employs⁹—others would argue that Stevens has not, for better or for worse, broken with the High Romantic tradition at all, or only translated it into his own onto-theological vocabulary,

⁹ And yet even “transcendence” in the High Romantic sense is never something that is actually *achieved*. In Paul de Man’s essay, “The Rhetoric of Temporality,” he explores the confusion that still exists concerning the primacy of the subject in the literature and approach of the English romantics. He argues that “the assertion of a radical priority of the subject over objective nature is not easily compatible with the poetic praxis of the romantic poets, who all gave a great deal of importance to the presence of nature” (196). The tendency, exhibited notably by Coleridge, to “borrow” for the self “the temporal stability” of nature that it lacks, points definitively toward “the priority of object over subject that is implicit in an organic conception of language [...], [and] puts the priority unquestionably in the natural world, limiting the task of the mind to interpreting what is given in nature” (197). Regardless, what is central to either argument (subject over object, or object over subject) is a fundamental disjuncture – a necessary distance of the subject from any originary plenitude, which no experience, even the most sublime, can overcome. De Man goes on to consider this disjuncture in terms of the ironic mode central to Romantic exposition, which shares with allegory a structure wherein “the relationship with sign and meaning is discontinuous” (209). “In both cases,” explains de Man, “the sign points to something that differs from its literal meaning and has for its function the thematization of this difference” (209). Irony, “as we now understand it,” de Man remarks further on, “reveals the existence of a temporality that is definitely not organic, in that it relates to its source only in terms of distance and difference and allows for no end, for no totality. [...] The temporal void that it reveals is the same void we encountered when we found allegory always implying an unreachable anteriority. Allegory and irony are thus linked in their common discovery of a truly temporal predicament” (222). Considered in this light, it is clear that *ironizing* Romantic aims and ideals cannot be considered a definitive break from Romanticism.

without changing the terms.¹⁰ I believe that Stevens could defend himself, were he so inclined, against any charges of a “negative theology” in his work in much the same way that Derrida responds to such charges against his own thinking in the aptly titled, “How to Avoid Speaking: Denials.” He asserts here that his concept of “différance” was developed precisely to *resist* the hyperessentiality which is at the root of all negative theology. And indeed, rather than the “dif-ference” by which Heidegger defines the “middle” space between “world” and “thing,” it may—in keeping with Bloom’s pronouncement that Stevens was “about a generation ahead of his own time” (WS 168)—shed more light on Stevens’s work to consider the “middle” space that he opens up in his own work in terms of the Derridean evolution of the term, as a space of *différance*, where *différance*, that is, may be understood no longer as “a concept” but instead “rather the possibility of conceptuality” (MOP 11). “What *différance*, the trace, and so on ‘mean’—” Derrida explains in “How to Avoid Speaking: Denials” “which hence does not mean anything—is ‘before’ the concept, the name, the word, ‘something’ that would be nothing, that no longer arises from Being, from presence or from the presence of the present, nor even from absence, and even less from hyperessentiality” (MOP 9).

¹⁰ Harold Bloom places Stevens firmly within the tradition of the great American Romantics, Emerson and Whitman (*Poems of our Climate* 1980), exploring what he deems the inheritance within Stevens’s work of an explicitly Romantic ironic sensibility. Frank Lentricchia delineates for Stevens a definite break from the Romantic tradition (*Modernist Quartet* 1994) reading his work in light of a definitively modernist tradition and arguing that rather than preserving a space for any notion of a Romantic or transcendent sublime, Stevens is guilty of a nihilistic, morally relativistic, and “willfully” thoughtless approach not only to art but to the world (ATP 235). While on the one hand, the meditative strains in Stevens’s work convince many critics of his ‘Romantic’ lineage and predispositions, on the other hand his atheism and syntactic experimentation convince many others of his deep entrenchment within a particularly modernist moment. Although interesting aspects of Stevens’s work are brought to light by these differing approaches, the debate, on the whole, is not worthwhile. Stevens has clear connections to the preoccupations of the Romantics, but his modernity shifts the impossibility of transcendence in different directions. The desire to compartmentalize the complex influences and impulses at work in Stevens’s poetry into clearly delineated “historic” categories can result only in caricature, not only of the poet but also of the time period in which he wrote.

However, as Derrida readily admits, “the onto-theological re-appropriation always remains possible¹¹—and doubtless inevitable insofar as one speaks, precisely, in the element of logic and of onto-theological grammar” (MOP 9). How then, is it possible to “avoid speaking about negative theology?” Derrida asks, and with this question begins a series of further questions: “how, in saying or speaking, to avoid this or that discursive, logical, rhetorical mode? How to avoid the inexact, erroneous, aberrant, improper form?”, until we arrive at: “Finally, how to say something?” (MOP 15). This is a question of course that “haunts” Stevens’s poetics with increasing intensity as he becomes more and more fixated on the idea of language and being as a continuous process of further “cancellations” and “negations,” and a never ending series of supplements: “Or’s,” “as if’s” and ellipses. But it is this fixation on “negations,” on the going “without” God or metaphysics, which has led to the charge that Stevens has in fact not gone “without” anything at all.

Though it is not constrained there, the question for Stevens is, *at root*, not a question of metaphysics or of God, but always a question of language, as it is this concern—“How to say, how to speak,” along with its inverse, “how to be silent?...how not to speak, and which speech to avoid in order to speak *well*?” (MOP 15)—that provides the foundation for any genuine departure into the consideration of any further matter (just as Heidegger could not do without the consideration of “tools” but never intended them to exist only as “tools” in themselves).

In a further effort to move beyond the “hyperessentiality” that is at risk of being introduced by a fixation on negativity, of the *speaking* of “without”—which would, as Derrida writes, have every negative sentence “already...haunted by God” (MOP 6)—Derrida turns to Plato’s definition in *Timaeus* of *khora*, as a possibility of a space that

¹¹ And certainly, for theory after Derrida, “différance” occupies that position. The most we can do is to be aware of that tendency, and to destabilize it whenever possible.

might exist without the “without,” a formulation that involves neither presence nor absence, but rather the concept of the “trace.”¹² “This spatial interval,” Derrida explains of the *khora*, “neither dies nor is born” (MOP 35), it is “the atemporality itself of the spacing: it (a)temporalizes, it calls forth atemporality, provokes it immutably from the pretemporal already that gives place to every inscription” (MOP 36).

This “spatial interval,” which can neither die nor be born, remains of course evidently within the lineage of thinking (inaugurated, indeed, by Plato, from whom it is reclaimed) that also produced Benjamin’s space of “pure” language, Heidegger’s “pure” poem, the “pure poetry” of the symbolists, and Stevens’s own conception of “pure poetry.” The inescapability of this lineage and the inevitable inheritance of previous models of language and thinking is also considered by Derrida in “How to Avoid Speaking”—through a reflection on Heidegger’s professed desire to write a theology where the word *being* would not occur at all. That is: not just “under erasure,” but *in no way at all*. “Heidegger well knows that this is not possible,” Derrida remarks, “and perhaps it is for this profound reason that he did not write this theology. But didn’t he write it?” (59). A little further on he concludes:

With and without the word being, he wrote a theology with and without God. He did what he said it would be necessary to avoid doing. He said, wrote, and allowed to be written exactly what he said he wanted to avoid. He was not there without leaving a trace in all these folds. He was not there without allowing a trace to

¹² *Khora* is that “quasi-entity” designated by Plato for that which, as Dana R. Miller explains, remains “beyond the reach of philosophical discourse and conception. The very name [...] serves as a kind of telegrammation for what is [...] “beyond being.” Why something that is thus “beyond being” is necessary to cosmology is left obscure, but [...] this is as it should be: ‘*khora*’ just is obscure” (32). Obscure, perhaps, but not “un-thinkable” as Badiou would be quick to point out—Plato having been the first and most influential practitioner of what Badiou calls the “grand style” of philosophy, which “stipulates that mathematics provides a direct illumination of philosophy” (7), that refuses to accept that which apparently exceeds “the meager resources of human reason” (16), or—worse—translate what is *not yet* understood into spiritualist or skeptical figures, evasions, or abstractions.

appear, a trace that is, perhaps, no longer his own, but that remains as if his own
(MOP 60).

In concluding thus, Derrida is also certainly pointing to the inevitable failure of *his own* attempts to “avoid” what he wants to “avoid”—his own inevitable failure to “*avoid speaking*” (MOP 15).

It is a similar acknowledgement of “failure” that can be understood to constitute Stevens’s final collection, *The Rock*. In the first section of the poem, “Seventy Years Later,” Stevens begins: “It is an illusion that we were ever alive” and further on: “The houses still stand, / Though they are rigid in rigid emptiness:

Even our shadows, their shadows, no longer remain.
The lives these lived in the mind are at an end.
They never were ... The sounds of the guitar

Were not and are not. Absurd. The words spoken
Were not and are not. It is not to be believed. (CP 445)

But the starkness of this introduction does not disallow the affirmative substantial “trace” left among, as Derrida writes, the “folds”—among the layers, that is, of both speaking *and* the denial:

The meeting at noon at the edge of the field seems like

An invention, an embrace between one desperate clod
And another in a fantastic consciousness,
In a queer assertion of humanity:

A theorem proposed between the two—
Two figures in a nature of the sun,
In the sun’s design of its own happiness,

As if nothingness contained a métier,
A vital assumption, an impermanence
In a permanent cold, an illusion so desired...

The fecundity of the “trace” is what provides resistance here to the temptation of either the “purely” negative or the “purely” positive. It simultaneously refuses to attach itself with any conviction to meaning, and the “moral indignation” (Nietzsche 37) of denial. The “trace,” as articulated by Derrida—that which “does not mean anything—(which) is ‘before’ the concept, the name, the word” (MOP 11) functions as the generative force of Stevens’s work and is at the root of the “poetic concept” of the space of *différance* that is rendered palpable in both writers’ work—that is cut against the margins of the said, indeed, *beyond*, and *into* that margin: into a space of “secretive syllables” that mark the opacity of “language itself.” In his preface to *Margins of Philosophy*, Derrida enacts this marginal relationship and employment of language both literally and formally: “The mystery—” he writes in a narrow column beside the preface’s main text, “if we wish at any price, for the purposes of discourse, to give a figure of speech to that which by definition cannot have one—can be represented as a margin, a fringe surrounding the object, isolating it at the same time as it underlines its presence, masking it even as it qualifies it...” (xxiv).

Though Stevens would no doubt have been tolerant of Derrida’s formally “marginal” rendering of speech, he remarked on numerous occasions—just as he does in “A Note On Poetry,” first published in the 1938 edition of *The Oxford Anthology of American Literature*—that he himself was unaware of “anything, respecting form, that makes much difference. The essential thing in form is to be free in whatever form is used. A free form does not assure freedom. As a form, it is just one more form. So that it comes to this, I suppose, that I believe in freedom regardless of form” (CP 801). Though Stevens might have ultimately been sceptical, therefore, of Derrida’s formal efforts to disrupt the established hierarchies of meaning in order to “liberate” the text by overtaking the margins—such a gesture does not, after all, “assure freedom” just as any “negation” does not assure “freedom” from that which is negated—he would no doubt have been

sympathetic to Derrida's notion that though the relationship between presence and what *exceeds* presence (that which exists in the margins of presence) can never be understood simply *as presence*, it can neither be understood as "simply absent" (MOP 65). "Absent, either it would give us nothing to think or it still would be a negative mode of presence," Derrida explains. "Therefore," he continues, "the sign of this excess must be absolutely excessive as concerns all possible present-absence, all possible production or disappearance of beings in general, and yet, in some manner it must still signify, in a manner unthinkable by metaphysics as such" (MOP 65). It is here that the "trace" comes into play, as it alone "eludes mastery" being neither "perceptible nor imperceptible" (MOP 65). More importantly, it short-circuits the binarized schema of presence and absence: it is neither and both.

In keeping with the "dif-ference" existent between Heidegger's *world* and *thing*, the excess of the sign (the *thing*), can never be understood to name a "presence" (*world*). Presence can never be, that is, "as is commonly thought, what the sign signifies" (MOP 66). The trace refers to a presence that is *already not there*—that is already in *excess*, and so becomes "the trace of a trace, the trace of the erasure of the trace" (MOP 66). The mapping of this trace—an entity which confounds the dichotomy of presence-absence, which for so long plagued every metaphysical inquiry—certainly marks a step toward naming that difference "still more unthought than the difference between Being and beings" (MOP 67), which Derrida indicates as a possibility:

Such a *différance* would at once, again, give us to think a writing without presence and without absence, without history, without cause, without *archia*, without *telos*, a writing that absolutely upsets all dialectics, all theology, all teleology, all ontology. A writing exceeding everything that the history of metaphysics has

comprehended in the form of the Aristotelian *grammē*, in its point, in its circle, in its time, and in its space (MOP 67).

Stevens's own concentration on the *grammē*, his fascination with the "opacity" of "the vital, fatal arrogance" of the *letter as such* relies, indeed (and in keeping with Derrida's remarks above) on a conception of that which is in *absolute excess* of, rather than that which is or can be *contained or expressed by* form. His own comment, that he believes "in freedom regardless of form" (CP 801), is one way of expressing this. For Stevens, poetry was not the "form" of the words on the page (what was capable of actually taking shape there), but instead, what would *always* be in excess of that form; in other words, what would always be "gulping," in active pursuit, "after formlessness" (CP 355). The impulse behind this pursuit would, in Stevens's conception of it, stem from a "freedom" so absolute that it would indeed upset every reified conception of form, and indeed of "freedom" (as concept, "rather, the possibility of conceptuality" [MOP 11]), as word). His refrain throughout "The Auroras of Autumn": "Farewell to an idea..." could well be understood as Stevens's final farewell to his faith in the *grammē* as a valid method for the representation of human experience.

Aristotle's own criticism of the line, or "*gramme*,"¹³ was based on its insufficiency as a unit of temporal measure. Both the point and the line, he had observed—when manipulated to represent movement—actually implicate a "multiplicity of points which are

¹³ As Derrida explains, "time in the rigorous sense, is neither movement nor number. It lets itself be numbered only insofar as it has a relation to movement according to the before and after. The unity of the measure of time numbered in this way is the now, which permits the distinction between before and after. And it is because movement is determined according to the before and the after that the graphic linear representation of time is simultaneously required and excluded by Aristotle" (MOP 59). That graphic representation, the line, or "*gramme*," gives to length simultaneously "its *continuity* and its *limit*. The line is a continuity of points. And each point is both an *end* and a *beginning* for each part" (MOP 59) but this does not mean that "the now is to time what the point is to the line" (MOP 59). The essence of time can not be translated, according to Aristotle into linear representation: the spatial representation, "at least in this form, is inadequate" (MOP 59).

both origin and limit, beginning and end” (Derrida, MOP 59), and therefore result in a series of “successive arrests” rather than a model that could possibly serve as a successful analogy for time. In other words, because each point requires to be thought of as *two* points, a beginning *and* an end, and a line is comprised of a multiplicity of these two-pointed structures, neither point nor line can model the “now” of time in that the “now” is not possibly arrested by either beginning or end; like Plato’s *khora*, it “neither dies nor is born” (Derrida, MOP 35). As this indicates, however, and as Derrida goes on to point out, what Aristotle rejects is not “the *gramme* as such, but the *gramme* as a series of points, as a composition of parts each of which would be an arrested limit.” This is, of course, a similar criticism to the one that Barthes levels at the word in “Erté, or À la lettre”: “For the letter, if it is alone, is innocent” (RF 119).

This sort of directed attention to language, prevalent among French theorists during the 1960s and 1970s, inspired much of the attention that we now see in contemporary American poetry—and particularly those poets affiliated with the L-A-N-G-U-A-G-E movement¹⁴—to a concentration on, and reclamation of, the *letter as such*. The task of the Language poets was, and continues to be, to release language back—into *language itself*, from which point it might, perhaps, again be “purely spoken” (Heidegger, PLT 188). Where Marjorie Perloff convincingly argues, in her 1990 essay collection on modern and postmodern lyric, *Poetic License*, that the “fixation on the *gramme* or the smallest particle

¹⁴ The term “Language Poetry” evolved from the magazine launched by editors Bruce Andrews and Charles Bernstein in 1971, titled *L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E*. Poets associated with the movement include Bernstein, Clark Coolidge, Lyn Hejinian, Leslie Scalapino and Ron Silliman, among many others. These poets are united by their concern for detaching words “from their conventional moorings” in order that “something new and unprecedented,” that is, not a mere imitation of life or the world, might emerge (Drury 156). Although the existence of this “movement” is now widely accepted, many poets associated with it still deny that it has ever existed. Bob Perelman writes, “there never was any self-consciously organized group known as the language writers or poets. [...] The positive structures of language writing are socially and aesthetically complex and in places strained and contradictory, but the movement has been more united by its opposition to the prevailing institutions of American poetry.” Ron Silliman likewise warns: “this impulse to name confuses a moment with a movement” (both poets are quoted from Nicholas 85).

of writing” (68) definitive for the Language poetry movement in the United States can be traced directly to the French intellectuals of the 1960s, I would contend that exploration of the *letter as such* was in fact well begun with the late work of Wallace Stevens, a generation before. Stevens is more commonly aligned with the “American Romantic” tradition, as defined by Bloom—a tradition for which Stevens supplies the “crucial formula” (PC 152) according to Bloom in his poem “Creations of Sounds” where he addresses Eliot as “X, the pernoble master” (PC 151), criticizing him for poems that “do not make the visible a little hard to see” (PC 152). For Bloom it is this accomplishment: a rendering of the “visible” as “a little hard to see” that characterizes the American Romantic tradition of Whitman and Dickinson, and of Frost, Stevens and Hart Crane who followed after them, and that is continued by the more contemporary poets Robert Penn Warren, Elizabeth Bishop, John Ashbery, and A. R. Ammons—all poets Bloom considers to have “maintain(ed) this major tradition of our verse” (PC 152). Stevens is depicted, by Bloom, by and large in the role of an intermediary between an older Romantic tradition typified by Whitman, and the continuation of the tradition in contemporary poetry, and the many aspects of his poetry that do not align with the Romantic tradition that Bloom sketches out for us, most notably his emphasis on the materiality of the signifier and a long overlooked struggle to work out an ethics through his poetry that would refuse political or social dogmatism, are brushed aside. It does both Stevens and the Language poetry movement that grew up in his wake a disservice not to recognize what in many cases is a close alignment of their poetic efforts and concerns.¹⁵

¹⁵ In Perloff’s essay in *The Wallace Stevens Journal*, “Pound/Stevens: Who’s era? Revisited” (Fall, 2002) she delineates “two camps,” one—led by Bloom on the East Coast—championing Stevens as “*the* great modern American poet” (135), and another emerging mostly on the West coast—led by Hugh Kenner at Santa Barbara or by “a brief convergence” of academic interest in Pound on the part of Donald Davie, George Dekker, William Chace and Albert Gelpi (136). Perloff reminds us that in the early 1980s, when these camps emerged, “the poetic text was not regarded, as it is now, as a social practice or intervention, much less as a cultural symptom pointing to subliminal attitudes vis-à-vis race, class, or gender. The only positioning that

In an essay titled “Traduit de l’américain,” Perloff reflects on the—inarguably important—relationship between the L-A-N-G-U-A-G-E movement and both French poetry and theory. Where at first, as Perloff explains, Language poetry was influenced *by* the French poets and theorists it now, conversely, both lends its influence and gains its audience primarily from that source. Indeed, the movement has received a warmer reception, at least institutionally (Perloff cites numerous examples of the poetry movement’s all-but-exclusion from canonical American anthologies), in France. “J’essaie d’écrire comme un américain qui tenterait de se traduire en français” (PL 68) writes contemporary French poet Denis Roche in a statement that, as Perloff attests, is “worth pondering” (PL 68). One reason for “pondering” the statement is to consider the way that it reflects Benjamin’s suggestion that “the basic error of the translator is that he preserves the state in which his own language happens to be instead of allowing his language to be powerfully affected by the foreign tongue. [...] He must,” Benjamin urges, instead, “expand and deepen his language by means of the foreign language” (81). Though we are not dealing here with an actual inter-lingual translation, Roche indicates that he has taken Benjamin’s charge, that: “the task of the translator (is) to release in his own language that pure language that is under the spell of another, to liberate the language imprisoned in a

took place—and this is as true for Pound as it is for Stevens, was *vis-à-vis* the poetry of the past. Was Pound to be understood in the light of Browning or did we need to go back to Propertius and Catullus to understand him? Had Stevens been co-opted by those (e.g., Frank Kermode) who put him squarely in the British romantic tradition, when the truth was that, as Bloom insisted, he came straight out of Emerson and Whitman? [...] And, closer to home, was John Ashbery, who was finally getting some recognition, even though he had been publishing poetry since 1956, more than an avatar of Stevens?” (136-137). My intention in drawing attention to the allegiances between Stevens’s poetry and the Language movement to emerge in the 1970s is less an attempt at establishing Stevens and the Language poetry movement within the same historical framework and more the opposite: an attempt, instead, to spring Stevens from his historical context long enough to see that certain aspects of his project indeed transcend the categories by which we have been trying to understand them. This is not a call to read Stevens (as, according to Perloff, we do “now”) solely in terms of “social practice or intervention,” but it is a call to widen our conception of the tradition beyond juxtaposed approaches that are defined, or do not let themselves be defined, by the work itself, but instead by the “camp” to which a given scholar would like to belong.

work in his re-creation of that work” (80) very seriously indeed. Roche’s appropriation of the advice for use in the process of his own—*original*—language, is further testament to the deduction that the notion of a “pure language” is one that exists in *excess* of the consideration of any specific “tongue”; that it has to do, instead, with the problem at the root of *every* language consideration: as Derrida puts it, “how to say something” (15). Though he would not have read Benjamin’s essay, and would end his career before the concerns of his own later work would be taken up in seriousness by a younger generation of poets and artists, Stevens’s own sympathies with the notion of the writer as a possible “liberator” of the “pure language” “imprisoned” by the form of his particular tongue, is evident in his “fixation” on the elements of language that exceed any attempt at assigning them categorically with meaning: the “tintinnabulations” (CP 789) and “secretive syllables” (CP 362) of a language that can *only* remain excessive to every form of representation, in that they exist only in the “space of differences” (Jarroway 151) of the *trace*.

Perloff does not mention Stevens directly in this context, but she does usefully trace the American Language school’s “fixation with the gramme” back to the high modernism of Yeats and Pound, and, still further, to the Russian Formalists, such as Khlebnikov and Kruchonykh—who, in 1913, published their groundbreaking manifesto, “The Letter as Such.” According to Khlebnikov and Kruchonykh’s formulation, “letters are like bodies,” and writing, understood as a *dance*, can express emotion through their physical form.

Though the “emotive” dimension—and certainly the “spiritual” dimension—to Khlebnikov’s preoccupation with mathematics and the gramme has in large part been replaced in subsequent generations by what Perloff calls, “an intentional and ironized nominalism—a desire to empty the signifier of its accrued symbolic meanings so that 5, as in [Jasper] John’s elegantly painted numerals, is always and only 5” (PLT 95), there

remains the question as to whether or not such a concentration on the “pure abstraction” that the number, and the gramme, necessarily imply, “isn’t itself an example of what Khlebnikov called *zaum*, “beyondsense” (95).

Previously, in *The Futurist Moment*, Perloff had explored the concept of *zaum* extensively. She explains it as a sort of “transrational” language, which, according to Khlebnikov and Kruchonykh, “undermines or ignores the conventional meanings of a given word,” allowing *sound*, instead, to “generate its own range of significations” (121). *Connotative*, that is, rather than *denotative* significations: again, we see the way that a “fixation” with form, with *fixity* itself, lends itself to the notion of infinite multiplicity and expansion *beyond*, or in Derridean language, in the *margins* of, that form. In their manifesto, Khlebnikov and Kruchonykh use the term “*re-char*,” which Gary Kern has translated as “speechist,” Paul Schmidt as “write-wright,” and Gerald Janecek as “worder” (Perloff TFM 125). Regardless of which translation you choose—or better yet, in considering all three—what is evident is a concern, again, for language *as language*, for a “return” to the possibility of the “purely spoken”¹⁶—a possibility which can, of course, only be imagined within the territory of possibility that is language itself.

“Yet everything matters”

¹⁶ The distinction should not be confused with the primacy that Saussure affords spoken language against “the tyranny of writing” (Derrida OG 41) but should instead be understood as an attempt to *lay bear* the poetic impulse. It is not, in other words, about the distinction between sign and signifier, where the sign is understood as *true*. It is instead about the inherent and incommensurable difference between the two, that “irreducible absence within the presence of the trace” (OG 47). The “purely spoken” must be understood to take place in that “irreducible” gap where language is freed from the “said” but takes place in its “saying,” its “becoming.” What Derrida calls “the unmotivated” trace—that is, that entity which refuses to be reified within the structure of signification but exists as signifyingness, as the always-ever *becoming* of signification itself—is “indefinitely its own becoming unmotivated. In Saussurean language, what Saussure does not say would have to be said: there is neither symbol nor sign but a becoming-sign of the symbol” (OG 47).

Where Stevens ceases to follow this “fixation” is where it begins, in its effort to effect a radical separation from sense, to impose a fixed form of its own, which in turn begins to impinge upon its own freedom. Stevens had long associated himself with the formalist aesthetics of painter George L. K. Morris, and in fact resisted “abstraction” precisely because of what he saw to be its abandonment of meaning. Later, he recognized the “spiritual content” of Piet Mondrian’s art, and it was only then that he allowed himself, finally, to “acknowledge his sympathy” to the movement and begin to “come to terms with the abstract tendencies of his own art” (McLeod 120). What concerned Stevens, once again, was not the “form” of the movement itself, but the possibilities that were rendered by the *practice* of a style that would not, in the end, be tied to form itself. His criticism of surrealism ran along similar lines. It was in a 1942 issue of the Surrealist magazine, *View*—a piece subsequently published as part of his *Materia Poetica*—that Stevens wrote: “The essential fault of surrealism is that it invents without discovering. To make a clam play an accordion is to invent not to discover. The observation of the unconscious, so far as it can be observed, should reveal things of which we have previously been unconscious, not the familiar things of which we have been conscious plus imagination” (CP 919). An art that “invents without discovering” was specifically what Stevens hoped to avoid, and it was because of this that there developed in his work an increasing “fixation” on the “*gramme* or the smallest particle of writing” (68)—not, that is, for its formal qualities, or to, in the Russian Formalist sense, detach himself from meaning entirely, but for its possibilities of exploring and *discovering* through the “innocence” of the letter the inter-relationship between the opacity of form and the transparency of meaning.

Steven's re-establishment of a *time* "of innocence" within the final stanza of "The Auroras of Autumn" where there could "never (be) a place" is interesting when considered in this context, and doubly so if considered also in conjunction with Aristotle's critique of the *grammē* as being an insufficient measure of temporality, given that its "multiplicity of points...are both origin and limit, beginning and end" (59). Stevens's "innocence," as should be sufficiently clear by now, is not conceived in terms of any final signification but rather in the spatial and temporal dimensions of its very *process* of signifying; it takes place ("if" it does) "as if" in *between* "origin and limit, beginning and end." That is: *in-between* the purely imaginative "idea of it, alone" and the reality of both the limitations of the phenomenal world and the words on the page. What is essential, therefore, for Stevens, and what fuels his exploration of the letter-as-such, and indeed his fixation on language as the always potential and generative mode by which one might "discover" the world, is a re-investment of the letter with the innocence that is lost to it in our insistence on it as a measure of time and space; in other words, as a measure of *meaning*. Imagine, if you will, that we might (within the "multiplicity of points" Stevens's fixation on language reveals within *language itself*) "Lie down like children in this holiness, As if, awake, we lay in the quiet of sleep..." That, in doing so, and though we might not be liberated in a space outside of time, we might find ourselves inhabiting the *very structure of time itself*—a structure not yet built but always "as if" in the process of being constructed... Imagine that it is there, in that in-between space, that we would be "fated" to remain, bound ("unhappily") to a "happy" world. It is, perhaps, the revelation and acceptance of this position as "no less real" than anything else, that constitutes the text's genuine literary freedom, and affords as well the empathetic transcendence of the poem's final stanzas, wherein the rabbi's text "meditates a whole, / The full of fortune and the full of fate..." (CP 363).

“You can do as you please, yet everything matters” (CP 789), Stevens wrote:

You are free, but your freedom must be consonant with the freedom of others...You are free to tintinnabulate if you like. But others are equally free to put their hands over their ears. Life may not be a cosmic mystery that wraps us round everywhere. You have somehow to know the sound that is the exact sound; and you do in fact know, without knowing how. Your knowledge is irrational. In that sense life is mysterious; and if it is mysterious at all, I suppose that it is cosmically mysterious. I hope that we agree that it is at least mysterious. What is true of sounds is true of everything: the feeling for words, without regard to their sound, for example. There is, in short, an unwritten rhetoric that is always changing and to which the poet must always be turning. That is the book in which he learns that the desire for literature is the desire for life. The incessant desire for freedom in literature or in any of the arts is a desire for freedom in life. The desire is irrational. The result is the irrational searching the irrational, a conspicuously happy state of affairs, if you are so inclined” (CP 790).

But this Freedom cannot simply be “freedom for freedom’s sake.” Assumed in that sense, “freedom” would in very short order certainly impose itself as its own limit. Instead, freedom must—for a poet, and “in spite of the cynicism that occurs to us as we hear of such things”—be always essentially *un-representable*: “a freedom not previously experienced, a poetry not previously conceived of...” (CP 790).

Based on these reflections, it is not surprising that in his 1955 acceptance speech for the National Book Award for Poetry, Stevens said: “Now, at seventy-five, as I look back on the little that I have done and as I turn the pages of my own poems gathered together in a single volume, I have no choice except to paraphrase the old verse that says that it is not

what I am, but what I aspired to be that comforts me. It is not what I have written but what I should like to have written that constitutes my true poems, the uncollected poems which I have not had the strength to realize” (CP 878).

Chapter Four: The Mind

When the mind is like a hall in which thought is like a voice speaking, the voice is always that of some one else

—Wallace Stevens (CP 907).

But along with freedom, which is if anything, only an ultimate passivity—an openness to the always-infinite and infinitely variable future—there is an openness to disaster already inscribed: “the disaster, unexperienced,” writes Blanchot. “It is what escapes the very possibility of experience—it is the limit of writing. This must be repeated: the disaster de-scribes” (7). Freedom, and that includes the freedom afforded by anteriority, by *not* being able to read the “limit” that the future will inevitably inscribe upon it, is an empty signifier. It is rendered meaningful only by that unforeseen future event—an event that is always “disastrous” in its interruption of the un-describable openness of the present moment where everything is still possible, waiting to be written. We are always, as Blanchot writes, “on the edge of (this) disaster without being able to situate it in the future” (3). We hover there, at the very limit of experience, of the de-scribed, the textual.

Published in 1942, *Parts of a World*—Wallace Stevens’s only wartime collection—is fittingly steeped in the sense of impending disaster. And indeed this disaster is an always-anticipated disaster—written into the future—but yet it remains inseparable from the heightened urgency of the poetry’s present-tense. In “Girl in a Nightgown,” for example, Stevens writes:

Once it was, the repose of night,
Was a place, strong place, in which to sleep.
It is shaken now. It will burst into flames,
Either now or tomorrow or the day after that. (194)

Similarly, “Connoisseur of Chaos” from the same collection reflects: “After all the pretty contrast of life and death / Proves that these opposite things partake of one, /At least that was the theory, when bishops’ books/ Resolved the world. We cannot go back to that” (CP 195). There is indeed a sense within this collection of a defining moment having been reached—not only within the “theoretical” balance, and contemplation, of the world, but within Stevens’s poetry itself. “Connoisseur of Chaos” continues:

The squirming facts exceed the squamous mind,
 If one may say so. And yet relation appears,
 A small relation expanding like the shade
 Of a cloud on sand, a shape on the side of a hill (195).

This “small relation,” unnamed, that expands into a much larger shape when a certain light is cast provides a concrete illustration of the ominous futurity that permeates this poem and the collection as a whole. The unnamed “relation” is insignificant in itself and is, in the largest part, not responsible for the size or shade of the image that its shadow casts. This “small relation” and its limited autonomy over the larger “relation” that it has to its environment and to the temporal moment (the play of light that might render it more or less imposing) speaks to the limited autonomy of the subject as he in any moment gazes ahead—or reflects on the past. Indeed, the next section turns its attention to history, and muses: “Well, an old order is a violent one.” In the next line, however, we read the definitive, “This proves nothing.” Regardless of the directionality of the gaze, it seems that we are left hovering at the edge of a disaster that, as Blanchot writes, we are unable to “situate”: “it is rather always already past and yet we are on the edge or under threat” (3).

An “intractable reality”

Stevens’s three post-war collections following *Parts of a World—Transport to Summer* (1947), *The Auroras of Autumn* (1950) and finally *The Rock* (1954)—were to be criticized heavily for their increasing abstraction, but a tendency toward the abstract had certainly been evident, if more consciously resisted, from the early days of *Harmonium* where it was articulated most strikingly by “The Snowman’s” “nothing that is.” The most profound shift toward a concept of “abstraction” that would act as a guiding principle in the later work is felt in Stevens’s first post-war collection, *Transport to Summer*, characterized by the highly theoretical long poem, “Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction.”

Parts of a World, then, is indeed a collection poised at an intersection between the “harmony” and “Ideas of Order” of Stevens’s earlier career and the definitive move that he effects in 1947 with the announcement in “Notes” that: “It Must Be Abstract” (329). What drives Stevens toward this conclusion is precisely the sense evoked in “Connoisseur of Chaos” that there is no longer any ultimate resolution possible, in “bishop’s books,” in poetry, or otherwise, that: “[t]he squirming facts” are in excess, to and ultimately unintelligible, to “the squamous mind” (195); that they are not, indeed, “facts” at all in any sense of being knowable, definable, or substantive, but are instead rather like the “squirming” phosphorescence off his beloved Florida coast: certainly present, certainly living, but in the end utterly ungraspable, either by the human body or mind.

The idea that the mind cannot contain the ineffable “facts” of the world does not presuppose either that the “facts” do not exist in their own right, or that the mind is somehow deficient due to its inability to absorb them. Instead, what “Connoisseur of Chaos” introduces most powerfully is that there exists a tangible body of space *outside*—*excessive* of—human ideas of reason and order:

- A. A violent order is disorder; and
- B. A great disorder is an order. These
Two things are one. (Pages of illustrations.) (194)

Importantly, this excessive space where “[t]wo things are one” is indicated as being potentially figurable, but the figuration—the “pages of illustrations” which are suggested to us as a possibility—are emphatically withheld. It is the space of this withholding that is Stevens’s primary concern in *Parts of a World*—a space where the signified remains purposefully in excess of the signifier; it becomes, indeed, nothing other than the process of its own articulation, the figure nothing other than the process of its figuration.

Again—similarly to the manner in which a camera seeks to capture a moment that will always be in excess of the photograph’s material rendering, Stevens seeks to create through his poetry a tangible space within which to indicate what *will always remain in excess to the poem*. Through the careful composition of the poem’s material elements, in other words, Stevens hopes to convey what is and must remain exterior to the poem, and immaterial. He continually draws our attention to the limit-reach of the poem, what it is possible to point to, or represent, and in doing so he emphasizes the complex relationship between outside and inside, reality and the imagination, *without* reducing either relation to a schematic binary.

Close examination of *Parts of a World* allows not only a consideration of the pressures Stevens’s poetic approach and style were undergoing during the war, which would result in the 1947 publication of the unprecedented “Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction,” but also the way Stevens’s poetry in this collection shrugs off the lingering romance, so evident in his earlier collections, of a higher power located *outside* of the self—in Nature or in God. Instead, Stevens explores and finally inhabits, as he will continue to do for the rest of his career, a state of being where the highest power of perception is afforded to the *individual imagination*.

Barthes’s consideration of the paradoxical “*absence-as-presence*” (106) of the photographic image—its simultaneous being and non- being rendering it, like the “unsayable” *absent-but-present* subject of a poem, *excessive* to the material world which comprises it—again offers us a tangible method of approaching some of the same issues of materiality and representation at work in the poetry of Wallace Stevens. Perhaps, this chapter suggests, the duality of the photograph as explored by Barthes (its peculiarly tangible rendering of both “absence” and “presence”) can be considered one of the missing “illustrations” that were promised, but apparently withheld, by Stevens in the opening lines

of “Connoisseur of Chaos.”

According to Barthes, the advent of photography “corresponds precisely to the explosion of the private into the public, or rather into the creation of a new social value, which is the publicity of the private: the private is consumed as such” (CL 98). The idea of a shared and subjective “system of representation,” however, goes back at least as far as Immanuel Kant’s *Critique of Reason*, in which he argues that not only outer objects but inner objects are made up of appearances. When we become aware, Kant argued, of the manner in which appearances “are not things in themselves,” we are quickly able to see that they are only “the mere play of our representations” (Collins 73). Although for decades artists had been experimenting with the possibilities of representing the fleetingness of temporality and sensible perception— famously Van Gogh’s self-portraits, Monet’s cathedrals—photography, in the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries, was beginning to develop its own innovative techniques by which to render tangible the conflict between “outer” and “inner” senses (71) through a literalization of the ephemerality, or “play of representation,” by which those senses themselves are constituted.

Though the photograph revolutionized our understanding of the image by exposing its ultimately material terms, it remained at the same time, as Barthes writes, “always invisible: it is not what we see” (CL 6). An inquiry into this seeming dichotomy serves as a powerful entry into the role of representation in Stevens’s work as, essentially, what is described here is an intermediate space *between* the supposedly juxtaposed poles of “outer” and “inner,” “reality” and “imagination”; this is precisely the space Stevens strives to literalize (to render, like a photograph, in material terms) through his explorations of the dialectic between the real and the ideal in the life of the poem and the mind.

Although, like Kant before him, Barthes did not conceive of the self as *enduring*, as a “thing in itself” (Collins 128), he sought to know what *photography* was “*in itself*” (Barthes, CL 3)—and to explore what he perceived, evident within the photograph, to be the very “lineaments of truth” (Barthes 100). Unlike Stevens, whose work has often been critiqued for its impersonality,¹ Barthes’s search for “truth” in *Camera Lucida* is highly personal, centering on the famous “Winter Garden Photograph” where his deceased mother appears as a young girl. Although, in sorting through a variety of photographs of his mother shortly after her death, Barthes had not expected to find any “truth” to the images that claimed to represent her, *Camera Lucida* is Barthes’s account of finding what he was *not* looking for: “the truth for me” (110). The subjective nature of Barthes’ response to “The Winter Garden Photograph” is underlined by the fact that it is the sole photograph that he discusses in *Camera Lucida* that he does *not* include in the book for the reader’s inspection. The photograph is withheld—bracketed, like Stevens’s “pages of illustrations.” It demarcates a space of representation so subjective as to be finally un-representable. Or rather, it is the space of this impossibility that is demarcated and represented in Barthes’s discourse and Stevens’s poem.

“The photograph,” says Barthes, “has become a new form of hallucination: false on the level of perception, true on the level of time” (115). It is this paradox (the subject confronted with *physical* evidence of his own subjectivity—of the unendurable, “hallucinatory” nature of his perception) that makes tangible, in both Barthes and Stevens, the conflict between the limited singularity of the viewer and the object viewed. Barthes, in identifying this conflict in the photograph, describes a choice: the viewer, he says, can

¹ Even when a case is made, as it was back in 1967 by Joseph Riddell, that the “impersonality” of Stevens’s poems constitutes a “way out of solipsism” (TCE 229), the charge carries with it a heavy weight in the context of a highly lyrical American poetic tradition, one that it has not been able entirely to shake: Dan Chiasson’s review of the new *Selected Poems* (Knopf 2009), which takes for granted Stevens’s reputation as “anti-realist ... solipsist ... escapist” (New York Review of Books 63) is testament to this.

maintain for the photograph “the civilized code of perfect illusions,” or he can “confront in it the wakening of intractable reality” (119). This “code of illusions” corresponds to what fashion photographer Richard Avedon intended by “likeness” when he famously insisted that, “(a) portrait is *not* a likeness” (*The Archive* 9, emphasis added). Avedon emphasized the creativity inherent in every representation of subjectivity, and thus the creative control that the artist exerts over even the most “accurate” journalistic portrait: “the moment an emotion or fact is transformed into a photograph it is no longer a fact but an opinion. There is no such thing as inaccuracy in a photograph. All photographs are accurate. None of them is the truth” (*The Archive* 9). The “intractable reality” that Barthes refers to is akin to the abstract, amorphous “truth” that Avedon here juxtaposes against concrete, formal “accuracy.” Barthes’ decision to leave out the photograph that comes to represent “the truth” for him about his mother seems to suggest that providing an “accurate” likeness would serve only to *distract* the reader from the purpose that she actually serves in the text: she represents not “Truth” itself, but the continuous, creative *possibility* of arriving at subjective “truth”—“the truth for me.”

In his essay “Imagination as Value,” Wallace Stevens confronts a similar choice between truth and accuracy, or as Barthes phrases it, between “illusion” and “intractable reality,” and opts to confront the “intractable reality” not of any “outer” object, but of the imagination. That is, he makes a distinction between life and art that allows him to explore the idea of truth only as it might apply to individual perception. In keeping with the pragmatist tradition that influenced him, he attempts to assign a practical *value* for truth, even if—as it was for Barthes—that truth may only be “the truth for me” (CL 110). “In life,” Stevens says, “what is important is the truth as it is, while in arts and letters what is important is the truth as we see it” (CP 733). It is evident from this statement that Stevens’s pragmatism situates the perception of truth (as Kant had done before him) within

the subjective space of the individual. Instead of focussing on a subjectively perceived *reality*, however, Stevens draws attention to what he sees as the intrinsic “poetic value” of our imaginative experience; and just as Kant does not “justify” the *a priori* value of space or time, Stevens does not justify the value of the imagination: “poetic value is an intuitional value and ... intuitional values cannot be justified” (Stevens 735). For Stevens it is through “*poetic value*” that he seeks to move past representation towards a “space” of blankness that exists not as a *quantity*—an empty container for something unknown and ungraspable—but instead as a *quality*. He was a poet not, like Williams, of the noun, but of the adjective—of the phenomenal rather than the noumenal (although, arguably, he ultimately pushes past both). This is often overlooked, however, in the argument between poets and philosophers who would seek either to establish Stevens firmly within, or conversely to expel him from, one camp or the other. Stevens’s poetry, ultimately, is invested *not* in the rational processes of the mind—though these were certainly of subsequent interest to him—but in the sensory experiences that *exceed* cognition entirely, and that cannot be “illustrated” or accounted for in formal terms.

This “space” *beyond* a play of representation—defined, that is, not by what is *present* but by what is *not*—is precisely what Barthes, paradoxically, perceives in the form of the photograph. It will be useful here to revisit in greater depth the distinction that he makes between “the Real and the Live”:

The photograph’s immobility is somehow the result of a perverse confusion between two concepts: the Real and the Live: by attesting that the object has been real, the photograph surreptitiously induces belief that it is alive, because of that delusion which makes us attribute to Reality an absolutely superior, somehow eternal value; but by shifting this reality to the past (“this-has-been”), the photograph suggests that it is already dead (Barthes, 79).

What photography accomplishes, Barthes attests, is “the unheard-of identification of reality (*‘that-has-been’*) with truth (*‘there-she-is!’*)” so that it “becomes at once evidential and exclamative” (Barthes 113). Identifying this split—between the Real and Live, the “truth” and “reality” of a photograph—enables Barthes to move beyond representational value and to define a separate “space” for what he defines as “*the impossible science of the unique being*” (Barthes 71).

The “lineaments” of this “unique being”—an internalization of the notion of the subject as singular and autonomous in the sense of pre-existing the relation with the object, hence ultimately disconnected and solipsistic—are evident throughout the body of Stevens’s poetry and are particularly notable in “Re-statement of Romance” from *Ideas of Order* (1936). Here Stevens develops a new form of “romance” that locates perceptive power not in a larger, all-seeing and unknowable Other, but in an admittedly limited, autonomous and transient subjectivity—one that was undoubtedly influenced by the “transparent eyeball” of Emerson’s 1849 essay, “Nature.” This was a formative essay for an entire generation of pragmatist and modernist writers who followed—a generation that included Stevens, Frost, Eliot, Pound, and Stein (Poirier, *Poetry and Pragmatism* 9). Emerson’s “transparent eyeball” had revolutionized American thinking in that it granted to *individual* perception a legitimacy and power that had previously been reserved for God alone. Emerging from an obviously Wordsworthian tradition, Emerson establishes his sublime perspective on new and uniquely open American terrain. “Standing on the bare ground,” he writes in “Nature,” “– my head bathed by the blithe air, and uplifted into infinite space, – all mean egotism vanishes. I become a transparent eye-ball; I am nothing; I see all; the currents of the Universal Being circulate through me; I am part or particle of

God” (Emerson 18).² This transcendentalist shift from “Nature” to “Experience” is evident in Stevens’s “Re-Statement” as the poem corrects a previous conception of “romance” that imagined the power of the “Universal Being” to exist *outside* the self and understood Nature to “see all,” and therefore to “know all.” The first line of “Re-Statement” flatly refuses this notion: “The night knows nothing of the chants of night” (Stevens 118), the poem begins. In this way, it immediately establishes itself within a perspective that is at once secular and autonomous³.

In his “The American Scholar” speech of 1837 Emerson declared that “the poet chanting, was felt to be a divine man” (SELP 87), and it is this—the passive receipt of knowledge; the idea that the “divine poet chanting” should indicate that “henceforth the chant is divine also” (SELP 87)—that Emerson, and later Stevens, resist in their work. Stevens’s “Re-Statement” of an old world conception of romance suggests an Emersonian desire for an assertion of reason (what is known) over what is mysterious or religious (what

² This oft-quoted passage indeed illustrates many of the ideas and enthusiasms central to the transcendentalist tradition Emerson has come to typify. In his 1842 lecture, “The Transcendentalist,” Emerson provides the following context for “transcendentalism”—which he broadly defines as a “class of intuitive thought”: “It is well known [...] that the Idealism of the present day acquired the name of Transcendental, from the use of that term by Immanuel Kant, of Konigsberg, who replied to the skeptical philosophy of Locke, which insisted that there was nothing in the intellect which was not previously in the experience of the senses, by showing that there was a very important class of ideas, or imperative forms, which did not come by experience, but through which experience was acquired; that these were intuitions of the mind itself; and he denominated them Transcendental forms. The extraordinary profoundness and precision of that man’s thinking have given vogue to his nomenclature, in Europe and America, to that extent, that whatever belongs to the class of intuitive thought, is popularly called at the present day Transcendental...” (CPW 391) In fact, Stevens’s inheritance from the transcendentalist tradition should be considered more broadly, and the ideas that permeated the work of Thoreau and Whitman should also be considered, in this light, as significant influences. The active, process-oriented approach to perception and awareness proposed by Thoreau in the following passage is particularly resonant with many of the themes developed, and often returned to, by Stevens: “In eternity there is indeed something true and sublime. But all these times and places and occasions are now and here. God himself culminates in the present moment, and we will never be more divine in the lapse of all the ages. And we are enabled to apprehend at all what is sublime and noble only by the perpetual instilling and drenching of the reality that surrounds us. The universe constantly and obediently answers to our conceptions; whether we travel fast or slow, the track is laid for us. Let us spend our lives in conceiving then” (186).

³ It is through the “self” then, according to Emerson’s model, that “transcendence” may be achieved. This “transcendence” is not an eradication or a remove from the self, nor is it an enlarged solipsism. It can be understood most usefully in the Levinasian terms established previously. Through a concentration on the material nature of Being, on the subjective, the “I,” one may encounter the limit of that frame, coming “face to face” with what is “Other,” external, unknown.

is unknown), as well as of the individual and subjective over the collective or socially defined (like the “chants”). The move toward an individual over a collective consciousness, which had already been well established by Emerson, was reinforced by his disparagement in “The American Scholar” of those “who set out from accepted dogmas, not from their own sight of principles” (SELP 87) and his encouragement to resist “the sluggish and perverted mind of the multitude” (SELP 87). “The one thing in the world, of value,” he asserts, “is the active soul” (SELP 88); within this one statement we read the future of American pragmatism. Like Kant before, Pragmatism sought to offer a balance between rational and empirical philosophy. In Emerson, for example, as in the rational tradition, the soul is that which “every man is entitled to; (that) every man contains within him, although, in almost all men, obstructed, and as yet unborn” (SELP 88). As in the empirical tradition, however, it is *only when the soul is made “active”* that it “sees absolute truth; and utters truth” (SELP 88). The soul is not a thing “in and of itself,” then, but something that necessarily interacts and changes. It is something—as William James would later say of “truth” itself in defining his own particular brand of pragmatism—that “*becomes true*” (James 77).

Contrary to his reputation as a High Modernist aesthete, it is a similar impulse toward action that defines Stevens’s rejection of Romanticism: “The imagination is one of the great human powers,” he says in “Imagination as Value.” “The romantic belittles it. The imagination is the liberty of the mind. The romantic is a failure to make use of that liberty” (CP 728). Interestingly, however, Stevens’s “Re-Statement of Romance” does not suggest a move *away* from “romance.” “Romance” is *re-stated*, but it is neither negated nor re-defined.

The night knows nothing of the chants of night.
It is what it is as I am what I am:
And in perceiving this I perceive myself best.

And you. Only we two may interchange
 Each in the other what each has to give.
 Only we two are one, not you and night,

Nor night and I, but you and I, alone,
 So much alone, so deeply by ourselves,
 So far beyond the casual solitudes,

That night is only the background of our selves,
 Supremely true each to its separate self,
 In the pale light that each upon the other throws (CP 118).

The quality of this reflective light, which is “thrown” upon each “separate self” here, is reminiscent of the “relation” that “appears” and expands “like the shade / Of a cloud on sand” or “a shape on the side of the hill” in *Parts of a World's* “Connoisseur of Chaos.” In both cases it is what exceeds and “backgrounds” that “relation”—the “relation” itself being dependant on, and reflective of, that greater and more pervasive unknown. The “re-statement,” understood in this way, serves only to shift the notion of romance from the “crowd” to the “individual,” and assert for art (the sublime on the scale of the personal, the known) the role that religion once played. This assertion is exemplified in the second line: “It is what it is, as I am what I am...” (CP 118). Here, the biblical allusion to God’s self-identification—“I am that I am”—situates the figure of the “night” (that backgrounded unknown against which the “relation” flickers only as a shadow—a constituent part, if subtly and momentarily articulated as formally separate from that greater darkness) in comparison to the figure of God. As this statement is linked causally, through the use of a colon, to a third line: “And by perceiving this I perceive myself best” (CP 118), we see that the emphasis is clearly on the individual; therefore, “...as I am what I am” seems not to connote an actual figure of God, but instead a God-like understanding of the world and the self. It is through the application of this understanding to the speaker of the poem that the

supremacy of the individual, over any figure of God or the religious rites of the crowd, is established.

Once Stevens establishes this supremacy, however—once we, alongside him, come to power in a world we must willingly accept as the product of our own limited subjectivity—that world necessarily becomes for us “no longer an extraneous object, full of other extraneous objects, but an image” (CP 736), and it is our own imagination that must be seen as both creator and created. We, too, therefore, become an image. We, too, become, as in “Landscape with Boat” from “*Parts of a World*”: “[a]n anti-master-man, floribund ascetic” (CP 220), who is as unable to master his own senses, or the scene to which his sensibility has been exposed, as he is unable to submit to the authority of a higher, all-powerful, all-seeing eye. This poem continues:

He brushed away the thunder, then the clouds,
Then the colossal illusion of heaven. Yet still
The sky was blue. He wanted imperceptible air.
He wanted to see. He wanted the eye to see
And not be touched by blue (CP 220).

At the root of the desire depicted in this poem for a vision that would “not be touched” by the reality that it perceived is the desire to assume ultimate responsibility: not for the scene itself, but for the faculties by which it is perceived, manipulated and represented. The “anti-master-man” would not be master of any *thing*, but would become instead the un-masterable sense of sight itself—wholly extraneous to, and therefore no longer contingent upon, the objects of its own perception. This is, of course, a desire not to surrender control but to assume it entirely, to eradicate the distance between the “this will

be” and the “this has been” of the image by the grammatical subject of the poem *becoming*⁴
the space of the difference: the image itself.

It was not as if the truth lay where he thought,
Like a phantom, in an uncreated night.
It was easier to think it lay there. If
It was nowhere else, it was there and because
It was nowhere else, its place had to be supposed,
Itself had to be supposed, a thing
Supposed in a place supposed, a thing that he reached
In a place that he reached, by rejecting what he saw
And denying what he heard. He would arrive.
He had only not to live, to walk in the dark,
To be projected by one void into
Another (CP 220).

The “anti-master-man” is here described as taking up precisely the space of his own
“supposed” truth. This position is, admittedly, a fantasy (“It was easier to think it lay there.
If / It was nowhere else, it was there...”), the ultimate realisation of which may only exist in
death (“He had only not to live, to walk in the dark / To be projected by one void into /
Another”). Nonetheless, what is obtained by the “anti-master” according to the speaker in
this stanza is a subjective space of his own “truth” arising according to the coordinates of
his own autonomous imagination. But this space of “truth” is thrown wide open by the
speaker when he later reflects, in what I consider one of Stevens’s most beautiful passages:

He never supposed
That he might be truth, himself, or part of it,
That the things that he rejected might be part
And the irregular turquoise, part, the perceptible blue
Grown denser, part, the eye so touched, so played
Upon by clouds, the ear so magnified
By thunder, parts, and all these things together,
Parts, and more things, parts. He never supposed divine
Things might not look divine, nor that if nothing
Was divine then all things were, the world itself,
And that if nothing was the truth, then all
Things were the truth, the world itself was truth (CP 220-221).

⁴ In the poem’s discourse, the subject is, of course, the ‘he.’ This ‘he’ may be said to be conjugated by the predicate, which here is the reiteration of ‘supposed;’ ‘he’ can therefore be understood as manifest in the very place where it “had to be supposed” (CP 220).

This passage is particularly interesting in terms of the way Stevens begins his conscious shift toward a universalizing abstract conception of “man” without giving up the lineaments of a subjective “truth”—that which constitutes, as Barthes would write, “the truth for me.” When the speaker’s voice interrupts the solipsism of the “anti-master’s” reverie by announcing, “He never supposed...”, Stevens introduces a personification of the split between the universal and the particular so characteristic of his oeuvre. Indeed, the articulation of this split may be considered Stevens’s most urgent pursuit as he continues, with increasing energy in his late collections, to elaborate a middle-space in which the representation of perception might capture the peculiar juxtaposition between (as Barthes describes for the photograph) a double-consciousness, inherent to the subject, of the abstract “*this will be*”, and the particular “*this has been*” (CL 96). It is this double-consciousness that gives rise, of course, to the “suppositional” nature of subjective observation and experience of being.

“The major abstraction”

History according to Barthes, like the world according to Kant, can be “constituted only if we consider it, only if we look at it...and in order to look at it,” writes Barthes, “we must be excluded from it. As a living soul, I am the very contrary of History, I am what belies it, destroys it for the sake of my own history” (CL 65). In essence, this is Emerson’s “active soul” as taken up in the poetry of Stevens: the individual consciousness that belies not only History but the “outer” world for the sake of an “inner” world of the imagination. However, with the establishment of such a self-enclosed system it cannot be otherwise that the “active soul” contains, like the photograph, its own end: “I observe with horror” Barthes

writes, in speaking of the photograph of the young man on death-row, and then of the Winter Garden Photograph of his mother:

an anterior future of which death is the stake. By giving the absolute past of the pose (aorist), the photograph tells me death in the future. What pricks me is the discovery of this equivalence. In front of the photograph of my mother as a child, I tell myself: she is going to die: I shudder...*over a catastrophe which has already occurred*. Whether or not the subject is already dead, every photograph is this catastrophe (CL 96).⁵

For Stevens, this “equivalence” is paramount; the simultaneity of “will be” and “has been” *is* the autonomy—the self-enclosed structure—of the individual mind. “If the imagination is the faculty by which we import the unreal into what is real,” Stevens says in “Imagination as Value,” “its value is the value of the way of thinking by which we project the idea of God into the idea of man. It creates images that are independent of their originals since nothing is more certain than that the imagination is agreeable to the imagination” (Stevens 736). Therefore, according to Stevens, we *create* our realities through the material of the *unreal*, but in doing so establish for ourselves a closed-circuit of imaginative power in which our “unreality” matches perfectly our “reality,” due to the fact that it is that “unreality” *which is the very substance* of our “reality.” It is the opposite for the photograph, according to Barthes, but the result is the same. The photograph imports the “real” into the “unreal”—it poses as reality, but it is in fact an *unreality*; its “being” is

⁵ Key to this discussion is Barthes’s use of the tense of the future anterior. This unusual tense is important to a consideration of Stevens’s ‘suppositional’ poetics, which is framed by a similar grammatical temporality and conditionality *before* it embarks on any abstract speculation. It is the grammar of the future anterior, the articulation, that is, of the difference between what has been and what will be, that opens up the gap between descriptive tense (the past) and conditional mood (the future). Barthes’ uncanny encounter of *the difference between* his contemporary observation and engagement with the Winter Garden Photograph, taking place *after* his mother’s death, and the time (unknown to, and un-experienced by, him) when the photograph was taken, is the very split Stevens works to elaborate between the particular and the universal—it is this “middle space” of temporal difference that grounds the epistemological predicament at the root of Stevens’s oeuvre.

evidence already of its “having been,” of its “being no longer.” It is, as Barthes writes, “invisible: it is not what we see” (CL 6).

What is it, then, that we are left with? What *is it* that we see? In both cases, it is not an object—anything “known” or “material”—but a *spaciousness* that is inferred. In “Re-Statement,” “night” is established “only as the background of our selves,” where “our selves” are considered “Supremely true each to its separate self, / In the pale light that each upon the other throws” (CP 118). Stevens has created an infinite system of contingent autonomies here. Again, like a “shade” that might have been cast upon the hill in “Connoisseur of Chaos,” the light here serves to both illustrate and undermine the autonomy of “each.” The subjects of this poem are self-enclosed and yet still interactive in that they are able to “reflect” off one another in a Kantian “shared system of representation.” No *one* is “knowable” to an *other*, but “each” is nevertheless relative to the other and dependent to a certain extent on the other for its “illumination.” How else does one know *oneself* in the particular than by recognizing what it is not, by perceiving “enduring objects” (Collins 137) in the outer world *in relation to which* we might represent the self? It is in just this way that Barthes is “pricked” by the century old photograph of a man on death row, through which he identifies the “imperious sign of (his) future death” (CL 97). This Kantian model of the self that cannot endure is not limiting for either Stevens’s or Barthes’s process of self-representation. Instead, such a paradox allows for the split between the evidential (Barthes’s “*that-has-been*”, Stevens’s “the pale light” of illumination—which can only further diminish, having no source of its own) and the exclamatory (Barthes’s “there she is!”, Stevens’s “Supremely true each to its separate self”), and allows for an autonomy of the self and imagination that, as the imagination—being “agreeable to the imagination”—is capable of establishing *supreme truth* regardless of, or rather *because of*, that truth’s subjectivity and impermanence. It is from this split that

there arises an opening into spaciousness,⁶ a Barthesian “*ecstasy*” (CL 119), a Stevensian “nothing that is” (CP 8).

This paradox at the root of the photograph, its “*absence-as-presence*” (CL 106), is demonstrated further in Barthes’s discussion of another old photograph in which two young girls are seen to be gazing at a “primitive airplane.” “How alive they are!” Barthes exclaims. “They have their whole lives before them; but also they are dead (today), they are then *already* dead (yesterday). At the limit, there is no need to represent a body in order for me to experience this vertigo of time defeated” (CL 97). It is this “vertigo of time defeated” that acts as the spaciousness encountered by both Barthes’ photograph and Stevens’s poetry. But just as Stevens’s poetry reverses the photograph’s temporal structure—which can indicate a “beyond” only by pointing to the ultimate insubstantiality of that which it purports to represent—by attesting to a “beyond” constituted from a *substantial affinity* between the “Real” world and the “unreality” of the imagination (the “Real” constructed from that “unreality” and vice versa), so the thrust of Stevens’s discovery is ultimately different from Barthes’. Where Barthes is confronted in the photograph by the horror of death-in-the future: “I shudder...*over a catastrophe which has already occurred*” (CL 96), Stevens exposes within the structure of the poem the way language is “always-ever” *alive*. In both cases, however, the impulse, even as it concerns itself with the particularities of subject and object, is always *beyond* the body, *beyond* the representation.

The paradox of being and non-being is also expressed by Stevens’s now familiar, self-professed “reality-imagination complex.” As Theodore Sampson states, it is this

⁶ The trope of “space” is here used not in an attempt to formalize or reify the space “in between” temporality, between subject and object, which indeed constitutes the very epistemological predicament of the subject in Stevens’s poems but in order to set the concerns of the poet somewhat in relief against the deeply entrenched linear trajectory of arriving, via language, at (even the most poetic) meaning.

“complex” that serves as the “pivotal idea that lies at the heart of Stevens’s poetic sensibility and work, and what needs to be said about it is that the very conflict involved in this ‘complex’—the opposition between the imaginative and the real, the transcendent and the earth-bound—has its roots in Stevens’s own inner division” (6). It is Stevens’s project to “counterpose reality’s pressure with a counterpressure of its own, and in so doing...not only keep reality at bay, but also prove imagination’s incontestable sway over it” (Sampson 6). This, according to Sampson, is in keeping with the tradition of Emerson, the great “American progenitor of modern perspectivism” (8), who uses sight as a metaphor for understanding the process of establishing individualized *truths* (8). “Truth,” for Emerson, “is not only contingent upon the ‘inner eye,’ but...consists of a series of ‘circles’ or perspectives, receding into infinite space” (Sampson, 8). “The eye” wrote Emerson, “is the best of artists” (as quoted in Poirier, AWE 50) and, as Richard Poirier explains, what is most significant in this phrase is an understanding that even while the eye “encircles infinitely larger areas and discovers an incomparably greater variety of relationships than do other bodily instruments, it remains marvellously unencumbered” (Poirier, AWE 50).

It is Stevens’s preservation of this “unencumbered” state of perception that allows him to perform, according to Sampson, an “Emersonian ‘inner leap’” (23) by which he is able to turn “the chaotic randomness and irrational disorder of things in the life-giving ‘fortuities of earth that solace us and make a world’” (Sampson, 23). We see this idea reflected quite clearly in Stevens’s own “Imagination as Value”: “My final point, then, is that the imagination is the power that enables us to perceive the normal in the abnormal, the opposite of chaos in chaos” (CP 737). It is this same stabilizing power, albeit “hallucinatory,” that Barthes claims for the photograph: “in a certain photograph *I believe I perceive the lineaments of truth*” (CL 100, emphasis added); that is, through the chaos of an unknowable and unrepresentable experience of being, and the concurrent terror of erasure,

it is possible in brief “*ecstatic*” moments for the photograph to be the “opposite of chaos,” to be “time defeated” (Barthes 97)—or for “Modern Poetry,” as Stevens memorably puts it, to become “the poem of the mind in the act of finding / What will suffice” (218).

In his critical analysis, *What I Cannot Say*, Thomas B. Byers says that for Stevens, notably in “Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction,” there exists a “desire to overcome the distance between speaker and subject as an approach to bridging the related gap between self and world” (43). John N. Serio, in his introduction to the new *Selected Poems*, comments that what he finds most remarkable about Stevens’s poetry is his capacity for extending the “reality-imagination complex” “beyond its human scope.” “This is a paradox,” Serio admits, “but it is Stevens’s most distinctive achievement. In an age of disbelief or, what might be worse, one of indifference to questions of belief, Stevens adds a metaphysical dimension. In doing so, he does not imply anything religious, but he goes beyond humanism” (xvi). This “going beyond” often manifests itself in the figuration of a “blankness,” a spaciousness *as such*. What is “the supreme fiction” with which Stevens launches his post-war career, but an invitation to such blankness?

Begin, ephebe, by perceiving the idea
Of this invention, this invented world,
The inconceivable idea of the sun.

You must be an ignorant man again
And see the sun again with an ignorant eye
And see it clearly in the idea of it (CP 329).

That the world exists only as an “invention” invites consideration of what is *not* invented, what is therefore *not* world. The opening passage of the poem negates itself again and again, as though receding in Emersonian circles “into infinite space” (Sampson 8). First, the notion of the perception that may be possible for an “ephebe” is called into question by the ephebe’s presence, which is, in the poem, *already an absence*. (Think again here of

Barthes's airplane girls: the antiquated term *ephebe* connotes a young man who, "dead [today], [is therefore]... *already* dead [yesterday] [Barthes 97]). Next, it is not only the notion of perception that is called into question (given the "invented" quality of the poem, and the ephebe), but the "invented world" itself is problematized given that it is the ephebe who *perceives* the world as such, and not that the world *is* "in itself" as such. That the ephebe is instructed to perceive something "inconceivable" further negates the solidity of his perception, and the statement "you must be an ignorant man again" returns, or desires a return, to an *a priori* state of blankness—made impossible by the fact that the man himself is already "invented" as a man who, not being "ignorant," will forever be incapable of seeing the sun, or anything, "clearly in the idea of it." That the sun is something that can indeed be "explained" according to astrophysics underscores that the main purpose that the image of the sun serves in the poem is as an object not of astronomy, or even as a material object at all. Instead, the sun is an "object" of thought, which is to say an abstraction. It is this quality of "abstraction" that renders the sun "inconceivable." It follows that when "man" is considered not as subject but as object of thought he becomes in Canto X, a "major abstraction." "The major abstraction," Stevens writes, "is the idea of man /And major man is its exponent, abler in the abstract than in his singular" (CP 336). It is in this state of "abstraction," according to Stevens, blank of particular, that man is able "plainly to propound" (CP 336).

Just as Kant is seen to argue for the "uniqueness of space" in an attempt to "eliminate the idea that each subject's outer intuitions are located in a private space that is not spatially related to the private spaces and outer intuitions of other subjects" (Collins 64), Stevens imagines for us an abstract consciousness, which becomes the "unique space" wherein all of our "private spaces" may intersect and ultimately be absorbed. "Spaces," Kant has argued, "have to be considered to be parts of and not instances of space" (as

quoted in Collins 65), just as for Stevens our “private spaces” are expressed more “ably” through the “idea of man” (CP 336). “Happy fecundity,” he says of that “major abstraction,” “flor-abundant force, / In being more than an exception, part, / Though an heroic part, of the communal, / The major abstraction is the communal...” (CP 336). It is within this space of “abstraction” that Stevens personifies the poetic form:

...Who is it?

What rabbi, grown furious with human wish,
 What chieftain, walking by himself, crying
 Most miserable, most victorious ,

Does not see these separate figures one by one,
 And yet see only one, in his old coat,
 His slouching pantaloons, beyond the town,

Looking for what was, where it used to be?
 Cloudless in the morning. It is he. The man
 In that old coat, those sagging pantaloons,

It is of him, ephebe, to make, to confect
 The final elegance, not to console
 Nor sanctify, but plainly to propound (CP 336).

Conversely, but not incongruously, it is within the space of language— of poetry— itself that Stevens claims we may also be able to “find ourselves” (Riddel 11), and it is this attention to an “intrinsic” space of abstraction that defines him against a generation of imagists and objectivists. Stevens was never, like Williams, “so much astonished by the ‘thinginess’ of nature as by the creativeness of imagination” (12), writes critic Joseph Riddel. “He was never so much attracted by the discovery of ‘things as they are’...as by the *discovery of himself in the act of discovery*” (12, emphasis added).

It is this same process that entrances Barthes in his perception of the photograph of his mother as a child, in which he discovers himself “in the act of discovering” within that photograph something that “was indeed essential” (CL 71). In the act of looking for what

was, in the place that it *used to be*, Barthes is startled to find it elsewhere. He describes this process of “discovery” in the following passage:

The Greeks entered into Death backward: what they had before them was their past. In the same way I worked back through a life, not my own, but the life of someone I love. Starting from her latest image, taken the summer before her death (so tired, so noble, sitting in front of the door of our house, surrounded by my friends), I arrived, traversing three-quarters of a century, at the image of a child: I stare intensely at the Sovereign Good of childhood, of the mother, of the mother-as-child. Of course I was then losing her twice over, in her final fatigue and in her first photograph, for me the last; but it was also at this moment that everything turned around and I discovered her *as into herself*... (CL 71).

“As into herself” proposes the notion of “essence,” which Barthes himself has already suggested, but it is also indicative of the space of interiority developed by Stevens: space that is not so much a “private space” in the Kantian model as a “uniqueness of space” wherein all things and subjects are not instances, but parts; that is, a space greater than any contained within an individual, and one that may become evident in the split identity afforded by the death of the photograph’s subject. Barthes recognizes an “essence”—discovers his mother “as into herself”—because he is able to “discover” her *as an abstraction*, as part of a “shared system of representation” of which he himself is also part. He becomes, through this process of discovery, an abstraction himself: “in his old coat, his slouching pantaloons,” located now *beyond any particular representation*, “beyond the town, Looking for what was, where it used to be...” Of course, he may only find and experience “what was” in an abstract state: once he moves to the particular, once he attempts a detailed examination of the same photograph (which has just a moment ago

caused him to exclaim with such delight and assurance: “There she is! She’s really there!” [CL 99]), his assuredness begins immediately to falter. Inspired, however, by his identification with the subject in its abstraction, he desires a return to that initial state of identification and believes that still further knowledge of the subject may be possible: “I want,” he writes, “to enlarge this face in order to see it better, to understand it better, to know its truth” (CL 99). But it is here that the photograph re-asserts its illusory dimension: its very *flatness*, “platitudinous in the true sense of the word” (CL 106). “Alas,” Barthes admits of his attempt to know his mother’s image, “however hard I look, I discover nothing: if I enlarge, I see nothing but the grain of the paper...In front of the Winter Garden Photograph I am a bad dreamer who vainly holds out his arms toward the possession of the image...Such is the Photograph: it cannot *say* what it lets us see” (Barthes 100). Here Barthes discovers, in practice, the “hallucinatory” property of the photograph (CL 115).

A hallucination of an object is something that becomes possible, however, only through the recombination of concrete items perceived in reality. That is, only after their initial apprehension in reality can objects *reappear* in hallucination, imagination, or dream. Hallucination cannot be considered a pure “unreality”; therefore, Barthes’s experience of his mother’s “essence,” that “kindness” he recognized so powerfully, is not an *unreal* experience but one produced by an initial apprehension of the “kindness” that he identified with her in reality. As Kant had proposed, it is because “inner” things must necessarily be representative in this way of some initial apprehension of “outer” things that the distinction between the two becomes increasingly vague. For him, “the problem of hallucination” becomes, as Arthur Collins explains, “...not that the object exists but only in the mind,” but that “the object does not exist at all” (77). In *Otherwise than Being*, Emmanuel Levinas claims that it was Kant who showed “in the very objectivity of an object its phenomenality”

by demonstrating the incompatibility between the conception of temporal succession and “the in-temporal (or synchronic?) series conceived by the understanding of the other” (17). While Heidegger and Hegel, in an effort to “denounce the idea of a subjectivity irreducible to essence,” attempted to re-introduce temporality into the conception of being—thus positing that everything should be understood to fall under the dominion of (for Hegel) the Absolute, or (for Heidegger) *Dasein*: those modes by which “essence manifests itself” (17)—Levinas, on the contrary, is concerned with what exceeds or is “*otherwise than being*” (17). He writes:

Our inquiry concerned with the *otherwise than being* catches sight, in the very hypostasis of a subject, its subjectification, of an ex-ception, a null-site on the hither side of the negativity which is always speculatively recuperable, an outside of the absolute which can no longer be stated in terms of being(17).

It is this ex-ceptional space, “*otherwise than being*,” that Barthes is confronted with in the Winter Garden Photograph. The impasse confronting him is clearly not that what he recognizes in the photograph does not exist for him, but that it does not *exist*. “In this little girl’s image I saw the kindness which had formed her immediately and forever” (CL 69), says Barthes of his discovery. Yet he can find “nothing” in the space of the photograph—characterized by its perfect flatness—to correspond to the reality that he apprehends. Still, as he pores over the enlarged photograph, faced with nothing more substantial than the “grain of the paper,” Barthes is still able to perceive those “lineaments of truth” (CL 100). This “truth” that Barthes discovers through the revelation in the photograph of his mother’s *actual* kindness can be profitably understood along the lines of Levinas’s notion of *goodness*, which is always-ever in excess of Being. “Arising at the apex of essence, goodness is *other* than being,” writes Levinas:

It no longer keeps accounts; it is not like negativity, which conserves what it negates, in its history ...The exceptional, extra-ordinary, transcendent character of goodness is due to just this break with being and history. To reduce the good to being, to its calculations and its history is to nullify goodness. The ever-possible sliding between subjectivity and being, of which subjectivity would be but a mode, the equivalence of two languages, stops here. Goodness gives to subjectivity its irreducible signification (18).

The “null-site” that Barthes perceives in the Winter Garden Photograph is, then, in direct concordance with the “truth” that he is able to detect within it. It is what remains—*goodness*—finally and utterly *exterior* to being that paradoxically is at last able to reward Barthes with what he seeks in his mother’s photograph: her “irreducible signification.”

An “impossible science”

Stevens’s declaration in 1947 that “It Must Be Abstract” similarly affirms what he had always known but resisted: that it was the most “abstract” of his poetry that held the promise, for both himself and his readers, of the most individuated truth. For Stevens, it is, indeed, *through* the abstraction itself that poetry becomes highly personal and that we may “find ourselves” (Riddel 11). But the process of doing so is, at the very least, a difficult and ambiguous one due to the fact that the space we are provided with is none other than the abstract space wherein, like the photograph, the poem *cannot say* “what it lets us see” (Barthes, CL, 100).

DeSales Harrison, in his book *The End of The Mind*, explores the way that Stevens works to push past intelligibility into intuitive reality *beyond* the mind—a territory in which we learn what we “cannot learn, cannot know, cannot do with words”(Harrison 68).

“Stevens,” Harrison says, “dedicates himself to the task of determining how his writing can preserve a degree of ‘imagelessness,’ of hesitation on the brink of representation” (76). He does so by resisting any attempt to *describe* “imagelessness,” instead attempting to *enact* or embody it (77). A nod to the Emersonian influence on Stevens—to the impulse forward that Stevens and other artists inherited from Emerson’s insistence that “life only avails, not the having lived”; that “power ceases in the instant of repose” (SELP 163)—is evident in Harrison’s reading of Stevens’s poetry. In “Montrachet-le-Jardin,” Stevens describes the wind as a “never rounding O” (Stevens 237), and Harrison asserts that “the challenge for the poet is to find a way to keep the wind a ‘never rounded O,’ to preserve within the letter ‘O’ an attribute of voicelessness, of the zero, or the surd” (77). The use of “alphabetical elements” (Harrison 77) in Stevens’s poetry produces a precision so extreme that it becomes an abstraction, thus mimicking the fate of the photograph, which in its specificity loses hold of significance: “of all the objects in the world: why choose (why photograph) this object, this photograph, rather than some other?” (Barthes, CL 6). “The A B C of being” (CP 257), as expressed in Stevens’s poem “The Motive for Metaphor,” identifies the “literally *literal* ‘here’ of speech” in which Stevens seeks to locate the “primary nakedness” of language (Harrison 77). At the end of poem, the “vital, arrogant, fatal, dominant X” (CP 357) serves as this “primary nakedness”: the *blankness* toward which Stevens turns again and again in his poems. It expresses a “tear or pucker in speech” (Harrison 80), the expression of which can be managed only by “*writing X* instead of *saying* what *X* stands for” (Harrison 80). It is in this way that the poem acts as an image, manifesting in itself the same “absence-as-presence” identifiable in the photograph. *X* becomes a blank within the poem, an abstraction in which the reader is able to “find” herself—in which, for brief moments, there exists the potential for her to experience “the truth for me” (Barthes, CL 110).

But, as Harrison points out,

even if one acknowledges that any description of reality is by definition at a remove from reality...a focus on the (joyous, infinite) possibilities of profusion distracts from the *X*'s inherent opacity, the fact that *X* stands for something which, by definition, cannot be. The *X* is not a site to be filled with any number of possible substitutions, but the site of a removal, a fundamental absence, by definition undecipherable, imageless, a 'never-rounding' O (Harrison 80).

The *X* is also, then, "platitudinous in the true sense of the word" (Barthes, CL 106). Its "truth" may be immediately perceived, but if examined further there will, again, be "nothing to discover." However, "nothing" here can be understood to possess a certain value—to exist not as a description but as an "enactment" of "absence," which is not and cannot be a "thing in itself" but must necessarily exist as "presence," in a constant *process* of being or non-being. It is remaining aware of this *process*, maintaining the 'never rounding O' (Harrison 80) of language, that Harrison identifies as the true "challenge for the poet" (77).

Even in *Harmonium*, Stevens demonstrates a concern for providing a space within his work for the "attribute of voicelessness" (Harrison 77). This is, again, most conspicuously demonstrated by the "The Snow Man," where the "nothing that is" constitutes both a quantity and a lack. As Harrison goes on to explain, this space—the "never rounding O"—is both vacuum and source. "As a vacuum, it draws description toward itself, though it can never be filled. As a source, it resembles a white-hot solar origin, like 'the inconceivable idea of the sun'" (81). In a similar way the photograph is involved in an infinite process of referring to its own absence, of thus creating endlessly its own "vacuum of referentiality" that it can never substantially fill. "The Photograph,"

Barthes says, “mechanically repeats what could never be repeated existentially. In the Photograph, the event is never transcended for the sake of something else: The Photograph always leads the corpus I need back to the body I see; it is the absolute particular, the sovereign contingency, matte and somehow stupid, the *This...*(this photograph, and not Photography)” (CL 4).

Yet it is within the specificity—indeed, because of the specificity, the “this-ness” of the Winter Garden Photograph—that Barthes is able to discover the “lineaments of truth” (CL 100). The “essence” of the impossible thing that he had sought is finally yielded to him—if only in a hallucinatory flash, and outside of any disappointing “likeness,” or other ordinary method of representation. “Likeness leaves me unsatisfied and somehow skeptical” (CL 103), writes Barthes, explaining that “the sad disappointment” (CL 103) he experienced in looking at the photographs of his mother (photographs which presented him with nothing other than a “likeness” to the woman that he knew) did not yield to him anything he felt to be actually “true” about that woman at all. “I missed her being,” he writes, “and therefore I missed her altogether” (CL 66)⁷. When an image is unable to

⁷ “[N]othing,” Freud declared, “can be apprehended in effigie, in absentia” and yet at the same time *transference* (the redirection of feelings from one subject or object to another), which is of course the basis of language itself, must be understood as being *characterised by* absence, by the creation or maintenance of an “effigy” of the real. In chapter four of his *The Four fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, “Tuché and Automaton,” Lacan explains that the term “*tuché*”—a term he borrows from Aristotle who had used it “in his search for cause” (53)—represents for him “the real as encounter—the encounter in so far as it may be missed, in so far as it is essentially the missed encounter” (55). This conception of “the missed encounter” first arose in the discourse of psychoanalysis in relation to trauma. And “[i]s it not remarkable,” as Lacan asks, “that, at the origin of the analytic experience, the real should have presented itself in the form of that which is unassimilable in it—in the form of the trauma, determining all that follows, and imposing on it an apparently accidental origin? We are now at the heart of what may enable us to understand the radical character of the conflictual notion introduced by the opposition of the pleasure principle and the reality principle—which is why we cannot conceive the reality principle as having, by virtue of its ascendancy, the last word” (55). “The missed encounter” supplements Freud’s model of repetition, which is linked to the drives, and in particular to the death drive. The drives will continually circle around the object of their desire but can never coincide with it. “The missed encounter,” which lies at the very heart of this structure, is not merely elusive. Its absence is constitutive of the ‘contact’ with the real described by the term “*tuché*,” of that which lies beyond all signification. But if we are not to simply abandon ourselves to the idea that “*life is a dream*” (55) beyond all possible definitions of “reality,” Lacan urges that we must learn to identify “those radical points in the real” that he refers to as “encounters,” and by which we are able “to conceive reality as

match the original “outer object” the disparity is made apparent by the jarring of that “outer” image with the “inner copy” of that object—a “copy” that continues to exist in the mind of the viewer, a sort of “hallucination” (Collins 77). For this reason, it is in the space of an *abstraction* (which will not jar so forcibly against the “inner copy” of a specific object in the mind) that the particular is found: “the only (photograph) which has given me the splendour of her truth,” Barthes says of his mother, “is precisely a lost, remote photograph, one which does not look ‘like’ her, the photograph of a child I never knew” (CL 103). This problem of “likeness” within, and to, a perceived reality—as well as the problem of “identifying” that reality—is central to Barthes’s study. “In order to designate reality,” he writes in the opening pages of *Camera Lucida*, “Buddhism says *sunya*, the void; but better still: *tathata*, as Alan Watts has it, the fact of being this, of being thus, of being so; *tat* means *that* in Sanskrit and suggests the gesture of a child pointing his finger at something and saying: *that, there it is, lo!* But says nothing else” (CL 4-5).

It is toward such a quality of “this-ness” that the blankness Stevens develops in his poetry over the course of his career finally yields. The “absolute particular...the *This*” (CL 4), articulated by Barthes’s analysis of photography is strikingly similar to what is arrived at in Stevens’s “The Man on the Dump” from *Parts of a World*: “Where was it one first heard of truth? The the” (CP 186).

According to Harrison, “The the” can be read not only as “a designation and a specification” but as “a shying away from the definition promised by the definite article.[...] ‘The the’ enacts a pull backward from designation, away from the image,” so

unterlegt, untertragen, which, with the superb ambiguity of the French language, appear to be translated by the same word—*souffrance* [“in suspense,” in abeyance,” “awaiting attention,” “pending”]” (55-56). Reality is always pending, awaiting our attention, and can be apprehended only through the “experience of rupture” inherent to the unconscious, that experience of a “non-temporal locus” *between* perception and consciousness, a locus which, Lacan concludes, “forces us to posit what Freud calls, in homage to Fechner [...] the idea of another locality, another space, another scene, *the between perception and consciousness*” (56).

that what is “ultimately asserted...is not so much the lack of ‘proper names in the language of poetry,’ but the ‘incipient realizations’ accomplished by such a pull away from intelligibility” (76). It is again the extremity of the designation that allows the poem to retreat from designation entirely. So it is in its abstraction, in the discovery of its own “blankness,” that the poem is able to create a space of absence within which we may suddenly and for brief, necessarily unrestful, moments “find ourselves”—as though inhabiting, for an instant, “the nothing that is” (Stevens, 8). We experience this “nothing” not as a private “instance” but rather as a “part” (Collins 65) of that greatest abstraction, a “uniqueness of space” (Collins 64) that must necessarily remain opaque and unknowable: “a fundamental absence” (Harrison 80). It is, after all, the very insatiability of this absence that allows us to move beyond representation into the exposed “blankness” between reality (“*that-has-been*”) and truth (“*there-she-is!*”) and discover, therein, “*the impossible science of the unique being*” (Barthes, CL 71). As Levinas writes of the paradoxical insistence with which that which is, and must remain, “beyond being” always-ever shows itself in being, “in the said”: “This diachrony is itself an enigma: the beyond being does and does not revert to ontology; the statement, the beyond, the infinite, becomes and does not become a meaning of being” (OTB 19).

Returning again to “Re-Statement of Romance,” we can, by contrast, clearly determine the way that this enigma of “blankness,” as it pertains to the individual in Stevens’s poetry, is expressed. Although what is most certain is the self (“I perceive myself best...”[CP 118]), it is only through the perception of the unknowable that this self is perceived. Knowledge in the poem—just as in Wordsworthian romanticism—can be seen, then, to both come from and return to the unknown. It is the unwritten (absent) “source,” from which both the “I” and the “you” in the poem must necessarily have attained their

reflected “pale light” and which acts as the “central blank, both source and absence” (Harrison 81), that is so recurrent in Stevens’s poetry. Therefore, the poem’s “re-statement” of this traditional romantic origin/return split lies not in the refusal of such an infinite process, but in the fact that the power of perceiving that process has been shifted *away* from the unknown and onto the individual: “The night knows nothing” (CP 118); it is the self that perceives best. By asserting for the “I” of the poem an Emersonian supremacy, allowing it to be “part or parcel of God” (Emerson, SELP 18), Stevens seeks to establish the imagination as one of “the great *human* powers” (CP 727, emphasis added), creating for it a space that is at once “source and absence” (Harrison 81) and therefore independent from any other system of imposed meaning—religious or partisan. “One sits and beats an old tin can, lard pail,” says the man on the dump:

One beats and beats for that which one believes.
That’s what one wants to get near. Could it after all
Be merely oneself...? (CP 185)

A new romance has ripened for Stevens in *Parts of a World*. The romance of a space of exploration, en-actment—if not of ultimate understanding—of that which would continue to *exceed* the rational, cognitive “order” of the world (and there was nothing after the war but a sense of precisely this excess). This new romance did not, however, fully surrender the pre-War hope that would remain fundamental to Stevens: that by dissolving “all mean egotism” (Emerson, SELP 18) and assuming an *abstract* quality, the “human” might still achieve a transcendent power: a “liberty of the mind” (Stevens 727), “which I shall call, in conclusion, the photographic *ecstasy*” (Barthes 119)

Chapter Five: The Act

One reads poetry with ones nerves

—Wallace Stevens (CP 919).

The transcendent “liberty of mind” (CP 727) that Stevens sought to achieve, via poetry, beyond the singular and objective, can be profitably understood in the terms that Emmanuel Levinas, in *Totality and Infinity*, uses to describe the movement, via “representation” itself, beyond “theory” or “theoretical” relation. “Theory,” as that which remains “knowledge, relationship,” *specifically* disallows, according to Levinas, “all ecstatic behaviour” and, more specifically, “the entering into the Beyond, by ecstasy” (48). It remains tied to singularity, to the separation between the “I” and the “Other,” as well as between “I” and “God.”¹ “Representation” is privileged because it offers the possibility, not of accessing or constituting a “primordial relation with being,” but of “recalling” exactly this space of separation, within which Levinas locates “the idea of the infinite.” This idea is crucial to any “ecstatic” transcendence beyond the “theoretical,” or “known,” and is alone “exceptional,” Levinas writes—distinguishable from other ideas, including “mathematical and moral notions”—in that “its *ideatum* surpasses its idea [...] The distance that separates *ideatum* and idea here constitutes the content of the *ideatum* itself” (49). Infinity, is, therefore, according to Levinas: “absolutely other. The transcendent is the sole *ideatum* of which there can be only an idea in us; it is infinitely removed from its idea, that is, exterior, because it is infinite” (49). To think of it, to think “the infinite, the transcendent, the Stranger, is hence not to think an object,” Levinas concludes. “But”—and this last remark would no doubt have resonated strongly with Stevens in the latter part of his career— “to think what does not have the lineaments of an object is in reality to do more or better than think” (49).

¹ This separation is one that Levinas links to what he refers to as “the ambiguity of Descartes’ first evidence” whereby the “I” and “God” are revealed as “two distinct moments of evidence,” which, while “mutually founding one another” never actually “merge” (TI 48).

“After the final no, there comes a yes”

It is into this negative-space of representation, beyond “the lineaments of an object”—a space of “infinite remove”—that Stevens invites us within “The Ultimate Poem is Abstract” from *The Auroras of Autumn*. In keeping with the poem’s “Ultimate” aim, the poem begins not with an objective statement, but with an abstract question: “This day writhes with what?” This question is addressed to us by a comic “lecturer” who is presenting on the following topic: “This Beautiful World of Ours.” Stevens recounts in the poem the manner in which his fictional lecturer “composes himself,” then “hems the planet rose and haws it ripe, // And red and right” (CP 369). It is “the question which is in point” we are assured, so that “if the day writhes, it is not with revelations.” A “revelation,” would, of course, be quite sideways to the theme. “One goes on asking questions,” Stevens writes. “That, then, is one / Of the categories” (CP 369). But it is here that there is a crucial turning point within the poem: “So said,” the poem continues, “this placid space is changed.” As soon as the “category” of questions in and of themselves—considered as finally separate from any anticipated “revelation”—is acknowledged, we move into a quite different realm; the title of the lecture, which has kept us at some remove from any genuine consideration of the subject matter (“This Beautiful World” might as well be a shiny artefact, with which we ourselves have very little to do, and know, on our own, very little about), loses its comic hold and we actually enter into consideration of the subject:

...It is not so blue as we thought. To be blue,
There must be no questions. It is an intellect
Of windings round and dodges to and fro,

Writhings in wrong obliques and distances,
Not an intellect in which we are fleet: present
Everywhere in space at once, cloud-pole

Of communication. It would be enough
If we were ever, just once, at the middle, fixed
In This Beautiful World Of Ours and not as now,

Helplessly at the edge, enough to be
 Complete, because at the middle, if only in sense,
 And in that enormous sense, merely enjoy (CP 371).

Stevens manages, within the brief space of this poem, to designate an intermediate region of *différance* between being and representation of being, Theory and experience, and finally between the immediate moment of the poem—always “hopelessly at the edge”—and the idealized fixity of an imagined centre. The “idea of the infinite” resides, finally, *not* in the inaccessible ecstatic space the poem gestures toward, but cannot arrive at—where one might “merely enjoy”—but in the relation between the hopeless “edge” of the present moment and an absent “fixity” at the centre. It is the elaboration of a negative-space between and inclusive of centre and edge that allows for the configuration of what *is* arrived at: the “enormous sense” of that relation. The poem can be seen, in this regard, to be in conversation with “Anecdote of a Jar”—where the contingent, temporary stability of the jar lends shape to the “slovenly wilderness” of abstractions that surround it. In “The Ultimate Poem is Abstract” this limited stability of an imagined fixity is further displaced—existing only in the wistful conditional, “If we were ever, just once...” Crucially for the realization of the poem’s “ultimate” abstraction, however, that stability is not entirely abandoned. It is indeed critical to the poem that the “enormous sense” of divine “enjoyment” arrived at in the final lines is located within the structure that the lecturer imposes—within the quotation marks, so to speak, of his lecture’s preposterous title. It is due to the imposition of this structure that the ideal, fixed “middle-point” that provides the discussion’s focus manages to escape the limits of the discussion entirely. The poem’s *failure* to locate the infinite as a fixed point—a centre, which could not possibly hold—is what moves us finally *beyond* that fixed point and therefore constitutes its *success* at evoking an “enormous sense” of the infinite. What is delineated by the poem is a space

of the *difference of representation itself*, in which “the middle,” the “fixed” exceeds the very “lineaments” by which it seeks to be bound. Again, Levinas: “The infinite in the finite, the more in the less, which is accomplished by the idea of infinity, is produced as Desire—not a Desire that the possession of the Desirable slakes, but the Desire for the Infinite which the desirable arouses rather than satisfies. A desire perfectly disinterested (goodness)” (TI 50).

What is finally expressed in this poem is, once again, similarly articulated in Barthes’ analysis of the Winter Garden Photograph wherein he locates—in the “infinite” trace of his mother’s “goodness”—the “truth” that he manages at last to recognize. It is not, indeed, the “truth” or the “infinite” at all—nor is it even a desire for the “truth” or the “infinite.” It is, instead, simply, *desire*. Within the delineation of this space of desire resides, for Stevens, not only a disinterested goodness—that which may be “merely enjoyed”—but *also* the possibility of authentic *action*. Recall here the echo: “poesis, poesis,” syllables which are described by Stevens in “Large Red Man Reading,” as the very “syllables of (the) law” when it comes to “being and its expressing” (CP 365). The “law” referred to here is, importantly, written *in potential*—in “the literal characters, the vatic lines,” which require “feeling” in order to be “spoken” (CP 365). It is this *feeling* which is, as the last line concludes, “what they had lacked” (CP 365), and this *feeling* that is required for the “literal characters” of the text to take on the fullness of “being and its expressing” (CP 365). Aspiring, and eventually (perhaps) attaining this *feeling*, is of course never a process that can be categorically complete; it is, instead, an ongoing process, the result of which the text promises the *possibility* of, but cannot possibly produce. The text itself must always remain a site of un-satiated desire—but it is the very presence of this *absence*, this “lack,” that guarantees that the site of the text will remain active and potential. It is for this reason that desire in Stevens’s poetry is consistently portrayed as insatiable—existing not

in order to be fulfilled, but instead in order to promote itself, constantly and consistently, as a space (always potential) of *desire itself*.

As is shown in “The Ultimate Poem is Abstract” this space of desire is often created by an oscillation between the two points of reference that describe a middle-space. This oscillation is perhaps most systematically rendered in “The Well Dressed Man with a Beard,” from *Parts of a World*. “After the final no there comes a yes, / And on that yes the future world depends,” the poem begins, and with this declaration Stevens establishes the conflict that will continue throughout the poem, culminating in the definitive irresolution of the poem’s final line: “It can never be satisfied, the mind, never” (CP 224).

It is indeed by juxtaposing, from the start, the assured “yes” of the present moment of—simply—being, against an accompanying critical consciousness of the fallibility of that being (of that which is unknown, and ultimately *beyond being*) that Stevens arrives at his conclusion. In other words, the central conflict explored in the poem is the mind’s impulse, on the one hand, to understand itself as existing solely within the present moment—in the “yes” of a passive, affirmative, receipt of its experience of being and time—and on the other, due to a *consciousness* of that reception, to spatialize and objectify its experience; ultimately, that is, to *reject*, like the ticking of a clock, each present moment in turn. It is this latter impulse, of course, that gives rise to the subject’s experience not of time, but of *duration*.

This conflict between the simply “being” of time and a “consciousness” of duration, of a being *in* time is fundamental for Stevens, contributing to a fixation on the idea of absence and lack that has led many critics to complain that the work remains ultimately too abstract, and—ungrounded in the real world—remote and ineffective. Even Randall Jarrell, who was usually sympathetic to Stevens’s work, complained that he was “obsessed with lack, a lack at last almost taken for granted, that he himself automatically supplies” (as

quoted in McLeod 37). This obsession with absence and lack—along with its corresponding fixation on the perennial dissatisfaction of the mind that must continuously grapple with it—must, I argue, be understood neither in terms of a loss, nor as intellectual failure, or despondency. Instead, the “lack” that is delineated and explored in Stevens’s work must be considered as an exploration and representation of the process by which we experience *being itself*, a process which is inherently *active*, and upon which all possibility of action depends. As Stefan Holander observes of “The Man on the Dump,” the line “One beats and beats for that which one believes” (CP 185) hinges on the fact that the word “for” does *not* indicate an objective set of beliefs that have been previously delineated. Indeed, the whole phrasing, “for that which” (preposition-pronoun-relative pronoun) describes the sequence through which the reader must move toward the unnamed and the unnameable. The ambiguity that results from the phrasing serves, Holander observes, to signify “both end and origin of poetry’s ‘beating’; an origin which is not only as yet unformulated but in principle unattainable. It, whatever it is, will not let itself be possessed, but remains something one ‘wants to get near’” (118).

In another example, “The Well Dressed Man with the Beard,” the speaker’s longing for a single solid “thing”—“One thing remaining, infallible, would be / Enough! Ah! Douce campagna of that thing” (224)—is undercut by a knowledge of the ultimate fallibility of that “thing.” But though the speaker laments this, it is apparent that it is *not*, in fact, the “thing” itself on which he ultimately depends, but *his own longing*. Were the subject to experience or enact any one “thing” as infallible, finally “a thing affirmed,” and give up the vacillation between the “yes” and “no” of his experience (time understood as duration) that experience—and therefore his own subjectivity—would be immediately annulled. It is *not* upon the “yes” in itself, then, that “the future world depends,” but—as the opening lines

more precisely suggest—upon a recommencement of the *conflict* by the “yes” that the “final no” has attempted to quell.

Just as Freud’s death drive cannot take the easiest route—ending the organism’s life immediately—but must instead, due to an opposing repetition compulsion, continuously *defer* its own end,² so, too, the mind is as unable to reject the *idea* of the possible solidity, and durability, of the “thing” (its own subjectivity, its thoughts, and its language included) as it is to find adequately stable ground on which to support that idea. So that at the same time that the speaker of Stevens’s poem is impelled to invent the critical “no,” his conflicting desire for an affirming “yes” does not permit the “no” to take ultimate hold. That is, the “finality” of the “no”—the mind’s own consciousness of itself—is undone at once by a simultaneous consciousness of its limits, and therefore the limits of its own “final” assertion. “After the final no, there comes a yes”: the “afterwards” of a consciousness that is able to assert itself in this way is always assured ahead of time, so that the mind is obliged to run continuously, and without recourse, between the assured consciousness of duration and the always-ever “yes” of simple *existent*-being.

The “eternal child”

The human species, writes Giorgio Agamben in *Idea of Prose* (1995), has ultimately been “cast out of himself”; that is, unlike other living beings who “develop only

² “It would be in contradiction to the conservative nature of the instincts,” Freud assures us in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, “if the goal of life were a state of things which had never yet been attained. On the contrary, it must be an old state of things, an initial state from which the living entity has at one time or other departed and to which it is striving to return, by the circuitous paths along which its development leads. If we are to take it as a truth that knows no exception that everything living dies for internal reasons—becomes inorganic once again—then we shall be compelled to say that ‘*the aim of all life is death*’ and looking backwards, that ‘*inanimate things existed before living ones*’” (45-46). Freud explains that the “hypothesis of self-preservative instincts,” which seems to be starkly opposed to the idea that “the instinctual life as a whole serves to bring about death,” is explained through “the fact that the organism wishes to die only in its own fashion. [...] Hence arises the paradoxical situation that the living organism struggles most energetically against events (dangers, in fact) which might help it to attain its life’s aim rapidly—by a kind of short-circuit. Such behaviour is, however, precisely what characterizes purely instinctual as contrasted with intelligent efforts (47).

infinitely repeatable possibilities fixed in (their) genetic code,” the human species is released, not into a particular *environment* to which he is genetically adapted, “but for the first time into a *world*” (96). In a chapter titled “The Idea of Infancy,” Agamben’s discussion hinges on the neoteny exhibited by the *axolotl*,³ a species of albino salamander native to the freshwater lakes of Mexico. Neoteny is the property by which an organism reaches full sexual maturation without undergoing the process of metamorphosis. The *axolotl*’s neoteny is particularly interesting to medical scientists today in that it is linked to the organism’s remarkable ability to regenerate lost or damaged limbs (when metamorphosis has been artificially triggered in axolotls by scientists this ability has been found to decrease significantly). The discovery of neoteny, as Agamben explains, has also provided scientists with substantial—and surprising—clues to the human being’s own evolutionary development: “It is now supposed,” he writes, “that man did not evolve from individual adults but from the young of a primate which, like the *axolotl*, had prematurely acquired the capacity for reproduction [...] Characteristics which in primates are transitory became final in man, thereby in some way giving rise, in flesh and blood, to a kind of eternal child” (96). Rather than abiding strictly by genetic law, the neotenic infant, prolonging its larval state “indefinitely,” is able, instead, “to pay attention precisely to what has not been written, to somatic possibilities that are arbitrary and uncodified” (96).

³ Julio Cortazar’s short story “Axolotl” provides an interesting fictional counterpoint to Agamben’s discussion. The story depicts a man who, obsessed by the axolotls at the Jardin des Plantes in Paris, goes to visit them every day and eventually, due to the extremity of his identification with them, becomes one. He then observes—from his new position behind the glass—his human “self” observing his axolotl “self.” Once he has metamorphosed into an axolotl the human “self’s” interest in the axolotl wanes, and the axolotl “self” observes that he comes to visit less and less. The story ultimately emphasizes the continuously regenerative process of creative identification and representation, and the crucial role of the imagination. In speaking of his relationship with his former “self,” the protagonist (speaking from the perspective of an axolotl) concludes: “I am an axolotl for good now, and if I think like a man it’s only because every axolotl thinks like a man inside his rosy stone semblance. I believe that all this succeeded in communicating something to him in those first days, when I was still he. And in this final solitude to which he no longer comes, I console myself by thinking that perhaps he is going to write a story about us, that, believing he’s making up a story, he’s going to write all this about axolotls” (9).

Finding himself in this condition—free from “genetic prescription” but simultaneously having “nothing to say or express,” the human being begins, “like Adam,” to *name things* (96-97). “In naming,” writes Agamben, “man is tied to infancy, he is for ever linked to an openness that transcends every specific destiny and every genetic calling” (97). It is precisely this proto-transcendent “openness” that transforms the “yes” of a genetically-prescribed existence into an active, distinguishing, “no” of Being. The “no” is what names; it is what, in Agamben’s words, is “truly *listening* to being” (96, emphasis added) rather than simply just (a closed and passive “yes”) *being*.

Drawing from Heidegger’s exploration of the differences between man and animal in *Being and Time*, Agamben writes in a later text, *The Open*: “Dasein is simply an animal that has learned to become bored, it has awakened from its own captivation to its own captivation. This awakening of the living being to its own being-captivated, this anxious and resolute opening to a not-open, is the human” (70). It is this “opening to a not-open” that makes room, as Agamben further argues, for the development of human language—as well as, and by the same route, for the unconsummated desire of Stevens’s dissatisfied mind.

Indeed, the desire that takes shape in many of Stevens’s later poems is precisely a desire for *language itself* to become “thing”; fixed, infallibly, to meaning. “And being unhappy, talk of happiness,” he writes in “Extracts from Addresses...”, “And, talking of happiness, know that it means / That the mind is the end and must be satisfied” (CP 232). Language, of course, always falls short of this—and every—goal. “Talking” of happiness does not, and *cannot* ever take the place of the experience itself that is expressed as or interpretable as such, and even if the mind, as in “Extracts to Adresses...” “[s]ometimes at

sleepy middays” actually *does* succeed at producing a “redeeming thought,” the thought itself is produced, as Stevens writes, “too vaguely” to be written down (CP 232).

Language cannot help but fall short of experience,⁴ because, as Agamben helps to make clear, it is *language itself* that defines the human condition in its perpetual openness to “that which has not been written” (TO 96). It is this perpetual openness—to a closedness, to the *limitations* of the language by which, and *through* which, the human has the capacity to *be* open—that allows for the possibility in the first place of the defining “no”; indeed, for definition at all. The possibility of the mind’s satisfaction is at once both revealed and concealed, as the (open) *idea* of the “thing” is set at odds with a (closed) reality of that which refuses to be named, leading ultimately, of course, to the “final no” with which Stevens concludes “The Well Dressed Man with a Beard”: “it can never be satisfied, the mind, never” (CP 224).

But, of course, after “the final no, there comes a yes.” Indeed, “The Well Dressed Man with the Beard” is constructed with its own in-built repetition-compulsion, and it is upon this *repetition*, on the perpetuation of a fundamental conflict rather than any resolution to that conflict, that—like “the future world”—the poem depends.

Even so, the animal (that is, bare, biological life) has been traditionally characterized in the West only in terms of the “yes” of being—reserving the “no” of judgement for the uniquely human. In Rilke’s eighth *Duino Elegy*, for example, which Heidegger takes up in his own analysis, and which, in turn, is taken up by Agamben in *The*

⁴ That this is consistently true in Stevens is precisely why Bloom has identified him so definitively with the Romantic tradition. The vibrancy of poetic inspiration and experience is, as it was for Shelley, always “transitory”—excessive of the poet’s efforts to transcribe it except in “inconstant” bursts. In *The Defence of Poetry*, Shelley had written: “the mind in creation is as a fading coal which some invisible influence, like an inconstant wind, awakens to transitory brightness” (as quoted in Bloom, TVC 302). For both poets experience remains exterior to expression, and yet the two are integral to one another. As Bloom reminds us regarding the line by Shelley quoted above, “the poem’s colour still comes from the power within the mind” (TVC 302).

Open, the animal—in distinct contrast to man, who is depicted as “facing opposite” his world—is described as immersed within a “nowhere without the no” (57). The human being, alone, says “no.” The human being, alone, in saying no, is cast out of his own environment, and—in being set at odds, in facing *opposite* his own world—thereby permitted to *enter it*.

The world that the human being enters, however, will be perpetually split, by the very act of his conceiving it, between the blunt facticity of its thing-ness (which it necessarily retains), and the appropriation of the concept of “thing-ness” into human consciousness and language. It is precisely this *awareness* and *appropriation* of “thing-ness” by the human—along with a simultaneous awareness that that “thing-ness” can never resolve itself in the *thing itself* (nor language in experience, nor consciousness of Being in the bare fact of being at all) that both constitutes the “world” for the human and casts him out of it. No matter how much he may desire a resolution to this fundamental split, resolution is made functionally impossible for the human by his very *conception* of “desire” at all.

A Peculiar Potency

It is precisely this rupture—between thing and “thing,” being and “Being”—that is elaborated upon in “The Well Dressed Man with a Beard,” even down to the poem’s title, where a specificity of the description (which regards, presumably, the *form* of the speaker) fails to correspond directly to the *content* of the speaker’s thoughts or the experiences represented in the poem. This incompatibility between *form* and *content* serves to illustrate a more *fundamental disjuncture*: that between the apperception of the self and the self that exists *beyond* apperception (what Levinas would call *the idea of infinity*) wherein the

speaker constructs for himself (in order to fill the apparent void between the perceivable and the conceivable) the *idea of the mind*. As a result, it is the *mind* to which the speaker subsequently attributes his insatiable desire. As Thomas A. Carlson writes in *The Indiscrete Image: Infinitude and the Creation of the Human*, “the mind’s being-able-to-see surpasses its being-able-to-conceive, and in that excessive gap, which it sees in looking upon itself, the human mind fulfills itself as image of unimaginable possibility” (112).

In keeping with the thinking of Agamben and Heidegger before him, Carlson asserts that it is, indeed, the opening of this “excessive gap” that constitutes the human. “Forever incomplete and indeterminate,” writes Carlson, the “neotenic” human “must invent language and world, must become technological, within the irreducible openness of mortal potential” (199)—an openness that, as Carlson goes on to write, implies of him “both irreducible unknowing and immeasurable responsibility” (117).

Though the perception of Stevens as an “anti-realist, a solipsist, an escapist” persists due to what has long been considered his lack of engagement with the “world of fact,” he remains, despite these claims, as Dan Chiasson writes, “the great poet of the continuity of thought” (63). It is true that Stevens managed to isolate himself from the upheavals of early twentieth century American history with a degree of success remarkable for a poet of the time, especially for one who once ambitiously asserted that he wanted to write poems that would help us to “live our lives” (CP 665), but—as Chiasson suggests—we should not be over-quick to dismiss this ambition, or even its achievement, as unrealistic to Stevens’s poetry.

I would submit, however, adapting Chiasson’s observation, that in fact, ultimately, Stevens is not a poet of thought’s *continuity*, but instead of the *awareness* of thought’s inevitable *discontinuity*. Awareness, that is, of the manner in which the mind is ultimately

split between the “yes” of its passive, repetitive compulsion toward existent-being, and the “no” of its critical awareness of that being: its openness, in other words, to the possibilities, as well as the limitations, of its “world.”

A similar split—between a passive pre-conscious state and the activated critical consciousness of the *cogito*—is formulated by Levinas in *Totality and Infinity*. “Before the cogito existence dreams itself, as though it remained foreign to itself,” writes Levinas. “It is because it suspects that it is dreaming itself that it awakens. The doubt makes it seek certainty” (86). Again, we see here the oscillation between the conscious doubting “no,” (It is all a dream! All has been, or will be, illusion, slid “over the western cataract”! [Stevens, CP 224]) and the irrepressible desire on the part of the cogito itself for the “yes” of *pre-cogito* being; for a pre-conscious time, before words and conception (“Ah! douce campagna, honey in the heart, / Green in the body, out of a pretty phrase, out of a thing believed, a thing affirmed” [Stevens, CP 224]). However much she desires it, however, the cogito will be unable to remain in this pre-conscious dream-space, this “douce campagna” of the “thing affirmed,” for long. Soon she will be returned, having “suspect(ed)” she was dreaming, to the limits of her own fallible, known world: this “openness to (the) closedness,” after all, is what constitutes her Being.

The space of oscillation that is described by Levinas between dream and doubt is precisely the space of oscillation between the “yes” and “final no” of Stevens’s dissatisfied mind—and it is from this space, therefore from the “dissatisfied mind” itself—that language issues. Levinas writes: “In fact signification is maintained only in the breach of the ultimate unity of the satisfied being...Thus consciousness itself has been derived from this breach. The intelligible would result from the non-satisfaction, the provisional indigence of this being, its remaining short of its accomplishment” (TI 95). It is highly “significant,” therefore, that it is within a space of inherent *dis*-satisfaction that the mind of

Stevens's poem, and that language itself, should "sustain itself" (Stevens, CP 224), as it is *precisely* this dissatisfaction, this awareness of the extreme, and always-prior, *fallibility* of human thought—its "irreducible unknowing," and the subsequently always provisional nature of language and other human technology—that constitutes what Carlson has referred to as humanity's "immeasurable responsibility" (117). It is this *dissatisfaction* with what has already been "said" that constitutes the potential of—and the responsibility to—an active, renewable, "saying."

Indeed, according to Jean-Paul Marion, the "greatest danger" that humanity faces today is a predilection for its own violent, exclusionary definition (Carlson 120). "For every *de-finition*⁵ imposes on the human being a finite essence," states Marion, "following from which it always becomes possible to delimit what deserves to remain human from what no longer does" (as quoted in Carlson 121). It is the human capacity not for determinateness (a "no" that remains a "no," imagining that it understands the full import of what it is rejecting), but instead for *indeterminateness* that creates space for the cultivation of the creative, perpetually generative space of the mind as imagined by Stevens—and it is, indeed, the cultivation of this space that may still, as Stevens once hoped, help people to "live their lives." That is, it may help us to continue to exist within the realm of possibility proper to the human: "a possibility irreducible to the horizon of actuality [...] disclosed but invisible in all beings (and nonbeings) just as light is invisibly disclosed in all visible things [...] or language silently spoken in all things said, or Being absently present in all beings" (Carlson 111-112).

⁵ Marion here plays with the French word *finition*, meaning "finish" or "finishing," and often used to refer to a surface coating.

But what does it mean to be concerned primarily with what *exceeds* actuality, what may never properly be contained by the poem at all? “Is there a poem that never reaches words?” asks Wallace Stevens in “Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction,” and indeed it is to the *possibility* of this poem that Stevens is dedicated, rather than to its realization. In “Notes” is enacted—perhaps for the first time, and certainly most overtly—the declaration Stevens had made ten years earlier in *The Man With the Blue Guitar*: “Poetry is the subject of the poem” (CP 144). “Is the poem both peculiar and general?” inquires Stevens further on in the same section of “Notes,” replying: “There’s a meditation there, in which there seems // To be an evasion, a thing not apprehended or / Not apprehended well. Does the poet / Evade us, as in a senseless element?” (CP 343). The tension evident in these lines, between the peculiar and the general, the sensible and the abstract, the singular “I” and that which exceeds the “I,” is of course fundamental to Stevens’s poetics, and is what gives rise, effectively, to a negative-space of representation in the work. This is a space defined *neither* by the “abstract” *nor* by the “concrete,” neither the “I” nor the “non-I,” but that is, instead, inclusive—and generative—of both.

Just as in a photograph, or indeed even a written word on a page, where it is the negative-space of the image and not the imaged *thing* that gives rise to that which is perceived, so it is with the negative-space developed especially in Stevens’s late poems. Importantly, however, it is not a frozen negative-image itself, a stasis of the neither/nor, that Stevens endeavours to explore within this space, but instead the fecund momentum of the “and.” Here there is a synthesis of the abstract and concrete that moves *toward* (“toward” being of course a crucial clue in the title of “Notes” as to the poem’s central concern—a poetics of motion) what at the end of Section IX Stevens articulates as “[t]he peculiar *potency* of the general” (CP 343, emphasis added).

It is this “peculiar potency”—which Stevens describes further, using a characteristic play of language, as a “compound” of “the imagination’s Latin with/ The lingua franca et jocundissima”⁶—that is suggested to be the poet’s true aim. However, it is ambiguous by the section’s end if that ultimate goal is not indeed *also*, and ultimately, an “evasion.” This ambiguity is central to the concerns of the text, as well as to the concerns of the poet; Stevens was plagued throughout his career by the question of the “practical” efficacy of his own poetic aims. Was a meditation on *poetry itself*—the “abstraction” of language from speech so much that it becomes, as Stevens writes, “a speech only a little of the tongue”—indeed a “*potency*,” a veritable “*poetry*” (as in *poesis*, a making), or was it only an evasive, rhetorical move? One that adheres finally neither to the sensible nor to the abstract, but falls instead—in an “intricate evasion” (CP 414)—precisely in the middle? Stevens’s greatest fear would have been precisely this: that his poetry was not, in the end, a *making of* anything at all, but only something *made*. That it was, therefore, in fact, not “poetry” at all, but only a series of “poems.”

Because ultimately Stevens’s poetry is *not* about what can be contained within, or become the “subject” of any “poem,” but about what will always evade both poem and poet, the question of what and *for* what the poem actually speaks is bound to continually recur when considering Stevens’s poetry. It is significant in light of this question that, in “Notes,” Stevens radically distances himself from the voice of the “Canon Aspirin” (a voice that can, in keeping with Harold Bloom, be safely identified with a High Romanticism) precisely at the point that the voice moves *away* from evasion and begins instead to impose

⁶ This “compound” between the English adjective “jocund” and the Italian superlative ‘issima’ is typical of Stevens’s enthusiastic word play. The emphasis on the *jocund* here – the lighthearted, the joyful – underscores the role of “play” itself to Stevens’s conception of language and meaning production, which he saw to be ever-evolving and infinitely malleable.

“orders as he thinks of them, / As the fox and snake do” (CP 348). In other words, it is language’s ability *to evade, to be* abstract, rather than to name anything precisely, that is recognized in the poem as its true power. It is the imposition of “orders” that inevitably leads, the poem indicates, to the building of “capitols” where “in their corridors, / Whiter than wax, sonorous, fame as it is, / He establishes statues of reasonable men” (CP 349). Language, in other words, when considered not as *process*, but as *object*, can lead only to the proliferation of the concrete—capitols, statues of reasonable men—and it is this that Stevens would like, specifically, to avoid. In Heideggerian terms, “Notes” can be understood to mark the beginning of a new emphasis in Stevens’s work—rather than on the relationship between word and meaning, on that which *exceeds* both in a “manifold enunciating” (Heidegger PLT 195).

“Everyone knows that a poem is an invention,” Heidegger once wrote. “In the poem’s speaking the poetic imagination gives itself utterance. What is spoken in the poem is what the poet enunciates out of himself. What is thus spoken out speaks by enunciating its content. The language of the poem is a manifold enunciating” (PLT 195). Language is not, in other words, a “naming” that would “merely,” as Heidegger goes on to write, “deck out the imaginable familiar objects and events...with words of a language” (PLT 196); poetry (and it is specifically the poetry of Hölderlin that provides Heidegger with the material and inspiration for this claim) offers the possibility of a naming that “does not hand out titles,” or “apply terms” but instead “calls” something into being (PLT 196). “The naming calls,” he writes. And:

[c]alling brings closer what it calls. However this bringing closer does not fetch what is called only in order to set it down in closest proximity to what is present, to find a place for it there. The call does indeed call. Thus it brings the presence of what was previously uncalled into nearness. But the call, in calling it here, has

already called out to what it calls. Where to? Into the distance in which what is called remains, still absent (PLT 196).

Language is that which one “beats and beats an old tin can, lard pail” (CP 185), as does Stevens’s “Man on the Dump.” It is, in Holander’s words, “the end and origin” of poetry itself, and the belief of that “distance” between end and origin is precisely what “will not let itself be possessed, but remains something one ‘wants to get near’” (118). The calling is not a naming, then, but a repetition compulsion—a rhythmic, non-figurative “beating,” which results in the demarcation of the empty space where the call itself originates and must remain. It is not to language itself, therefore, but this space of “the call” that Stevens gestures toward with the question, “Is there a poem that never reaches words?” It is within such a space—*beyond* the speaking of the poem, *beyond* the naming—that the active imagination by which “the call” (and therefore the eventual content of the poem) is produced can be made *present*, even though the generative force or “call” itself will forever remain *absent* from the text.

Where Stevens, once again, departs from Heidegger’s formulation, is in the description of the poem as the “purely spoken” (205). As discussed at greater length in Chapter Three, Stevens’s conception of “pure poetry” differs significantly from Heidegger’s, as well as from the Symbolist’s⁷. For Stevens the true poetic concern should not be for “transcendence” in the sense of a departure or flight from the “reality” of the world, or from the noisiness and “jocundissima” of speech, but instead for locating a broader “Reality”—and a more supple tongue with which to express it. This broader “Reality” was one that Stevens hoped might accommodate the always-ongoing and

⁷ His use of this term confused critics for years. As James Logenbach has importantly noted, Stevens’s understanding of “pure poetry” owes less to Mallarmé than it does to the writings of Benedetto Croce. For Croce, the truly “pure” poem dwelt not *beyond* the poem, but in a middle ground between the extremes of reference and music, between the life of the world and the life of the text (151), much like Roland Barthes’ “Rustle of Language.”

relational interaction between the phenomenal world and the life of the mind. So that even where Stevens would seem to agree with Heidegger's formulation of "world" and "thing" as traversing a middle-space where they are "at one" (PLT 199)—where he would also seem to agree that poetry, as Heidegger writes, "is not a higher mode of everyday language (but) rather the reverse," that "everyday language, is a forgotten and therefore used-up poem, from which there hardly resounds a call any longer" (PLT 205)—he ultimately distances himself from Heidegger's analysis. For Stevens, poetry is not the High Romantic rhetoric of the Canon Aspirin, but the speech of a blended, garbled "compound" tongue—which even then can only account for a "part" of what is spoken. Stevens is always careful to maintain this emphasis on what (will always) exceed even the most inclusive "jocundissima"; what will remain ultimately *outside* of the poem, "only a little of the tongue." It is because of this that he develops, increasingly as his career progresses, and in accordance with his simultaneous increasing conviction that "It Must Be Abstract," a fixation on the articulation of a *negative-space* within his poetry wherein the processes and materiality of *representation itself* might be accommodated and expressed. "Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction" provides a vanguard example.

It is indeed the decidedly *un-transcendental* space of "dif-ference" (by which Heidegger defines the "middle" space between "world" and "thing") that constitutes this space in Stevens's work, but it can again be better understood in terms of the Derridean evolution of the term: that is, as a space of *différance*, where *différance* is to be understood no longer as "a concept" but instead "rather the possibility of conceptuality" (MOP 11). In reference to the orders "imposed" by the Canon Aspirin, for example, we are reminded: "But to impose is not to discover," and a little later (betraying the unfashionable optimism that would have him labelled a disengaged "hedonist" for years): "It is possible, possible,

possible. It must / Be possible. It must be that in time / The real will from its crude compounding come..." (CP 348). This space—not of the “possible,” but of the “call” to a “possibility” of the possible—is the negative-space within which Stevens’s poetry begins to take shape.

Certainly, the repetition of the word “possible” evokes at this point in the poem—rather than Heidegger’s “peal of stillness”—a noisy *attempt* at communication. Where a “stillness” of language (achieved through the “purely spoken”) is, for Heidegger, “not anything human,” Stevens’s “pure poetry” is instead precisely this: a stuttering, most human, cry. The repetition of the word, and the further insistence, “it must / Be possible,” resounds less as assertion than as a desperate desire for that possibility to arise. It is made clear, however, that this possibility must arise not through words, but out of that which *exceeds* language—the “fiction of an absolute” with which Stevens concludes this Section. “Angel--,” he writes, “Be silent in your luminous cloud and hear / The luminous melody of proper sound” (CP 349). This indeed cannot be construed as an invitation to, nor a celebration of, silence, but rather as the opposite: the “luminous melody” of *attempted* speech, a noise, or sound; it is this that is “proper” to the human, and thus that is the “proper” subject and “proper” speech of the poem.

But if even this—the “*absolute*,” the “properly” human—ultimately must be understood as a “fiction,” it is no wonder that Stevens continues in Section VIII: “What am I to believe?” Bloom has asked: “What kind of a question is this, open or rhetorical? And which of these words is to be emphasized: what? am? I? believe?” (WS 212). All of these are valid inquiries, of course—questions which the phrasing of Stevens’s own question seems to demand. What is *invalid*—that is, what is *not* elicited by the question, *or* by the poem—is the assurance with which Bloom provides an answer. “‘I’ is the answer,” Bloom

writes, “and the question is rhetorical, implying the single answer, “I am to believe in a fiction of the self, in a trope of myself (WS 212).

“It is impossible,” as J. Hillis Miller has written, “to find a single one-dimensional theory of poetry and life in Stevens” (146). This is not, in philosophical terms, a sign of weakness or lack of focus in his thinking, but rather of a departure from the conventionally “imposed” methods of writing *both* philosophy and poetry. Simon Critchley’s 2005 book, *Things Merely Are: Philosophy in the Poetry of Wallace Stevens*, though highly interesting and relevant to Stevens studies, makes it quite clear that there continues on the part of critics a desire to claim Stevens either for the side of the poets or for the philosophers. On the other hand, there is the equally divisive reaction against him: claims from the philosophers that his philosophy is too poetic, and, with chiasmic logics, from the poets that his poetry is too philosophical. Stevens himself was not concerned with such categories. Instead, what concerned him was an inclusive space *between* these categories and disciplines that might allow one to dispense with them altogether. Such a space would be one of which one could posit, along with Nietzsche, that there may exist “a more laudable truthfulness in every little question mark that you place after your special words and favourite doctrines (and occasionally after yourselves) than in all the solemn gestures and trumps before accusers and law courts” (36).

For Stevens, of course, your “favourite doctrines” after which a question mark might be legitimately placed, includes poetry itself. This explains the advent of his explicitly metapoetic explorations in “Notes,” continued in his later poems—notably in poems such as “Looking Across the Fields and Watching the Birds Fly,” and “The Poem That Took the Place of a Mountain,” which enact what Rosalind Krauss, in relation to visual art, has termed a “redoubled vision”—a “seeing and a knowing that one sees” (19).

But Stevens's real goal lies beyond a questioning of the "doctrines" of poetry and philosophy; instead, it is Nietzsche's aside—"occasionally after yourselves"—where he would most emphatically place his interrogative mark. Stevens's is a questioning not only of language or of principle but of *Being itself*, and as he moves in the later poems toward what Hillis Miller calls a language of "flickering mobility, a poetry in which each phrase moves so rapidly it has beginning and ending at once" (153), this becomes strikingly clear. This "flickering mobility" is indeed quite the opposite of the "stillness" that Heidegger evokes for the "purely spoken," and it is perhaps those readers and critics who persist in equating poetry to that "stillness"—as that which might indeed be spoken "purely"—who resist the philosophical strain of Stevens's poetry, criticizing it for its incongruencies, before recognizing that it is precisely that space of *incongruence*, the space between the peculiar (language) and the general (the world to which that language ultimately refers) that constitutes the very fundament of Stevens's poetics. In the terms delineated elsewhere by Heidegger as "the open"—the interval within which man is "awakened from its own captivity to its own captivity" (Agamben, TO 70)—it is a particularly *human* space. Stevens's is not, that is, a poetry that strives to transcend the space of captivity, but instead one that strives to place a question mark after it.

In Heidegger's analysis of the work of Hölderlin in his essay "What Are Poets For?" he reflects on the following fragment: "But where there is danger, there grows / also what saves," considering first the implications of the word "danger" and finally what it means for "salvation" to inhabit, or to emerge, from that shared space. "What is deadly is not the much-discussed atomic bomb" (PLT 114) he wrote in this lecture of 1946; "...The danger consists in the threat that assaults man's nature in his relation to Being itself" (PLT

115). Heidegger's technophobia may be ultimately limiting to his thinking, and his utopian vision of retreat from the scientific and technological world is surely sideways to any worthwhile consideration of our contemporary world, but what is at root of Heidegger's denouncement and fear is still, if not more than ever, relevant to us here. As Carlson reflects, it is the "thoughtlessness that Heidegger [...] sees at the heart of a modernity consumed by research, (that) manifests itself in a mode of thought that is all too understanding and hence that excludes the possibility of any amazement in which not understanding would, in fact, be the precondition of genuine—that is, truly questioning or truly philosophical—thought"(Carlson 50).⁸

What Heidegger rejects, in other words, in keeping with his radical critique of a philosophy of presence in *Being and Time*, is the ultimate reliance of technology and science on the ontology of presence, on the *physical*: "What threatens man in his very nature is the willed view that man, by the peaceful release, transformation, storage, and channelling of the energies of physical nature, could render the human condition, man's being, tolerable for everybody and happy in all respects" (PLT 114). What, on the other hand, Hölderlin's poetry makes possible, according to Heidegger, and what, I argue, Stevens's metapoetic negative-space of representation also affords is ultimately—the "I" placed eternally in question—a space of danger. It is in this space that the "I" risks—as Plato had feared, thus his banning of the Poets from the "Republic"—dissolving entirely.

⁸ To a certain extent, as Foucault made clear through his critique of *episteme*, this is the problem with which all investigation and critique is faced. Any investigation is, as Foucault pointed out in *The Order of Things*, limited from the outset to the parameters that the investigation itself has drawn—the findings limited to what the investigation *is already prepared to find*. Every critique is restricted most rigorously, therefore, by its anticipated outcome, and so needs to move away from *any* outcome at the same time that it attempts to arrive at one. As Judith Butler writes in her essay, "What is Critique? An Essay on Foucault's Virtue": "Critique is always a critique *of* some instituted practice, discourse, episteme, institution, and it loses its character the moment in which it is abstracted from its operation and made to stand alone as a purely generalizable practice. But if this is true, this does not mean that no generalizations are possible or that, indeed, we are mired in particularisms. On the contrary, we tread here in an area of constrained generality, one which broaches the philosophical, but must, if it is to remain critical, remain at a distance from that very achievement" (eicpc, May 2001).

But this “danger” indeed constitutes the poetry’s “saving power.” As Stevens once wrote, “The poet represents the mind in the act of defending us against itself” (CP 911)—a statement with which critic James Logenbach pairs the following passage by Kenneth Burke, a thinker whose wariness toward the confusion of art and politics, and their respective strengths and roles, matched Stevens’s own: “An art may be of value purely through preventing a society from becoming too assertively, too hopelessly, itself” (265).

But where does this leave us? What *are* poets for? Where does what looks very much like an endless questioning lead us? How can such a question be legitimately asked? Let alone answered?

Perhaps it leaves us in the space from which we came: an *in-between* space—not of an excessive reliance on presence but neither on a pure negativity: a space of danger, of Being placed in question—of being called, in the questioning, suddenly near. Perhaps it is, after all, this: an ability to be drawn into proximity with the ambiguous space of Being, and to *not become the space itself*, that is our “saving power.” That is, our ability to “face opposite” our world, as artists, and as human beings, to *risk* empathy, to encounter the Other—an encounter which is not, and could never be, a forfeiture of our own subjectivity as Plato had feared, but is instead, in Levinas’s terms, the primordial ethical action, the “ultimate situation of the face to face” (Levinas 81).

The possibility of a return to this primordial relation, a manifestation, through language, of that original confrontation—the very space of the human as first defined by Carolus Linnaeus (not, that is by any description but only by the imperative: *nosce te ipsum*, know yourself [Agamben TO, 25])—is indeed what constitutes that space in the first place. It is the ability to “face opposite,” to be “amazed”—“captivated” by our own space

of “captivation”—that allows us to resist becoming too “assertively, too hopelessly, ourselves” (Logenbach 265).

A Saving Power

“It is not the insufficiency of the I that prevents totalization,” writes Levinas, in *Totality and Infinity*, “but the Infinity of the Other” (80). The space of that relation exists, however, not finally in the territory of the Other, but in the *in-between* territory of the peculiar and general, the “I” and the “non-I,” the fictive and the real, the “mind and the sky.” This is the active, inter-spatial territory that Stevens spent his poetic career working to delineate. In keeping with this, Holander provides a convincing analysis of “Waving Adieu, Adieu, Adieu,” from “Ideas of Order,” in which he observes that “to be one’s singular self” (as the poem, according to Holander, suggests “one should”), “would not only be to bid farewell but perpetually to ‘be bidding farewell,’ to ‘be waving adieu.’” (80). The poem’s final stanzas conclude as follows, further emphasizing the active, always-ever transitional territory conceived of within the poem:

To be one’s singular self, to despise
The being that yielded so little, acquired
So little, too little to care, to turn
To the ever-jubilant weather, to sip

One’s cup and never say a word,
Or to sleep or just to lie there still,
Just to be there, just to be beheld,
That would be bidding farewell, be bidding farewell.

One likes to practise the thing. They practice,
Enough, for heaven. Ever-jubilant,
What is there here but weather, what spirit
Have I except it comes from the sun? (CP 104).

Importantly, like so much of Stevens's poetry, the grammatical structure of this passage is conditional; it is written in the speculative mode ("That *would be* the bidding..."), the grammatical mode of philosophy. The gerund "bidding" becomes, as Holander states, "part of a non-finite infinitive clause," which thus defines "the individual as isolated in self-identity" (80), but this—it must be remembered—is achieved by Stevens while retaining the collective and investigative grammar of the speculative mode. Another important grammatical observation is made by Holander regarding the phrase, "To be one's singular self," where he observes that Stevens "turns the copular use of 'to be,' which would normally link two different terms, into an existential one" (80). According to this usage, Hollander notes: "it is just to be. This inward turn is simultaneously envisioned as a turn to the natural world" (80). "Being" needs to be understood, Holander urges, as both a verb and a noun within the poem, positioning itself "in between" the pure exteriority represented by "the weather" and the pure interiority of the "singular self." To achieve this grammatical positioning is precisely the work of the gerund. The gerund "being" works within the poem to indicate, as Holander writes, its "complex involvement with a reality of others, a common yet discordant world of collective but conflictive fictions and languages" (81).

The final stanza makes a clear separation between those who would "practice" for a fixed idea of "heaven" that is finally separate from a notion of an "ever-jubilant" being, and those, like the speaker, who translate the necessity of "waving adieu" ("à-Dieu"[Holander 181]) in personal terms as a practice *in itself*—something "non-final and constant" and not merely a rehearsal for an event over which they have no control, and are not now a part. "The difference between the atheist speaker and the religious others," explains Holander, "is also formulated as a difference between necessity and pleasure, vocation and vacation, between those who need to practice the thing, since their final leave-taking (as they

believe) will initiate a transport to heaven, and one that, although the sense is also that he has to do it—and cannot but do it—tries to claim to enjoy doing so” (Holander 81).

The atheist conceives of himself as an inherent part of the whole, and the processes, “practices,” that contribute to that whole: “what spirit / Have I except that it comes from the sun?” (CP 104). It is precisely in these terms that the poet considers himself in relation to language: poetry being the active, “non-final and constant” process by which language is continually “called” into being, which resists calcification in the imposition of an “order” that Stevens laments in “Notes Toward A Supreme Fiction” (CP 343).

In the final section of “Notes,” Stevens concludes with the following plea: “Soldier, there is a war between the mind / And sky, between thought and day and night. It is for that the poet is always in the sun” (CP 351). The poet, in other words, is he who speaks in the “non-finite infinitive clause, defining these de-personalized activities as constitutive of existence” (Holander 80). He speaks, in other words, in the imperative— “know yourself”—of Being. That is—for Stevens—*what poets are for*. “The soldier is poor without the poet’s lines,” he writes, and, most movingly: “How simply the fictive hero becomes the real” (CP 352).

It is not the real alone that creates its reality—a *causa sui* that would be, as Nietzsche writes, “a sort of rape and perversion of logic” (21); it is the constant interpenetration of reality and the imagination that creates our experience in the world, and it is this that Stevens’s poem is finally testament to. We are constantly shaping and re-shaping our realities through the interaction between the fictive and the real, through our encounters with the Other, and the limitations and possibilities of the empathy that each encounter allows. “These external regions, what do we fill them with / Except reflections, the escapades of death, / Cinderella fulfilling herself beneath the roof?” (CP 350). It is up

to us, Stevens suggests, to fill “our external regions” (CP 350) with the reflections of the sort of imaginative hero by which we would like, in reality, to be one day “saved.”

But Stevens’s conception of poetry as “a mystical, spontaneous creative process bringing opposites together,” his elaboration of an in-between space where fact and fiction can marry, where “Cinderella” can at last be “fulfilled,” does not address the schism between that imagined “fulfillment” (a satisfaction that is forever deferred), and the “actuality” of the dearth that remains. The risk that Stevens runs in representing the imagination and the poetic process as “a kind of immanence, an essence residing in its representation yet not equalled by it” (Holander 105) is one, as Holander duly notes, of “‘isolating art’ against its own intentions” (105). Through emphasis on a world of the imagination that is always “immanent,” that can never be accessed in concrete terms, the schism between reality and the imagination risks being understood as unbridgeable—rather than allowing that “immanence” to form the desired and constantly projected bridge. The “alienating moment implicit in art” emphasized in Stevens’s reliance on rhetorical figures like “subman” in “Owl’s Clover” and “major man,” in “Notes,” serve to underscore, on the one hand, the “semantic impenetrability or otherness, but on the other...the possibility of (re)interpretation” (Holander 105). Holander posits that Stevens’s disruption, through the use of these figures, and of the oppositions inferred between “art and reality, ‘creation’ and ‘rhetoric,’ suggests that deconstruction is itself a Hegelian enterprise,” and that what is accomplished by the “negative work” of long poems like “Owl’s Clover”—and certainly, I would add, of “Notes”—is “if not a resolution or synthesis, a positive new understanding of the oppositions between which it pretends to mediate” (105).

But Stevens’s insistence on an existent negative-space between, and in surplus to both reality and the imagination—a space that cannot be subsumed into any universal idea,

let alone a reality of any *named* “heaven”—opens up a space of encounter not only with “*semantic* otherness” but a more fundamentally “external region” *beyond* mediation. In contrast with the Western philosophical tradition, Stevens navigates a space of identity and spirituality *beyond* “consciousness, thematic exposition of being, knowing” (Levinas, OTB 99). Like Levinas, his concern is not with knowledge, but with sensibility, which he understands “not as a knowing but as proximity” (OTB 99). Both Levinas and Stevens seek within language contact and sensibility “behind the circulation of information it becomes” and attempt to “describe subjectivity as irreducible to consciousness and thematization” (OTB 100). Rather than the space of equality (“self equals self”) by which, for Hegel, consciousness is described, Stevens is concerned with the far more anarchic space described by Levinas: the obsessional space of “the-one-for-the-other” (OTB 100).

The point that Levinas makes about this space is in essence very simple. The relationship between self and other, “I” and “non-I,” is only partially accounted for by the information to which we are able to reduce it through our senses—primarily of sight. There is an aspect of “proximity” to the other that remains irreducible to images. It is with this purely subjective relation—that of *proximity*—rather than with any objective or imagistic measurement of *distance* that both Levinas and Stevens are primarily concerned. What remains “beyond visibility” cannot be reduced to a “sign,” but nonetheless is not exempt from the process of signification. In fact, as Levinas argues, it is “the very transcending character of this beyond that *is* signification” (OTB 100, emphasis added). Just as the “saying” is not reducible to the “said,” so “proximity” refers to the relationship to the other that is irreducible to consciousness or identity: “The relationship of proximity,” writes Levinas, “cannot be reduced to any modality of distance or geometrical contiguity, nor to the simple ‘representation’ of a neighbour; it is already an assignation, an extremely urgent assignation—an obligation, anachronously prior to any commitment” (OTB 100-101).

“The-one-for-the-other” of proximity which cannot properly be “represented” is precisely this “surplus of responsibility” that constitutes “the very signifyingness of signification!” (Levinas, OTB 100). To be clear: before any information resolves itself in images, in the “said,” in the encounter of the “face to face,” or in “knowledge,” there is an invisible process *beyond*-signification through which signification—all images, all “knowledge”—takes place, but which remains always in surplus of that signification. It is to this “surplus” (a measurement that exceeds objective *distance* but not the subjective measurement of *proximity*) that we are indebted, bound by an anteriority “‘older’ than the a priori” (Levinas, OTB 101).

It is important, however, that this “surplus of responsibility” that exists “beyond” representation, mediation, and indeed of consciousness itself, be understood not in terms of “‘further’ than everything that appears, or ‘present in absence,’ or ‘shown by a symbol’” (Levinas, OTB 100). Barthes’s photograph, Stevens’s “fatal, dominant X,” in and of themselves, do not articulate this space: they remain fundamentally “subject to a principle, to be given in consciousness” (Levinas, OTB 100). What is “beyond” is that which essentially refuses to be “tamed or domesticated by a theme,” which “loses its own signifyingness and becomes an immanence as soon as logos interpellates, invests, presents and exposes it, whereas its adjacency in proximity is an absolute exteriority” (Levinas, OTB 100). It is, therefore, that which escapes Barthes’s photograph, that which refuses to be named by Stevens’s X, which enters into the space of “transcendence” *beyond* representation, and also why the photograph as “representation,” the poem as “the said,” and finally the “mind” as a self-equalizing consciousness cannot be “satisfied”: all three are contingent upon a territory “beyond” that is absolutely anarchic, un-representable. Objectively, Stevens can get no nearer than Levinas toward a representation of the “beyond”: he cannot close in on “signifyingness” itself, but can only work to articulate the

ongoing process by which Being is constituted by “a responsibility for the other” that goes finally “beyond” Western categorical knowledge; he can only disrupt the notion of “equality of self with self” (Levinas, OTB 102). Through an exploration of the anarchic space of “proximity,” which is the very territory of language itself (understood, that is, in terms of a poetic capacity not to name, but rather to apprehend, and communicate, a “call”) Stevens works to bring that which is *called*, that which is un-thematizable into “presence.” In this sense, he resists submitting language to domestication or “theme,” encouraging instead only a “nearness”—a “proximity” to the subject, which will (and must) remain forever “absent” (Heidegger, PLT 196), always in “surplus” of that which could be “present-ed,” “re-presented” or “named,” but which nonetheless offers us if not knowledge, then a “sense” of Being itself as the “very signifyingness of signification” (Levinas, OTB 100).

The Pure Present

Stevens’s formulation of the “poetic concept” as ultimately incompatible with a Western philosophical tradition, which would seek to understand poetry, and language itself, in terms of a “still-point” of “knowledge,” is what ultimately causes him to shift the emphasis in his work from the already completed moment of the “said” to the immanent “saying” power of language: the “dizzle-dazzle of being new / And of becoming...Of that which is always beginning, over and over (CP 449). For Stevens the present participle (“being,” “becoming”) is always more replete with possibility and than the dead-end of the preterite with its illusive suggestion of a definite end point of any verb. Stevens’s primary “poetic concept” is definitively one of movement, action, and change. So much is this the case that in the later collections the poetry becomes increasingly obsessed by its own inability to name that movement, action, or change. Far from giving up on the idea that

language might come to “present” that which must remain absent, Stevens emphasizes instead the manner in which “logos”—and precisely *through* its very exteriority—delineates a space of absence that, though it cannot be “named,” presented “as such,” *can* be made proximate, “brought near,” in much the same way that the physical limits of the body delineate a space of absence between the self and the other. Regardless of the fact that the distance that is delineated cannot at last be reduced to “geometrical contiguity” (Levinas, OTB 101) and that it therefore cannot ultimately be either represented or bridged, the exteriority of the physical limits of the body, the encounter of the “face to face,” remain at the root of all signification—and therefore all possibility for encounter and inter-action. The idea of “absolute exteriority” as the limit from which all *interiority*, as well as all potential inter-action between subjectivities begins, is explicitly worked out in *The Rock’s* “Note on Moonlight.”

The one moonlight, in the simple-colored night,
Like a plain poet revolving in his mind
The sameness of his various universe,
Shines on the mere objectiveness of things (CP 449)

This simile structure, whereby the natural, exterior, “objective” world is explored in terms of the interior “subjectivity” of the individual, is common to Stevens: it is the same comparative structure that was developed in his earlier “Re-Statement of Romance,” where he disrupts the roles of the individual beholden to the “sublime” Nature/God; in “Re-statement” it is the individual, “supremely true each to its separate self,” through which the universe may be “best” understood. What Stevens points toward is something intrinsic to all simile per se: the dialogue between the external world of perceivable objects (what we might, for simplicity’s sake, call “reality”) and subjective perception (or, equally, the “imagination”). The comparison, in “Re-Statement of Romance,” of “I am what I am” to the way in which the world, exterior to the self, “is what it is,” both accepts and works to

reveal the basis of the simile structure itself, which is always one of comparison and relation—never one of equivalence or of subjugation. The “imagination” is never “beholden” to “reality,” but is instead, as it is written in “Waving Adieu Adieu Adieu,” “beheld”(CP 104). An autonomy over and above the disinterested natural world (“reality”)—its “ever-jubilant weather”—is asserted, but not in a manner that either simply reverses a pre-existing power-structure between “reality” and the “imagination,” or asserts the supremacy of one over the other. Stevens’s poetic investigations into the “singular self” hinge not on that “singular self’s” ability to “behold,” or be “beholden” but on the way in which the self is always ever “beheld” by that which remains—irreducible to consciousness or knowledge and “‘older’ than the a priori” (Levinas, OTB 101)—*beyond being*.

But what *does* remain when the investigation of selfhood is stripped of its insistence on a ground of knowledge where “self” must equal “self”? When there is, to the contrary, a space afforded for the call of language to echo in “proximity” to being without being forced to “present” itself (resulting in “the mere objectiveness of things”), as well as for the lingering question as to what exceeds the “lineaments” of the object? Any ontological insistence on a self-equalizing system of “knowledge” must always account for the gaps in “knowledge”—for what remains “beyond” knowledge; it is for this reason that one Western philosopher after another has been accused, against their intentions, of resorting to metaphysics.⁹ Poetry, on the other hand, which does not assume to “name” but only

⁹ Heidegger’s specific project in *Being and Time* is outlined in the heading of section one of the Introduction: “The Necessity for Explicitly Restating the Question of Being.” This is a question that, though as Heidegger notes, we may “deem it progressive to give our approval of ‘metaphysics’ again,” has in actuality been “forgotten.” (BT 2). For Heidegger, as Simon Critchley explains, metaphysics, “or, more properly, first philosophy, conceives of beings in terms of a unifying *ousia* and ultimately a divine *ousia*. Heidegger therefore describes metaphysics as discourse which states what beings are as beings” (E 20). As previously noted, Heidegger does not, in *Being and Time*, conceive of anything outside of Being, or (therefore) outside the question of metaphysics. However, in his 1962 lecture, “On Time and Being,” Heidegger reformulates his exploration, this time actually *enacting* the process he had called for in *Being and Time*—that of placing

“calls” language into nearness, and which is not, therefore, obliged to fill or explain away the gaps and holes that necessarily show when the “said” is purported to represent “saying”—when “signifyingness” is purported to reside fixedly within the “sign” of the “signified”—can with some “certainty,” as Stevens goes on to do in “Note on Moonlight,” discuss the “absolute exteriority” of the “mere objectiveness” of things.

It is as if being was to be observed,
 As if, among the possible purposes,
 Of what one sees, the purpose that comes first,
 The surface, is the purpose to be seen,

The property of the moon, what it evokes.
 It is to disclose the essential presence, say,
 Of a mountain, expanded and elevated almost
 Into a sense, an object the less; or else

To disclose in the figure waiting on the road
 An object the more, an undetermined form
 Between the slouchings of a gunman and a lover,
 A gesture in the dark, a fear one feels

In the great vistas of night air, that takes this form,
 In the arbors that are as if of Saturn-star (CP 450).

Note here the repetition of the word “disclose,” a word that connects the language of distance and proximity to that of exposure and revelation. Proximity *is*, in this context, revelation. It is the “expansion” and “elevation” of objective *distance* into a subjective,

Being under question—by replacing the accustomed sentence construction, “Time is...”, “Being is...” with the expression, “es gibt Sein, and “es gibt Zeit” (“there is Being,” “there is Time”)(Critchley, E 20). The separation of Being from the language of metaphysics in this formulation establishes Being as belonging “to a prior giving, the giving of an ‘It.’” To thus “think Being without beings [...] is to think without metaphysics” (Critchley, E 22-23). But the question remains open as to whether any of these attempts at reformulating the question of being or the representation of subjectivity—*independent of metaphysics*—have succeeded, and another question—more interesting, perhaps—remains at the root. Regarding the long history of philosopher’s reaction *against* the perceived reification of a metaphysics of subjectivity, Simon Critchley asks: “Has there ever existed a unified conscious subject, a watertight Cartesian ego? Or is the subject some phantasy or abstraction that is retrospectively attributed to a past that one wants either to exceed, betray or ignore? That is to say, is not the subject a fiction that Kant finds in Descartes without it being in Descartes, that Heidegger finds in Kant without it being in Kant, or that Derrida finds in Husserl without it being in Husserl? [...] In light of such sceptical questions, all we seem to be left with is a series of caricatures, or cartoon versions of the history of metaphysics, a series of narratives based upon a greater or lesser misreading of the philosophical tradition. Such narratives may well be necessary and unavoidable fictions, but they are fictions nonetheless” (E 59-60).

proximal “sense” of an “essential presence” that must be understood to exist *beyond* all objective representation or experience of “presence.” Once again, we are deeply entrenched within a simile structure intent on drawing out the *relationships* between the internal and the external, rather than on arriving at any possible equivalence, or asserting any final authority over either one. This is the simile structure, *per se*. Even more committed to the revelation and expansion of relation and difference over authority or equivalence is the hypothetical simile, “as if,” which—as is evidenced by the passage above—is used frequently by Stevens. The “as if” structure’s fundamental grounding in *conjecture* underscores the “gaps” or distances intrinsic to the processes of signification itself, but at the same time, and perhaps paradoxically, it is the very grammar of apprehension. Its structure is that of the leap toward a figuration and understanding that lies on the far side of language: it is, in short, the syntax of proximity. Stevens’s familiar strategy of stacking these “as ifs” one on top of the other works to further emphasize these gaps—as well as their potential figurative and communicative power. The relationship between the interior “subjective” world (represented by the poet), and the exterior “objective” world (represented by the moonlight) is sketched out in “Note on Moonlight” according to a simile structure that accentuates *distance* as well as—or more accurately, *in order to attain—proximity*. Moonlight, “like a plain poet,” invents his “various universe” only in terms of what is familiar to him—in terms, in other words, of “sameness.” This is not to suggest that for either poet or moon, the world outside of the illumined, “invented” reality (that is, for the poet, the metaphors or “samenesses” with which he may seek to expose and understand that reality) is any *less* real than if a more comprehensive or objective mode of apprehension was available. The world continues to exist as a formal “reality,” and will remain—ultimately exterior, but ever-available to the “imagination” (“an object the less...an object the more”) that the light casts upon it. “Reality,” is thus, and again, as the

poem goes on to expound, ever-potential, existing within the permanent, and ever-potential structure of conjecture: the “as if.”

So, then, this warm, wide, weatherless quietude
Is active with power, an inherent life,

In spite of the mere objectiveness of things,
Like a cloud-cap in the corner of a looking glass,
A change of color in the plain poet’s mind,
Night and silence disturbed by an interior sound,

The one moonlight, the various universe, intended
So much just to be seen—a purpose, empty
Perhaps, absurd perhaps, but at least a purpose,
Certain and ever more fresh. Ah! Certain for sure ... (CP 450).

That this world that remains aloof (though always at the potential disposal of) the inventiveness of both poet and moon is depicted as “weatherless” emphasizes the “absolute exteriority” of a “reality” that can at last not be subsumed into the “imagination”—into the “sameness” of the “I.” The opposition between the “singular self” and the “ever-jubilant weather” is finally dissolved in the poem—into “weatherless quietude”—but, crucially, the terms of their relation are always preserved. Indeed, as Krauss would say of the apprehension of visual objects according to the figure-ground relation, they are “preserved all the more surely in that they are cancelled” (OU 15). Just “like” a simile, it is this preservation of a certain distance between the two relative terms that underscores their proximity as they come into contact. It is the third term, however, that which remains always in surplus to the opposition—in “Note on Moonlight,” a “weatherless quietude” (not the “weather,” and not the “self”)—that remains “active with a power” (CP 450). Exterior to every comparison, as well as to all knowledge and consciousness, this “quietude” is at the same time absolutely essential to all three—it signifies, in other words, the very *signifyingness* of signification itself.

“The one moonlight, the various universe,” begins the poem’s final stanza—accentuating, with this simple concluding phrase, the final and absolute imbalance between an active “saying” power, and what is possible to be “said.” This is far from a dismissal or denigration of the “said” for its inability to capture “the various universe,” and it is even farther from an assertion of any final authority over it. The emphasis—and the ellipsis that concludes (or fails to conclude) the poem underscores this—is on that which the “said” *illuminates* as *always-excessive* to the poem. The gap that the “said” delineates is precisely that active, ever-generative space of “purpose, empty / Perhaps, absurd perhaps, but at least a purpose,/ Certain and ever more fresh” (CP 450), which is the “call” of language itself: “Ah! Certain for sure ...”

Is this “certainty” that Stevens affirms at the end of “Note on Moonlight” meant to assuage any part of the dis-satisfaction that was so categorically professed to be inherent to the mind: “It can never be satisfied, the mind, never” (CP 224)? Or is the “certainty” that is directed at an “empty purpose” precisely the root-cause of the dis-satisfaction the mind can presumably never hope to overcome? The ellipsis by which the “certainty” arrived at in “Note on Moonlight” is conjoined to the rest of the poem suggests that “certainty” itself is something that must always be attained in conjunction with a process that exceeds “certainty”; it is only by this route that purpose can be “ever more fresh.” “The oneself does not rest in peace under its identity” writes Levinas, “and yet its restlessness is not a dialectical scission, nor a process equalizing difference” (OTB 118). There remains a “variety” that is irreducible to the “sameness” of “one moonlight,” one imagination; there remains the “absolute exteriority” of a world “intended / So much just to be seen” that will not be “seen.” The endeavour to “see,” however, to “say” what one sees in a way that may be “ever more fresh” is (Stevens would, with “certainty,” allege) a worthy purpose. In a passage that, appearing within the poem, “The Planet on the Table” from *The Rock*, one

cannot help but read as reflective of Stevens's own feelings toward his body of work to date, and demonstrating an uncharacteristic strain of optimism—not for what remains possible, but what has already been accomplished—Stevens writes:

Ariel was glad he had written his poems.
They were of a remembered time
Or of something he liked.

Other makings of the sun
Were waste and welter
And the ripe shrub writhed.

His self and the sun were one
And his poems, although makings of his self,
Were no less makings of the sun.

It was not important that they survive.
What mattered was that they should bear
Some lineament or character,

Some affluence, if only half-perceived,
In the poverty of their words,
Of the planet of which they were a part (CP 450).

Here again the conflation between the “ipseity” of selfhood with the sublime autonomy of Nature or a god, does not seek to reverse a pre-existing power-structure but to disrupt the very notion of the opposition itself. What is expressed here in the form of Ariel and the specificity of the “poems” that he is happy enough to have written is, in Levinas's words, “the oneself” as “singularity, prior to the distinction between the particular and the universal. It is, if one likes, a relationship, but one where there is no disjunction between the terms held in relationship, a relationship that is not reducible to an intentional openness upon oneself, does not purely and simply repeat consciousness in which being is gathered up, as the sea gathers up the waves that wash upon the shore” (OTB 118). The “relationship” that serves to hold poem, poet, and world together in “The Planet on the Table” is one that exists in *excess* of every part of that relationship. The poet is, prior to

every consciousness of either himself or the world and thus prior to every poem, indebted to “the Planet” which exceeds him, but, likewise (and it is this that constitutes the satisfaction that the poem is able to express in what has already been “written”) every poem, according to the formulation of the relationship where self and sun are one, and his poems are “makings of his self,” is also a “making” of the sun. Though the poem speaks to that which has been “written,” note that its content is still addressed in active, gerund form, as “makings” rather than as the “made.” It is this ability for language to remain “active with power” even when implemented—to remain a “making” even when “made”—that affords poetry its “affluence” even “in the poverty of their words.” The “affluence” that is referred to here is perhaps one of Stevens’s most direct comments on the power of poetry, and importantly refers not to anything “accumulated” or “achieved” but toward that which exceeds all achievement, what Levinas would call an extreme passivity which remains *always prior to and in excess of* being and yet is constitutive of that being. As he explains in *Otherwise than Being*, the very existence of the body is based on that body’s *a priori* exposure and indebtedness to the other. The body is “a recurrence to oneself out of an irrecusable exigency of the other,” Levinas writes:

a duty overflowing my being, a duty becoming a debt and an extreme passivity prior to the tranquillity, still quite relative, in the inertia and materiality of things at rest. It is a restlessness and patience that support prior to action and passion. Here is what goes beyond having, but makes giving possible. This recurrence is incarnation. In it the body which makes giving possible makes one *other* without alienating. For this other is the heart and the goodness, of the same, the inspiration or the very psyche of the soul (OTB 109).

In “The Planet on the Table,” Ariel’s poems exist both as and beyond “the lineament or character” with which they were written. Their “affluence” is their very embodiment—which is also their extreme passivity: their incarnation “out of an irrecusable exigency of the other” (OTB 109). It is for this reason that “[i]t was not important that they survive”—they do not participate in the entrenched delimitations and oppositions between presence of absence, self and other. Though the embodiment—the “lineament and character”—of the poems is what exposes their relationship to that which exceeds them (the seeing eye, and the conscious, insatiable mind), the “satisfaction” that results from their delineation comes from that which they have not, and *could not*, have delineated at all. This is not, finally, a *retreat* from the world, but its opposite: an exploration of precisely that “restlessness and patience that support prior to action and passion”; it is the “affluence” beyond any consideration of “having”—that which “makes giving possible,” which constitutes the “singular self” as an always anterior commitment to the “other” and is the “very signifyingness of signification” (OTB 100).

This is representation itself: representation considered in the Platonic mode as that “absolute, creative freedom” that clears the way to the goal, indeed, makes “the vision of that goal” possible by its projection prior to any “venturesome course” (Levinas, TI 125). “Representation,” expounds Levinas, “is this very projection, inventing the goal, that will be presented to the still groping acts as won *a priori*. The ‘act’ of representation discovers, properly speaking, nothing before itself” (125). It is because of this “pure spontaneity” that characterizes the “act” of representation that it can be described, as Levinas goes on to do, as a “pure present.” “The positing of a pure present without even tangential ties with time is the marvel of representation,” he writes: “It is a void of time, interpreted as eternity. To be sure the I who conducts his thoughts becomes (or more exactly ages) in time, in which his successive thoughts, across which he thinks in the present, are spread forth. But this

becoming in time does not appear on the plane of representation: representation involves no passivity” (TI 125). Representation is always a “pure” moment of concentrated activity in which “the I is not marked by the past but utilizes it as a represented and objective element” (Levinas, TI 125). It is in this manner that duration may be collated—through the examination of a series of “objective” elements that are forced to stand in opposition to an “eternity” that represents the always-already escaped moment of representation itself. The extreme passivity that constitutes *being itself* is, in each conscious (measured) moment, substituted by a correlative “objective” element: the “I” in the singular. The “I” that is forced by the “other” (to which he is a priori exposed; this always antecedent exposure constituting the “sameness of his various universe” [Stevens CP 449]) to identify himself, replaces each moment of extreme passivity with an active effort of self-equalizing representation. “I” is understood to equal the representation of myself to myself, and no longer to exceed the limits of either consciousness or corporeality. It is in this manner—through representation that allows for the I of the “same” to determine the “other” without himself being determined by that other—that the subject makes his world, and specifically his own subjectivity, intelligible to himself. A “disappearance, within the same, of the I opposed to the non-I” (124), allows the I to *fix* its identity at once in both space and time as singular and exclusive.

This *fixity* is exactly what troubles Stevens in his exploration of the “outward blank” as that which, as is shown in the following passage from “St. Armorer’s Church from the Outside,” exists *outside* of history, circumstance, and indeed of identity itself.

It is like a new account of everything old,
 Matisse at Vence and a great deal more than that,
 A new-colored sun, say that will soon change forms
 And spread hallucinations on every leaf.

The chapel rises, his own, his period,
 A civilization formed from the outward blank,

A sacred syllable rising from sacked speech,
The first car out of a tunnel en voyage

Into lands of ruddy-ruby fruits, achieved
Not merely desired, for sale, and market things
That press, strong peasants in a peasant world,
Their purports to a final seriousness—

Final for him, the acceptance of such prose,
Time's given perfections made to seem like less
Than the need of each generation to be itself,
The need to be actual and as it is.

St. Armorer's has nothing of this present,
This *vif*, this dazzle-dazzle of being new
And of becoming, for which the chapel spreads out
Its arches in its vivid element,

In the air of newness of that element,
In an air of freshness, clearness, greenness, blueness,
That which is always beginning, because it is part
Of that which is always beginning, over and over.

The chapel underneath St. Armorer's walls,
Stands in a light, its natural light and day,
The origin and keep of its health and his own.
And there he walks and does as he lives and likes (CP 449).

Stevens's focus within this poem, as in many of his poems of the period, is on that which remains *outside* of any consideration of being itself, but *is* and *must necessarily* be considered *constitutive* of that being: again, a sort of “nothing that is”—“is” intended here not to indicate a separate existence for the “blank,” which would be remote from or in *opposition* to the “I,” but instead an absorption *within* that singular being, and therefore that identity. In order to expose this absorption that is representation at its most elemental level, and therefore which is also the fundamental constituent of language, Stevens must disturb the equanimity with which the self is equalized; he must disrupt the balance between “I” and “non-I” which representation would seek to establish, erasing “difference.” Stevens's implementation of foreign or invented words, as demonstrated in the passage from “St.

Armorer's" quoted above, seeks to expose the "lineament or character" of language itself, pointing to the "outward blank" that must exist *beyond language*—a negative-space, that is, against which those "lineaments" are described. As this study has attempted to show, this negative-space *beyond* language, beyond the opposition of "I" and "non-I," indeed, beyond *being*, is one that is evoked by Stevens's work as a whole. Stevens's "St. Armorers" as a text can be understood in the same way that "what is left" of the Church is understood in the poem: a place where "reverberations leak and lack among holes," a place which—like Ariel's poems in "The Planet on the Table" ("it was not important that they survive" [CP 450])—was not built to last and now exists simply as "an appearance made / For a sign of meaning in the meaninglessness" (CP 448). A reduction to the surface-value of its "appearance" is precisely what affords the Church in Stevens's poem to evade the "present" and therefore to exist *outside* of representation as *representation itself*.

If "representation" is the occurrence of a "pure present" that is exempt from time (Levinas, TI 124) than "St. Armorers's" is an instance of this "purity"— an attempt at capturing a "represented and objective element" exempt from the linear and hierarchical trajectory of time and history. Put differently: an attempt at a "photographic ecstasy" that might liberate the image of the photograph from the "*absence-as-presence*" (Barthes, CL 106) of the photograph. "At the limit, there is no need to represent a body in order for me to experience this vertigo of time defeated" (97) writes Barthes in *Camera Lucida*, and likewise, for Stevens, the "defeat" of linear time is one that occurs not through the representation of the form, or body, but of the processes of representation itself. The chapel, which is described as "something seen / In a mystic eye, no sign of life but life, Itself," is that very "presence of the intelligible / In that which is created as its symbol" (CP 448).

It is entering into the “presence” of this symbol of the intelligible that allows the poem a space within which time may be sprung from chronology, and “sacred syllables” may rise from “sacked speech,” constituting the very “sing of meaning in the meaningless” (CP 449). The poem creates, in other words, its own microclimate of intelligibility. This is not an exemption from time but a re-envisioning of its structure, a dismantling of the prejudice toward the present moment over the future or the past. The insistence on the repetitive, ever-regenerative nature of time (“that which is always beginning because it is a part / Of that which is always beginning, over and over”) ensures us of that continuance, and suggests that—though St. Armorer’s “has nothing of this present”—it has not dislodged, and *cannot* dislodge, itself from the repetitive process that is the very basis of the structure of time. Instead, it refuses stasis in any conceivable fixed “present” or definable past and embodies time as it exists and is understood in the present participle: that which is “always beginning, over and over.” This structure does not exempt the subject from time, but links it to a larger reality through repetition, and the logics of synecdoche (that which is “always beginning” is, of course, only *part* of “that which is always beginning...”). This is the “pure present,” which the repetition of the present participle serves to enforce through its disruption of entrenched, chronological time—that which could be rendered preterite, completed—and insistence on an active, ever-generative conception of time that never could be. St. Armorer’s as “symbol” of the “intelligible” is placed at a remove from the repetition-compulsions of time (it is this that allows it to become “intelligible), but it is not exempted from them. Indeed, the achieved distance enables within the poem a figuration, and perhaps a brief apprehension, of the structure itself.

The tension that is created within the poem between the “outside” and the “inside” of “St. Armorer’s Walls,” also serves to establish a middle-space in which to conceive of the difference between the “I” and the “non-I,” between world and thing. Rather than being absorbed into one another, the difference between an active identification of the singular and a passive absorption within the other are permitted to stand apart. It is this that allows for St. Armorer’s delineation against the surrounding “dizzle-dazzle of being new / And of becoming” (CP 449) in a “pure present,” and in doing so renders it a “symbol” of the intelligible—a mode of reading and understanding, that is, the processes of intelligibility itself. Within this enlarged space one may indeed, as “St. Armorer’s” concludes, “do as [one] lives and likes” and yet one is always, irreducibly connected to the greater outside structure—we are, indeed, the very *material* out of which that structure is made. Perhaps the *a priori* responsibility to that which lies beyond or *outside* of the chapel “walls” (inside of which we are—falling back on ourselves repeatedly—maintained by the light that *we ourselves* project upon those walls, our “natural light and day”) is actually summarized best in Stevens’s “The Irrational Element of Poetry,” where he writes, “You can do as you please, yet everything matters” (CP 789).

The Open

“To be sure,” writes Levinas, “representation is the seat of truth” (TI 124). Representation, in Stevens’s work, of the very processes of representation itself opens up a space to explore the manner in which “truth” is constituted, hinging on the root difference between the “I” and the “non-I.” It is the elaboration of this space, of both *separation* and *difference*, seeing and *knowing* that one sees, that allows Stevens’s poetry to transcend categorical definitions of self and other. This space is one that has been further explored by generations of American poets and artists who came after Stevens; his refusal to

acknowledge the boundary between contemplation and action has affected a vast range of styles ranging from the new “American Romantic” poets identified by Bloom (PC 152) to the Postmodern experimentation of poets like Robert Creeley, John Ashbery and Michael Palmer (Schaum 169).¹⁰ The traces of Stevens’s “new knowledge of reality,” which would incorporate rather than subordinate the imagination, helped to open up a space of exploration in American poetry *between* world and thing, truth and representation, and made important steps toward the amendment of a centuries old confusion between the conception of *praxis* and *poiesis*. This distinction, commonly understood as that between action and production, goes back—according to Robert Bernasconi in *Heidegger in Question: The Art of Existing*—to Aristotle’s exposition of the two terms in his *Nicomachean Ethics* (2). Bernasconi contends that while Aristotle’s distinction remains the major source for our current understanding of action and production, doing and making, that in the *naming* the distinction, *the distinction itself was “transformed”* (2, emphasis added). The concern that characterized Heidegger’s Marburg period for the teachings of Aristotle, made a significant impact on the work of two of his most talented students: Hannah Arendt (specifically her *The Human Condition*), and Hans-George Gadamer’s *Truth and Method*. Both thinkers take up the question of the *original* distinction made by Aristotle between *praxis* and *poiesis*, and agree it is not just failing to make, and preserve, this distinction that has “distorted our understanding” of politics and the human sciences, but rather that *poiesis* (production) and *techne* (art, craft) have *so subordinated praxis* (activity) and *phronesis* (intelligence) that the latter concepts have effectively “fallen into oblivion” (Bernasconi 3). In what can be considered an attempt to correct this imbalance, Heidegger—in his discussion in *Being and Time* of the four Greek senses of the “thing”—

¹⁰ John Ashbery is identified by both “camps” – a most telling support of Bloom’s characterization of Ashbery as Stevens’s primary heir; his concerns, like Stevens’s, exceed critical attempts at clear canonical and historical divisions.

defines *praxis* “in a truly wide sense, neither in the narrow meaning of practical use, nor in the sense of praxis as moral action: praxis is all doing, pursuing and enduring, which also includes *poiesis*” (Bernasconi 7). But this definition does not come much closer to circumventing the fundamental ambiguity, inherited from Aristotle, who wrote in *Nicomachean Ethics*:

Thought alone moves nothing, but only thought for-the-sake-of-something and concerned with action. This indeed governs *poiesis* also, since, whoever makes something always has some further end in view: that which is made is not an end in itself, it is relative and for someone. Whereas that which is done is an end in itself, since doing well is the end and what desire aims at (as quoted in Bernasconi 8)

In Bernasconi’s commentary on this passage he writes, “It is striking that Aristotle appears to accomplish the reverse of what he intends. For when praxis is construed as the goal of *poiesis*, does it not cease to be praxis?” (8). This question, perhaps more than any other, has been central to the consideration of poetics from Aristotle onward, and its motivating force in the poetry of Wallace Stevens is something that I hope that this project has articulated and begun, at least, to explore. The “commitment of an approach” (Levinas, OTB 5) that is engendered in Stevens’s poetry seeks to reverse the subordination of *praxis* to *poiesis*—disrupting a conception of the relationship that would persist in measuring *praxis* against the limits of its *practical* application; in a world increasingly concerned with production, that would consider it only in material terms, as “*craft*” or *logos*, rather than in “*active*” terms of *intelligence*, process, or “saying.” What is opened up is a space of active reflection on what Levinas, in *Otherwise than Being*, articulates as “the responsibility for another”; a responsibility that “is precisely a saying prior to anything said. The surprising saying which is a responsibility for another is against the ‘winds and tides’ of being, is an

interruption of essence, a disinterestedness imposed with a good violence” (43). The gerund here is the very ground of the act, and it is also the ground (“beginning” as *part* of “that which is always beginning” [449]) upon which the false opposition between *poesis* and *praxis* is dismantled within Stevens’s poetry.

Intelligibility or responsibility for the other that establishes itself within a primordial relationship *beyond being*, does not free itself utterly from the practical material realities of Being itself, however. An emphasis on the gerund form, *the very ground* of the act, does not translate into action itself. In short, by upending the relationship between *praxis* and *poiesis*, we do not necessarily interrupt or make any impact at all upon the *practical realities* of the world around us, and it is precisely this that raised concern during Stevens’s lifetime among his critics and fellow writers. In not specifically addressing the issues and “realities” of his time, was he not actually shirking the responsibility of an artist? Stevens was explicitly aware of the tensions that existed between the poetic and the practical, and in retrospect his oeuvre can indeed be considered an exploration of just this tension—elaborating through the process of exploration a space within which *that which exceeds both* might be in some way figured and understood.

The process of “saying,” as Stevens knew well, exists always in *relation* to, but always, in *excess* of the “said.” There is no other way, however, of entering that which is *beyond* the “said,” than *through* the “said,” no other way of entering *beyond being* than via *being itself*. As Levinas writes:

To enter into being and truth is to enter into the said; being is inseparable from its meaning! It is spoken. It is in the logos. But the reduction is reduction of the said to the saying beyond the logos, beyond being and non-being, beyond essence, beyond true and non-true. It is the reduction to signification, to the one-for-the-

other involved in responsibility (or more exactly substitution), to the locus of the non-lieu, locus and non-lieu, the utopia of the human (OTB 45).

The “non-lieu” that Levinas evokes here contains important traces of Rilke’s “Open,” which Heidegger influentially discusses in “What Are Poets For?” “The Open,” Heidegger explains, “is the great whole of all that is unbounded. It lets the beings ventured into the pure draft draw as they are drawn, so that they variously draw on one another and draw together without encountering any bounds. Drawing as so drawn, they fuse with the boundless, the infinite. They do not dissolve into void nothingness, but they redeem themselves into the whole of the Open” (104). The “open” is not to be understood in spatial terms (“sky, air, space; they, too are ‘object’ and thus ‘opaque’ and closed to the man who observes and judges” [105]), but in terms of that which exists *beyond* all spatial categories, that which exists only as “that indescribably open freedom which perhaps has its (extremely fleeting) equivalent among us only in those first moments of love when one human being sees his own vastness in another, his beloved, and man’s elevation toward God” (106). “The open” thus corresponds to the primordial responsibility for the other (usually absorbed into the “same” by the process of intelligibility) and revealed in moments of “love.” It is at these moments, when the “I” is able to recognize itself “(extremely fleetingly)” in the “non-I,” that a space of *différance* is established and the subject’s *responsibility for the other* is effectively felt. This proximity—between the “I” and “non-I,” which is paradoxically the establishment of a space of *différance* against which the neighbour’s proximity can be felt—is precisely what poetry maintains the potential to “call” into being. It is the exploration of this proximity—the “proximity of one to the other...the one for the other”—which, in turn, as Levinas has written, is “the very signifyingness of signification” (OTB 5). Poets to whom, as Heidegger writes of Hölderlin, “the nature of poetry becomes worthy of questioning” (PLT 139), engage in an exploration

of the very nature of signification. In opening up a space of precisely this sort of questioning within his work, and thereby establishing a vantage point from which the reader, alongside the poet, might both “see” and “know that he sees,” Stevens explores not only the nature of signification, but the transcendental nature of human being: the primordial encounter of the “face to face.

Conclusion: “An Unexplained Completion”

The presencing of what cannot be made present—the attempt not to behold but to “be beheld” (CP 104) by that which exceeds both presence and absence: that most illusive of substances, the “nothing that is”—permeates Stevens’s work from the early days of *Harmonium*. His concern was not to discover through language any essential or original essence or meaning, but to afford, through language, a manner in which to continuously seek that which is prior to utterance, origin or meaning. Stevens was as deeply sceptical of fixing language in “the said” as Levinas. He searched, through the medium of language, for a method of transcending it—of re-inscribing, through language, the primordial recognition of exteriority, of being as *otherness*, and therefore as desire. This primordial recognition Levinas would later describe as “the first ethical gesture” (TI 174), but—like Stevens, and every practitioner of language—he was doomed to a discourse on the subject that would always dissimulate it. As Alphonso Lingis writes in the “translator’s introduction” of *Otherwise than Being*:

The very sentences of this book—thematic, synchronic time, systematic language, constantly making the verb to be intervene in phrases that profess to express what is antecedent to the work of being – can only be a continual transposition, and dissimulation, of the prethematic alterity, the diachronic time of the contact with the other, the non-presence of one term to another, which these phrases mean to put forth (xlili).

Stevens’s challenge, like Levinas’s, was to seize on this inevitability (the manner in which being is inscribed into every statement, even or especially, when one tries to speak past it) in order to expose it, and, in those brief moments of exposure, glimpse what remains, always, *beyond* being—and on the far side of language. For both, the process of thinking and writing was a “continual transposition, and dissimulation, of . . . prethematic alterity” (Lingis OTB xlili), and yet there was only language with which to grapple with what

remained, always, *beyond* language. Neither could conceive of a metalanguage by which, as Lingis goes on to write, “one (might) establish oneself so as to control the meaning and the evidence of the text and the pre-text” (xliii). All the poet, as equally as the philosopher, could do was to “live this effort to reduce the said to the saying, and be confounded by the ever-unfaithful text that that yields” (xliii).

Poetry, like philosophy, as Lingis explains, necessarily exists in the ambivalence that this effort describes—“between the intelligibility of system and synchrony and the intelligibility of signifyingness itself which is asymmetry and diachrony” (xliii). In other words, both philosophical and poetical thought reside within the space of tension between the static a-temporal sign (the “said,” that which appears as a “fixed” thought on the mind or the page) and the continuously shifting, temporal “signifyingness” (beyond the “said”) of “saying.” Rather than the adaptation of the asymmetry and diachrony of signifyingness to a synchronic system of signification, however, poetry may adopt as its primary concern *signifyingness itself*, leaving aside, at least to a certain degree, its translation into a symmetrical rendering. Poetry affords the possibility of an attention to and absorption within the reverberation of language as it exists *prior* to and in *the wake of* symmetrical meaning—with, that is (rather than any description or investigation into the “to be” of Being), *Being itself*. In this regard, poetry blurs the definition of both *praxis* and *poiesis*—at the very least resisting any rigid distinction (our inheritance from Aristotle) between the two, if not outright subverting it. Stevens’s “commitment to approach”—his pointed refusal to attend to any previously defined line between poetry and philosophy, and his resistance to the “pressures of reality” through his insistence on the value and aesthetics of the imagination—helped to carve a new territory for a contemporary American poetry that would continue, and further, this resistance and subversion.

Thanks to the inexorable influence of Bloom, John Ashbery is still resoundingly

considered to be Stevens's most direct heir—and for good reason. Ashbery takes up many of Stevens's key poetic themes, pushing the exploration of his own “reality-imagination complex” into new territory—particularly in regard to the representation of subjectivity. Given the emphasis within Stevens's oeuvre on the continuously regenerative nature of poetry, the continuity between the two poets's work exists primarily in the active re-imagining and enframing of self in relation to the dominant discourses of representation in their time.

An early Ashbery poem like “The Painter” continues Stevens's investigative approach to representation while at the same time portraying a surrealist impulse towards associative (il)logic; this combination establishes a new ground of exploration for Ashbery. At the time that “The Painter” first appeared in Ashbery's first published collection, *Some Trees*, which came out with the Yale Younger Poets Series in 1956, Ashbery was (although only twenty-eight years old and relatively unknown to the poetry world) already well-placed within the contemporary art scene. He would later find work as a “sort of an art critic” while living abroad in Paris following a Fulbright fellowship that originally brought him to the city in 1955.¹ Like Stevens before him, Ashbery's concern for the visual arts pervades his work, and he often relies on metaphors of ocular perception and representation in order to address these same issues on a broader scale. “The Painter”—similarly perhaps to Stevens's “Idea of Order at Key West”—can be read as an early *Ars Poetica* for Ashbery; it describes the maturation of a young artist's concept of representation as he encounters the limits and potentialities inherent within his own perception.

Sitting between the sea and the buildings
 He enjoyed painting the sea's portrait.
 But just as children imagine a prayer that

¹ Ashbery inherited a friend's position at the Paris *Herald Tribune* in 1960. He had little notion then that the temporary job would lead him to work—in his words—as a “sort of an art critic” for the next twenty-five years, publishing in journals such as *ArtNews*, *Newsweek*, and *New York* (Bergman, xi).

Is merely, silence, he expected his subject
 To rush up the sand, and, seizing a brush,
 Plaster its own portrait on the canvas. (SP 20)

What the young artist “forgets” in this opening stanza is the manner in which he is *other than* the world he seeks to represent. The “sea” becomes, for him, inextricable from himself—the opposition between “I” and “non-I” effectively disappearing into the “pure present” of the sea’s intelligibility (Levinas, TI, 124-125). By dissolving the exterior world in this way into his own experience of subjectivity, the young artist also dissolves his agency over the image, as well as his experience of it. His receipt of the world is depicted, at this stage, as one of extreme passivity.

So there was never any paint on his canvas
 Until the people who lived in the buildings
 Put him to work: “Try using the brush
 As a means to an end. Select, for a portrait,
 Something less angry and large, and more subject
 To a painter’s moods, or, perhaps, to a prayer. (SP 20)

It is only in this, the poem’s second stanza, that the painter is depicted as being able to differentiate between “the object of representation” and “the act of representation” (Levinas, TI 123). Still, the painter encounters the world around him and renders it intelligible in such a way that the perceived object is “interior to thought: despite its independence it falls under the power of thought” (Levinas, TI 123). The “clarity” of the image he perceives is attained, again in Levinas’s words, through a

total adequation of the thinker with what is thought, in the precise sense of a mastery exercised by the thinker upon what is thought in which the object’s resistance as an exterior being vanishes. This mastery is total and as though creative; it is accomplished as a giving of meaning. (TI 124)

The (a priori) intelligibility of the scene with which the painter is confronted is substituted for an alternate meaning, one rendered no longer by the “object” but “the act” of

representation. In thus allowing the moment of his apperception to remain within the “pure present” of intelligibility without an effort to objectify it or his perspectival relationship to it (experiencing it as he does seemingly from within—as “interior” to his thought—annulling, therefore, the borders between interior and exterior so that they would seem not to exist at all) the painter has failed to represent anything at all. His canvas is bare; the moment has not been ended and thus there is no way for it to now begin anew. We are here in a space outside of time, a space of “prayer,” which is (as children might imagine it) “merely silence.” This is a space very similar to that of Stevens’s “St. Armorers’s Church From the Outside”—beyond meaning, beyond Being—where silence is left un-translated into intentionality. The repetition throughout the poem of the word “prayer,” each time with a slightly different meaning, disrupts the possibility of attributing a larger symbolic, or over-arching religiosity, to the word. The word is merely indexical, and yet the cumulative effect of its repetition adds up to something *in excess of* the value of each iteration. The repetition itself points to an excess of the denotative value of the word within the poem as a whole, and yet in each case the denotative value is preserved. “Prayer” is, with each use, exactly what it says—its meaning specific to the context of each individual stanza—and at the same time *more than it can say*. In any one case it does not refer to any larger system beyond itself (God, Faith, Ideology), but through its continually shifting denotative value and its ultimate resistance to connotation, meaning, and even to sound, it refers as a whole to the system and constraints of *representation itself*.

How could he explain to them his prayer
 That nature, not art, might usurp the canvas?
 He chose his wife for a new subject,
 Making her vast, like ruined buildings,
 As if, forgetting itself, the portrait
 Had expressed itself without a brush. (SP 20)

What at first appears to be the painter's naivety (his inability to differentiate between passive receipt of experience and time and an active representative rendering of that experience, which would presuppose a separation and distance between the subject and its object) becomes at this point in the poem an active, if impracticable, aspiration; it is *desire* that occurs, then, in the gap between the extreme passivity of being and the possibilities of active representation. This desire is, of course, only for an extreme passivity to "usurp the canvas"—for the passivity of a "prayer" or mode of representation that would be again "merely silence" to overtake the creative act of representation on the part of the artist. The artist, in other words, desires that which is *beyond* being to be presented within *Being itself*; he wishes to depict a sort of "*absence-as-presence*" (Barthes 106) that would be at once the "pure present" characteristic of *representation itself*, while simultaneously securing a vantage point from which that moment could be actually witnessed and described. In still other words: what the artist desires is the simultaneous "*this will be and this has been*" (Barthes, CL 96) of the photograph—a simultaneity that, detected by Barthes in *Camera Lucida*, permits access to what he refers to as an "anterior future" in which, and though "death is the stake" (96), provides the opportunity, briefly, for contact with something *beyond* representation. He refers to this "something" variously as "truth," "pity," and "love."

It is, indeed, this possibility that Barthes suggests at the end of *Camera Lucida*—of encountering, even "extremely-fleetingly" (Heidegger, PLT, 105), this certain "something" beyond the bounds of what it is possible to represent, that, to a certain and very general extent, is granted by every artistic pursuit. It is certainly toward this possibility that the cumulative "prayer" of Ashbery's "The Painter" is aimed. Indeed, this possibility of "contact" beyond the limits of subjectivity and representation is elevated within the poem to a sublime and impossible goal. "The painter" reads into the idea of "re-presentation" a

potential far greater than that which is, or could ever be, simply *present* on the page. His ability to render his wife “vast,” and her analogous relationship to “ruined buildings,” fuels his desire to contain more and more of the “vast,” more and more of what is destined to, at least physically, remain absent from even his most perceptive depictions.

Slightly encouraged, he dipped his brush
 In the sea, murmuring a heartfelt prayer:
 “My soul, when I paint this next portrait
 Let it be you who wrecks the canvas.”
 The news spread like wildfire through the buildings:
 He had gone back to the sea for his subject.

Imagine a painter crucified by his subject!
 Too exhausted even to lift his brush,
 He provoked some artists leaning from the buildings
 To malicious mirth: “We haven’t a prayer
 Now, of putting ourselves on canvas,
 Or getting the sea to sit for a portrait!”

Others declared it a self-portrait.
 Finally all indications of a subject
 Began to fade, leaving the canvas
 Perfectly white. He put down the brush.
 At once a howl, that was also a prayer,
 Arose from the overcrowded buildings.

They tossed him, the portrait, from the tallest of the buildings;
 And the sea devoured the canvas and the brush
 As though his subject had decided to remain a prayer. (SP 21)

We are returned here, in the final lines—after a disastrously failed pursuit to represent that which it would be impossible to represent—to an extreme passivity, a prayer that is once more in this context “merely silence,” void of meaning, and yet at the same time (through the cumulative energy that the word has obtained through its repetition) directed *beyond* that denotative silence, toward the (always connotative) *beyond* of Being. The final split between the “I” and the “non-I” ruptures the passive receipt of the object of representation during the painter’s “act,” but it is precisely this rupture that brings about the desire for a

reintroduction of unity between the two—and simultaneously prohibits it. This prohibition is, in turn, however, what brings the “I” and the “non-I,” or “Other,” finally into proximity.

Importantly, “the painter” is represented at odds with a faceless antagonism represented by the people in “the overcrowded buildings.” The isolation of his limited subjectivity, as well as the insignificance of that subjectivity in relation to the “vastness” and otherness of the crowd, is—through this conflict—accentuated. The classic Romantic struggle that is depicted between the painter’s ambition (to follow his subjective vision) and the opposition to that ambition by the jeering crowd (“try using the brush as a means to an end” they advise, reminding the painter of the “reality”—the contingency—to which he is ultimately bound), dramatizes what years earlier Stevens had called his “reality-imagination complex.”

“To be, in Ashbery’s verse,” as John Shoptaw has observed, “is to be unperceived” (143). That “unperceived” being, however, is always caught in prismatic relation with what lies outside or beyond itself—both defining and threatening its imagined state of (again “unperceived”) being. There is always a “you” that interrupts and defines the “I.” This is depicted quite literally in *Three Poems* (“In you I fall apart” [CP 253] Ashbery writes) where a play of pronouns keeps subjectivity permanently unfixed and unmoored—but for the express purpose of effecting “a greater naturalism.”² W.S. Piero’s commentary on the prose sections that intersperse *Three Poems* further emphasizes the way that instability or

² In a 1973 interview, Ashbery explained: “The personal pronouns in my work very often seem to be like variables in an equation. ‘You’ can be myself or it can be another person, someone whom I’m addressing, and so can ‘he’ and ‘she’ for that matter and ‘we’; sometimes one has to deduce from the rest of the sentence what is being meant and my point is also that it doesn’t really matter very much, that we are somehow all aspects of a consciousness giving rise to the poem and the fact of addressing someone, myself or someone else, is what’s the important thing at that particular moment rather than the particular person involved. I guess I don’t have a very strong sense of my own identity and I find it very easy to move from one person in the sense of a pronoun to another and this again helps to produce a kind of polyphony in my poetry which I again feel is a means toward greater naturalism” (quoted in Perloff, PL 280).

inconstancy in Ashbery's work can actually serve to strengthen and intensify both its poetic and communicative aims.

When lesser talents try to write "prose poems," they do so in order to create merely gratuitous effects. The results are usually tedious and flimsy. Ashbery, however, resorts to a prose format in order to achieve a heightened concentration of sensibility, a firmer unity of feeling and thought which would otherwise be impossible to achieve in stanzaic verse. The prose sections in [*Three Poems*] cannot be broken down into lines of free verse. They can exist as poems only when rendered in prose (40).

As de Piero observes, it is not any identifiable formal element, but the *process* of destabilizing, "unpinning," the anticipated structure of "free verse" that allows for the piece to "exist as poems."³ It is a similar process of destabilization that also results, according to de Piero, through Ashbery's "heightened concentration" on "sensibility" and the subject. "Ashbery has always been possessed by a desire to posit a person or relationship at a particular point in time then slip that unit of time into the larger sequence of past and future," he explains. Continuing: "It's an attempt at redemption which strives to account for both visible and invisible aspects of life" (40).

Like Stevens, it is ultimately neither the one nor the other, the "visible" or the "invisible," "reality" or the "imagination," that Ashbery seeks, but an intermediate space between the two—a space in which, as "The Painter" had envisioned, one might transcend his own singular nature in order that nature *itself*, "not art," might, in "forgetting itself...(express) itself without a brush." In other words, what is desired by both poets is a space where the pure passivity of simply being might be contained within the *activity* of

³ It is thus the *content* of the poem, the reality at its base, that the poem is subject to; as Stevens affirmed, poetry serves reality, not the other way around: "The great well of poetry is not other poetry but prose: reality," he wrote in his *Materia Poetica*, "However it requires a poet to perceive the poetry in reality" (919).

Being itself—where the “pure present” of ecstatic being might be, if “extremely fleetingly,” realized, as in Barthes’s analysis of the photograph, or Stevens’s depiction of “St. Armorer’s Church.” What is key here—and to any conception of reality—is a refusal of stasis; for the maintenance, instead, of that *internal* element by which the *external* is maintained: constant motion, activity, change.

Like Stevens, Ashbery is motivated not by a desire to “represent” the world around him but by a desire to inquire into the nature and processes of representation itself, as well as the way that those processes—the incessant motion and change that characterize them—also characterize subjectivity: the relationship between the “I” of the same and “the other” that always exceeds it. The disappearance of “the other” into the “same” that Levinas describes as the moment of intelligibility or representation is a process that both Stevens and Ashbery work against. For both poets it is *the distance between* “the I” and “non-I,” *between* subject and object, *praxis* and *poiesis*, reality and imaginative desire, that is emphasized and explored. As Levinas—who considers the terms intelligibility and representation interchangeable (TI 124)—writes: “in representations the I precisely loses its opposition to its object; the opposition fades, bringing out the identity of the I despite the multiplicity of its objects, that is, precisely the unalterable character of the I” (TI 126). It is this assuredness—with which the “I” is foregrounded—that both Stevens and Ashbery seek to trouble in their work, this “unalterable character of the I” that both wish to interrupt—and alter.

Stevens worked conscientiously throughout his career to open up a negative-space of representation where the speaker, freed from the allegiances of either “reality” or the “imagination,” might articulate himself beyond “the said.” It was within this territory—a negative territory of the “outward blank”—that an encounter between the “I” and the “non-I” (each no longer either subsumed within the same nor juxtaposed, in the Romantic model,

against one another in absolute opposition) becomes possible. Ashbery continues to delineate the space of this encounter. What Marjorie Perloff refers to as his “discontinuous writing” style⁴ is indeed a concerted attempt at initiating a poetics through which, as Stevens says of “St. Armorer’s Church,” “reverberations leak and lack among holes” (CP 448). The shapeliness of the double negative created by this phrase (that which is figured as “lacking” among “holes”) is precisely the shapeliness that Ashbery seeks to create in the gaps resulting from his “discontinuous” style. His concern is *not* (or not primarily) the disruption of linear narrative, but rather the disruption of a linear understanding of Being and time. The “discontinuity” of the work is concentrated mostly on identity language: the constantly shifting pronouns, which often lack antecedents, are what most strikingly disrupt the notion of a singular, isolated subjectivity within the poetry. What Stevens identifies as an “outward blank”—a negative-space from which Stevens’s speaker, in resistance to any singular, positive identity, speaks—is articulated within Ashbery’s work as the collective “we.” That is: where Stevens had worked to create a space within which the speaker’s voice might be permitted, figuratively, to exceed representation through a singular subjectivity, Ashbery’s “speaker” is *literally* represented (following, along with Stevens, in the tradition of Whitman, only going a step further) as a collective. This destabilization of identity is furthered by a surrealistic montage effect that Ashbery develops in his work—a technique that Perloff has compared to Barthes’ autobiographical writings in *Barthes by Barthes*. The photo sequence with which Barthes begins this text is interpreted by Perloff

⁴ In her essay, “Barthes, Ashbery and the Zero Degree of Genre,” Perloff comments of the similarities between Barthes and Ashbery’s work (observations that are also interesting in regards to W.S. de Piero’s comments on the “prosaic” element of Ashbery’s poetry in *Three Poems*): “Lineation aside, we are dealing with two very similar modes of writing. In both cases, the fragmentary, discontinuous form breaks up what Barthes calls ‘the smooth finish, the composition, discourse constructed to give a final meaning to what one says, which is the general rule of all past rhetoric’ (PL 279). But Ashbery’s “discontinuous” style goes farther than Barthes in his removal of all narrative scaffolding, particularly in terms of the structuration of subjectivity and point of view, leaving the reader without any of the customary orientation typical of rhetorical or lyrical writing styles.

in the same manner as Ashbery's "fragmentary, discontinuous" style: both act as "dictées...the effect (of which) interspersed in the text is a kind (of) Brechtian *Verfremdung* [distancing, alienation]" (PL 279).

The influence of surrealism—which such adjectives cannot help bring to mind, is indeed explicit in Ashbery's work. The title poem of his 1992 collection, "Hotel Lautréamont," for example, directly refers to the famous statement of Isadore Ducasse (alias Comte de Lautréamont), which became a slogan for the surrealist movement: "Beautiful as the chance meeting upon a dissecting table of a sewing machine and an umbrella." Perloff argues that the effect of the dictées in Barthes's autobiographical text is a disruption of any holistic understanding of the work, let alone the individual who the work is purported to represent. Identity in the text is "called into question by the series of fragments that constitute the rest of the book" (PL 271). In Ashbery's work, through his use of fragmentation, surrealist collage and a "discontinuous" style, it is not only identity and subjectivity that are disrupted: *representation itself* is called into question.

Ashbery wilfully refuses to fix moments, thought, or language—to ground them in the "said"—but allows them instead to open off onto multiple, seemingly infinitely deferrable, meanings. This is a process that sometimes serves to disrupt meaning entirely. The long poem, "Grand Galop" (named, like many of the poems in this collection for a piece of music, this one of Liszt's), included in his Pulitzer prize winning collection of 1975, *Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror*, provides a remarkable example of the manner in which Ashbery's poetic *process* is embodied in its *product*—of the way that meaning takes shape within the work not in the form of a linear trajectory, but *radially*. "All things seem mention of themselves," he writes. "And the names which stem from them branch out to other/ referents. / Hugely, spring exits again. The weigela does its dusty thing/ in fire-hammered air." (SP 172). Here "the weigela" exemplifies the poem's opening claim—

“weigela” connoting both a flowering plant and its namesake—the German mystic Valentin Weigel. The connotations from there (or, as the poem suggests, from any point and in any direction) are uncountable. “An Ashbery poem does not articulate a process,” Perloff cites Lawrence Kramer as having written, “but simply lets a textured consciousness persist shimmeringly for a given duration...The nature of this flow is to be quirky, inconsistently coherent, and, contrary to conventional expectations, non-linear” (quoted in Perloff, PL 279).

Ashbery’s poetry is certainly a poetics of “duration” in two senses: in the temporal sense, as in “Grand Galop’s” emphasis on “waiting....only waiting” (SP 172), as well as in an objective sense—the “durability” of objects, of language itself, is continuously tested within the work, as though the speaker was himself the knife wielded over the “dissecting table” of the poem. Kramer’s comment is apt, therefore, in that it draws attention to temporality within Ashbery’s work, but it misses the mark profoundly in its refusal to acknowledge the fundamental role that process plays in the representation of temporality in the poems. *Essential* to what Kramer—rightly, I believe—calls the “shimmeringly” textured consciousness of the poems and that “given duration,” is the question: what *is* duration? It is the *process* of first asking, and then considering this question that is the driving force behind much of Ashbery’s work. “Only waiting, the waiting: what fills up the time in between?” The question itself. The materiality of the words on the page (which point beyond the text—beyond the linearity of the words on the page), and the *process* of the questioning (which can do nothing other than establish itself linearly and materially).

Unlike Barthes’ photo essay, the poem does not exist in stalled fragments; instead, it proceeds with a constant, cinematic flow. It is indeed this flow that provides the “texture” of the poem. But because “[n]othing takes up its fair share of time,” there is always a surplus of images, of signifiers, so that the cinematic momentum of the poems cannot be

absorbed into the “conventional expectations” of a linear narrative. Instead: “The wait is built into the things just coming into their own. / Nothing is partially incomplete, but the wait / Invests everything like a climate” (SP 172). The “wait,” the “pause,” is, in the tradition of Stevens, in direct conflict with any notion of a stalled, Heideggerian purely spoken (PLT 192) or by T.S. Eliot’s “still point.”⁵ For Ashbery, as for Stevens, the “wait” exists rather as a hyper-temporal charge “built into...things.” Even *before* they “come into their own” they are “invested” with a *delay*—the exact opposite of a “still point.” This is a rendering visible of the *process* of time, *not* an objectified pause or gap in that progression. A “still point” is always open to the possibility of absorption into the linear system—what is a line, after all, but a succession of “still” points? It is essential to both Stevens’s and Ashbery’s work that the “pause” be conceived as *outside* of the poem—as something “built in,” inherent to the structure, but also in permanent *excess* of it, as Levinas understood the *beyond* of Being, or Derrida understood *différance*.

Arguably, this space *beyond*, this *différance*, could be located within Eliot’s “Burnt Norton”—within the conceptualization of a space “in between” temporal figuration: “In my beginning is my end” (FQ 23), “Here is a place of disaffection / Time before and time after...Neither plenitude nor vacancy” (FQ 16). But a plenitude, a stillness, is established by Eliot in this poem nevertheless. A Hegelian “self equals self” equilibrium (Levinas, OTB, 100) is maintained—even if at times the poem resorts to locating a direct referent within the represented object itself: The kingfisher’s wing answers “light to light”; “only through time time is conquered” (FQ 16). It is this agreement—reference to referent—that enables Eliot to locate the “still point of the turning world.”

⁵ “At the still point of the turning world; neither flesh nor / fleshless; / Neither from nor towards; at the still point, there the dance / is, / But neither arrest nor movement. And do not call it fixity, / Where past and future are gathered. Neither movement / from nor towards. Neither ascent nor decline. Except for the point, the still / point, / There would be no dance and there is only the dance” (From “Burnt Norton,” *The Four Quartets* 15)

Stevens's poetry disrupted this "stillness"—and, paradoxically, through his own conception of a "pure poetry" that would concern itself not with any fixed point, any exterior "purity" that the poem might somehow attain, but with the processes of *language and representation themselves*. Ashbery's poetry, in keeping with the precedent that Stevens's notion of "pure poetry" had set, goes skittering from the "point" altogether. "It's getting out of hand," writes the speaker in "Grand Galop." "As long as one has some sense that each thing knows its place / All is well, but with the arrival and departure / Of each new one overlapping so intensely in the semi-darkness / It's a bit mad" (SP 174). "Each new one" here of course refers not to anything in particular but to an endlessly supplementable catalogue of experience and description. The poem suggests that the *poem itself* cannot help but be the thing that it bemoans: a "pocket history of the world, so general / as to constitute a sob or wail unrelated / To any attempt at definition" (SP 174). But because the "fragments" of Ashbery's "discontinuous writing" are not "still points" they can never be fixed—as in a dictionary—to any one meaning, but instead constantly move beyond the borders of their own definitions. They do not define themselves in terms of an essential, original, quality: "light to/as light" "time to/as time," but, instead, as in Benjamin's definition in "The Task of the Translator," they render both the "original" (meaning) and the "translation" (word on the page that can never apparently be fixed to that meaning) "recognizable as fragments of a greater language, just as fragments are a part of a vessel" (78). This "greater language" must necessarily be understood in conjunction with Benjamin's idea of a "pure language"—a language he hoped would manifest itself within a work that had been translated literally. A "literal" language would exceed the constraints—time and place-bound—of the "original" language and be permitted to access, *beyond* language, the text's transcendent meaning.

The connections between Benjamin's lofty vision for a greater, transcendent language to the earlier French Symbolist definition of "pure poetry" must also, of course, be taken into account, but Benjamin's attention to the materiality of language grounds his ambitions, concentrating it within the territory of the immediate and everyday. Both Stevens and Ashbery, though also undoubtedly influenced by the Symbolists, work definitively within this more literal territory. The focus in Stevens's work on the letter as such—the literal units by which we measure meaning—is continued within Ashbery's work with an even greater intensity, so that any "transcendence" that is sought through attention to the materiality of language needs even more urgently to be placed within qualifying quotation marks. The disruption of reference and meaning in Ashbery's poetry often seems, indeed, to undermine not only the prospect of establishing a "pure" language or poetry, but of establishing a reliable method of communicating through language at all. Ashbery's "difficult" style has resulted in a range of critical response; in di Piero's 1973 review he deems the polarization and extremity of the critics's views "almost amusing" (39). "On the one hand," he observes,

are those who berate him for lacking the Audenesque "censor" (that little editing machine in a poet's head which deletes all superfluous materials) or who accuse him simply of being willfully and unreasonably perverse. On the other hand are those reviewers who, queerly enough, praise the difficulty of Ashbery's verse as if difficulty were a positive literary value in itself, while ignoring what the poet is saying. I think that Ashbery's "difficulty" (grammatical ellipses, misapplied substantives, fragmented verb phrases, etc.) is a function of his meaning, which is a simple and unoriginal way of saying that sometimes the poet's methods work to support his meaning and sometimes they don't (39).

Just as it was the destabilization of “free verse” through “prose” in *Three Poems* that results in its *poetic* value, and the decentering of the subject that results in a heightened *concentration* on subjectivity itself, it is here the presumed *disruption* of meaning in Ashbery’s poetry that reveals itself as the very “*function*” of meaning. Meaning is not cancelled out or made subservient to disruption, it continues to function through, *and as a result of*, its disruption. The alternative assumption, that Ashbery’s poetry “doesn’t mean but is” (Perloff, NJA) is often employed by critics in order to explain away what appears an *avoidance* in Ashbery’s work of meaning in favour of a sort of “isness” of language—language presented as an object, or fact in itself. This assumption is, according to Marjorie Perloff, always a mistake (NJA). Investing Ashbery’s poetry with too much of this facticity, or “isness,” is to undermine the dominant force of the poems, which is one of incessant forward momentum. The stasis of any factual “isness” is abandoned in favour of the pursuit, the continual drive, *toward* meaning. As even the title of “Grand Galop” betrays, Ashbery’s poems are characterized by a restlessness. When the poem concludes: “The road just seems to vanish / And not that far in the distance, either. The horizon must have been moved up” (SP 178), the motion of the poem seems almost to devour itself. The result is what Kramer referred to as the “shimmering” quality of the work—a quality achieved not by a photo-montage-like “stillness” conceived of *outside* of time, but by a constant, frenetic, and intrinsically *time-bound* motion. The speaker can neither distance himself from this motion nor be absorbed into the flow. Instead, as in Stevens’s “St. Armorer’s Church,” the speaker achieves a doubleness of vision and experience: he sees, and he knows that he sees. He speaks and he understands both the heaviness and possibilities of the words he employs.

Where ordinarily the “gap” between sign and signifier is sealed over in the moment of intelligibility and representation, Stevens and Ashbery’s insistence on the temporality of language work to open them up—thus revealing the “astonishing divergence of the identical with itself” (Levinas, OTB 28). In Levinas’s words:

The getting out of phase with the instant, the ‘all’ pulling off from the ‘all’ – the temporality of time – makes possible...a recuperation in which nothing is lost.

There is a disclosing of being; disengaged from its identity, from itself (what we are here calling a getting out of phase) and rediscoveries of truth; between what shows itself and the aim it fulfills there is monstration. (OTB 28)

It is precisely this: the in-between space of *monstration* that both Stevens and Ashbery work to elaborate in their poetry. Both seek to reveal, indeed to *embody*, the tension that results between what Levinas describes as “the ‘all’ pulling off from the ‘all’” (28). This is, after all—according to Levinas—the very space of truth. “Truth,” he writes, is rediscovery, recall, reminiscence, reuniting under the unity of apperception. There is remission of time and tension of the recapture, relaxation and tension without a break, without a gap. There is not a pure distancing from the present, but precisely re-presentation; that is, a distancing which the present of truth is already or still is; for a representation is a recommencement of the present which in its “first time” is for the second time; it is a retention and a protention, between forgetting and expecting,⁶ between memory and project. Time is reminiscence and reminiscence is time, the unity of consciousness and essence. (OTB 29)

A “rediscovery” requires not just time, but also a vantage point from which the retention of the “first time” might be perceived from the next. It requires, that is, the sort of “redoubled vision” that Krauss describes for Modernist visual art—where the relationship

⁶ Recall here Barthes’s “*this will be and this has been*” (CL 96) of the photographic image.

between the terms figure and ground are simultaneously “preserved and cancelled” (OU 15) so that (as demonstrated so remarkably in “St. Armorer’s Church”) outside and inside begin to “take on a deductive relation to one another” (OU 16). In Ashbery’s “Grand Galop” it is made clear that, though the speaker suggests that it has, the horizon has *not*, in fact, been “moved up.” It is just that the motion—absorbed without apparent gap by the speaker and at first “unrecorded”—is only retrospectively established in the poem. The moment of intelligibility, in this way, has effectively been slowed, so that what is articulated in the poem is this space of “redoubled vision: ...a seeing and a knowing that one sees” (OU 19).

Vision, according to Krauss, “dispenses with narrative” (19). It offers perhaps our most immediate experience of the “all-at-onceness” of representation: the instantaneous divergence from, and re-alignment of, the identical with itself (Levinas, OTB 28). It offers us, in other words, the most tangible and immediate, as well as most *reproducible*, *representable*, experience of “Truth,” if it is to be understood in the terms that Levinas spells out, of “rediscovery, recall, reminiscence” (OTB 29). What Ashbery’s “discontinuous writing” and Stevens’s “outward blank” can be understood to aspire toward is the elaboration precisely of this space of “Truth”: that “astonishing divergence between the identical and itself” (OTB 28). In opening up this space, in which the instant of representation gets “out of phase with itself” (before the moment of recuperation after which we find that “nothing is lost”)—in revealing the gap between the “saying” and the “said”—both poets explore that which is in *excess* to truth and representation and indeed, “beyond totality,” to being itself.

As Levinas reflects, however: “totality should not leave anything outside.” It is for this reason that “the transcendence of the totality thematized in truth is produced as a division of the totality into parts” (OTB 29). But the question remains: “How can these parts still be equivalent to the whole, as is implied when exposition is truth? By reflecting

the whole. The whole reflected in a part is an image. Truth then would be produced in an image of being” (OTB 29). It must be remembered, however, that what Levinas is describing is the *ordinary* processes by which we assemble everyday images into corresponding “truths”—the process by which we render the world intelligible, that we absorb the “other” or “non-I” into the “I” of the “same.” What Stevens and Ashbery effect through their poetry is a *slowing down* or *lengthening* of this process so that what would ordinarily be absorbed is instead figured—made *present*. This requires not an exemption *from* signification and temporality but instead a profound integration of both. It is through this deep integration that the elaboration and exploration of that “excluded middle”—which, beyond essence, signification, being and non-being, is (truly) what “signifies” (Levinas OTB 29)⁷—is achieved.

It is also along these lines that Ashbery’s interest in “surrealism” runs. His interest extends well beyond the visual arts movement that identified with that name—as well as beyond Stevens’s grievance that the movement “invents without discovering” (OP 203). Ashbery’s more inclusive idea of the term is shaped profoundly, however, by Stevens poetic approach and conceptualization of an intermediate space (a space later influential not

⁷ In Errol Morris’s investigation into the mystery of which of the two available versions of Fenton’s iconic photograph, “The Valley of the Shadow of Death,” came first (the photograph that *includes* cannonballs strewn on the road—posed or otherwise, that is the question—or the photograph in which they are absent, *excluded*), he grapples with questions of authenticity, as well as legitimate and illegitimate intentions and interventions by the artist. Though at the end of the article he arrives at a satisfyingly decisive thesis as to which of Fenton’s photographs *did* come first (it is the one that *excludes* the cannonballs), he concludes: “Couldn’t you argue that every photograph is posed because every photograph excludes something? Even in framing and cropping? Someone has made a decision about what time-slice to expose on the emulsion, what space-slice (i.e., the frame) to expose on the emulsion” (65). Fenton could have had an elephant in the photograph, Errol somewhat preposterously suggests in order to prove his final point—but he does not. “The photograph is posed not by the presence of the elephant but by its absence. Isn’t something always excluded, an elephant or something else? Isn’t there always a possible elephant lurking just at the edge of the frame?” (65). It is not the “elephant” but the *possibility* of the elephant, of that which is excluded in order to constitute a measured, representable, experienceable slice of both space and time, that makes the existing photograph possible. It is, likewise, that which lies in *excess* to truth, representation and being that *makes possible* the conception of truth, representation, and being itself.

only to Ashbery, but also to the Abstract Expressionist painters, with whom Ashbery was well acquainted) *between* and *inclusive of* both reality and imagination. Indeed, the “surrealism” that Ashbery speaks of is one that he noted in a December 1967 article in *ArtNews*, “is still continuing, even in the minimal, post-painterly or ‘scientific’ art of the present which at first seems so far from ‘dreams’ (RS 12). Ashbery resists the definition of artistic movements according to particular historical moments, and reads the whole of art history, instead, as a continuum. Romantic, modernist, and minimalist art projects are, for Ashbery, all aligned in their shared exploration of a “sur-reality.” “The dream of escaping from dreams is a dream like the others,” he writes. What is essential to art is a shared “Romantic” vision of “reality” and a commitment to representing it in an expanded or heightened, that is, a “sur-real” way: “The space of dreams—” Ashbery concludes,

deep shallow, open, bent, a point which as no physical dimensions or a universal breadth—is the space in which we now live [...] there is no real alternative to innovation, and the artist, if he is to survive, cannot leave art where he found it. Dreamers are insatiable expansionists, and the space of dreams rapidly becomes overcrowded. (12)

It was with this sense—of a need to expand the territory of exploration of both language and reality—that the L-A-N-G-U-A-G-E poetry movement began to explicitly shift their concern from the poem as product to the *process* by which it is conceived and written. The space within Stevens’s poetry dedicated to an investigation into “the letter as such” was further defined and elaborated by the Language poets—poets who, through their attention to language, sought specifically to distance themselves from the lyrical and aesthetic tradition Stevens was, and continues to be, associated with. They identified instead with a lineage stemming from William Carlos Williams, whose work has long been considered more concrete. Unfortunately, an often overly simplistic interpretation of

Williams's famous dictum, "No ideas but in things!"⁸—which dismisses much of the complexity of Williams's approach to "thing-ness"—has also been the bequest of the Language poets and the complex questions at work in their poetry has often been understood only as a blunt offering of the facticity of language. Despite the increased intensity with which contemporary poets, especially those associated with Language and experimental poetry have worked to reverse the subordination of *praxis* to *poiesis*, the ambiguity between the two terms that Bernasconi identifies as our inheritance from Aristotle's initial distinction, remains. Language poetry's explicit concern for the materiality of language—its potentially generative power, but also its inherent limitations—is paralleled, and troubled by, a dual concern for social action and change; the question, therefore, remains explicit within the movement, and (just as it was for Stevens's work) fundamental to its continuance: where do poetry and practice meet? *Is* there a distinction, and if so, of what nature is the distinction? Does *praxis* include *poiesis*, as Aristotle suggests? Or is *poiesis* always, necessarily, an "end," a sharp *break* from, the more fundamental "all doing" of *praxis*?

Although poetry—which etymologically stems from the ancient Greek, *poieo*, meaning "to make," (containing therefore within itself this central ambiguity between process and production)—is now commonly understood to oppose itself to *praxis* (conceived of here in the sense of a pragmatic "doing"), the problems inherent in such an oversimplified opposition are apparent, and it is these problems that the Language poets have sought to uncover and explore. The "*presentness*" of the visual arts, which offers an immediately tangible venue for taking up this question and exploring the connection

⁸ As Marc Elihu Hofstadter reminds us: "notice Williams doesn't say 'only things,' or 'no ideas, just things,' but 'no ideas but *in* things.' Williams never denied the importance of ideas, but believed that, when ideas are embodied in verse, they should be just that—*bodied forth* in concrete images. The common misconception that Williams was a simpleminded namer of chickens and wheelbarrows misses the infinitely varied and subtle ways Williams *thinks through things*" (15-16).

between making and doing—something that Stevens had anticipated in the 1930s with his interest and reliance on the language and vision of the New York art world—established its influence more fully on the field of contemporary poetry in the 1970s and 1980s. Indeed, the increasingly close relationship between the two fields can be traced to the impact of Stevens’s inspirational phrase, “the pressure of reality,” on the early Abstract Expressionists (McLeod 140). What was perhaps most attractive to contemporary poets who were looking for a method with which to explore and address this “pressure” *without* giving up their chosen mode of exploration, was the idea, crucial to both mediums, that—as Lyn Hejinian, quoting from Heidegger, claims in her book of essays, *The Language of Inquiry*—“one must philosophize not ‘about’ factual life but ‘from inside’ it” (363). The absorbing qualities of non-figurative visual art—which seeks to rely entirely on sensory information rather than mimesis—has been of particular interest to Language poets, many of whom make use of visual art within their texts, or have collaborated with visual artists,⁹ thus further emphasizing the process-oriented, sensory nature of language, and—by extension—experience. Language, art, and philosophy are for the Language poets—just as they were for Stevens—inextricably linked; what is essential to all three, beyond any potential category of exploration or thought, is—as Hejinian explores with the help of Heidegger, above—that any question regarding the nature of Being acknowledges the fact of its own position *within* Being. There is no possible way, Hejinian affirms, of thinking outside of that fundamental framework, and any presumption of doing so—in being so

⁹ Michael Palmer has collaborated with numerous well-known painters, including Gerhardt Richter and the Italian painter, Sandro Chia; Lyn Hejinian’s book, *The Traveller and the Hill and the Hill* (Granary 1998) which intersperses text with paintings by Emilie Clarke is one of her many collaborative projects with visual artists. “Poetry Plastique,” an exhibition in 2001 at the Marian Boesky gallery in New York curated by Charles Bernstein and Jay Sanders highlighted the interrelationship between visual arts and contemporary poetry. In his preface to the exhibition catalogue Bernstein explains that the exhibition showcases, “[n]ot words and pictures but poems as visual objects (read: subjects). Not poems about pictures but pictures that are poems. Not words affixed to a blank page but letters in time. Not works closed in a book but hanging on a wall or suspended from the ceiling or rising from the floor or sounding from inside a figure or embedded with paint on a canvas or written in the sky or flickering on a screen” (7).

intrinsically ill-, or rather, *unfounded*—will certainly lead in the wrong direction. Key, of course, to Hejinian’s text is the passage from *Being and Time* considered in Chapter One, which is worth returning to, and quoting at greater length:

What is decisive is not to get out of the circle but to come into it in the right way. This circle of understanding is not an orbit in which any random kind of knowledge may move; it is the expression of the existential fore-structure of *Dasein* itself. It is not to be reduced to the level of the vicious circle, or even of a circle which is merely tolerated. In the circle is hidden a positive possibility of the most primordial kind of knowing. (195)¹⁰

Similarly, Heidegger contends—and Hejinian goes on to quote this in her own text—that the foundation for philosophy must be “the radical existential intervention and the production of questionableness; placing oneself and life and the crucial implementations into questionableness is the basic concept of all, and the most radical, illumination” (363). This questionableness, insists Hejinian, must not be considered a departure *from* (that is, as being directed toward the *production* of a new—*extra*-ordinary—concept), but rather as “a return to the ordinary condition of things [...] to the inside of the everyday” (363).

Because we are always, inevitably, surrounded by the everyday details of our own lives, we are never able to look at it as a whole, but are only able to experience—again Hejinian quotes Heidegger—“ ‘this’ and ‘this’ and ‘this’...This thisness is hard to bear.” (363). Contemporary art—and Hejinian’s poetry is a key example of this—struggles to reinstall itself (in resistance to a closing in upon the “that”) within the “unbearable”

¹⁰ In other words, there is never any “outside” *from* which—no “metalanguage” *with* which—to theorize. This is the central philosophical problem that contemporary thinkers have been left to grapple with. Think of Levinas’s inquiry into subjectivity, the difficulties of which could be expressed by the problem he poses in *Otherwise than Being*: “totality should not leave anything outside” [29]).

continual process of the “this.” This process amounts to a “questionableness” (this is the “unbearable” part, of course) of its being at all.

It is, understandably perhaps, precisely the “*unbearable*” nature of the “this” (if we are to understand “this” in the active process of its “doing”) that lends itself to chronic subjugation by the “that”—that is, by an “ending” of *doing* in *making*, in the static form of the word or the object. The process can once again be profitably understood in terms of Freud’s death drive, wherein—Freud theorizes—the living entity instinctually strives to return “by the circuitous paths along which its development leads” toward its initial “inanimate state” (BPP 46). “It would,” remarks Freud, “be a contradiction to the conservative nature of the instincts if the goal of life were a state of things which had never yet been attained” (BPP 45). But if we are to accept this, we are faced with the highly “paradoxical situation” of being forced to admit that the organism, should it *really* wish to return to the “inanimate state” in which it began, might certainly “attain its life’s aim more rapidly—by a kind of short circuit” (BPP 47), succumbing to all manner of illness and danger, which—on the contrary—it does everything in its power (at least for a time) to avoid. What this “paradoxical situation” occasions, Freud explains, is a two-fold process whereby germ-cells working “against the death of the living substance” actually succeed in winning for it “what we can only regard as potential immortality, though that may mean no more than a lengthening of the road to death” (BPP 48).

What is described within the bounds of this “paradoxical” two-fold process if not the fundamental ambiguity between *praxis* and *poiesis*, which we must therefore consider at the root of any consideration of Being at all? On the one hand Freud’s theory describes Being’s attempt to maintain its activity of Being for the *sake of the activity itself*, and on the other hand it describes the manner in which Being strives to end its “unbearable” situation (“unbearable” here because “never yet...attained,” therefore ultimately and painfully

unknowable; or, rather, knowable only in a fragmentary procession of disjointed instances of the “this”) through return to its initial inanimate form. It is this “unbearable” intermediate space that contemporary poets including Ashbery and Hejinian, working consciously in Stevens’s wake, as well as many other contemporary experimental or Language poets—Steve McCaffery, Susan Howe, Erin Mouré, Michael Palmer, Christian Bök—who may not specifically identify with the Stevens tradition, can be understood to explore. What is shared among these poets is the desire, and concentrated effort, to resist, and work against, the preterite—the “said”—toward the realization of the continuous *process* of the gerund: the “saying.” Just as for Benjamin’s “literal” translators, theirs is often an attempt to reveal language’s opacity rather than any of its (possible) transcendental qualities. It is only in the revelation of the materiality of any object, after all, that that which lies *beyond* the object may be, if “extremely fleetingly” glimpsed. Indeed, according to Rilke, whose consideration of the subject is central to both Heidegger and Agamben’s later analyses, consciousness of the world’s *opacity* is fundamental to the human conception, and therefore possibility, of that which transcends the human—what he refers to as “The Open.” “The animal’s degree of consciousness,” Rilke writes in one of his last letters, “sets it into the world without the animal’s placing the world over against itself at every moment (as we do); the animal is *in* the world; we stand *before it* by virtue of what peculiar turn and intensification which our consciousnesses has taken” (quoted in Heidegger, PLT 105). The man “faces opposite” his world, says Rilke, but he does so without exempting himself from the world of objects, within which he remains necessarily a *part*. It is by virtue, therefore, according to this reading, that as man sees, he “(*knows*) that *he sees*” (Krauss, OU, 19 emphasis added), that he is set at odds, “opposite,” his world. But it is *also* by virtue of his being so set at odds that the human being is able to experience “the Open” at all. Where “the animal, the flower, presumably *is* all that [“opaque,”

“object”], without accounting to itself,” it is surrounded at all times by “that indescribably open freedom”: the Open (PLT 105). Here “the Open” is not that which can be consciously experienced but instead connotes only a limitless immersion *within* experience. It is only “man,” Rilke, writes “who observes and judges” (quoted in Heidegger, PLT 105), and who can also therefore experience “the Open” (if fleetingly) as an “opaque” object of his consciousness. This ability, as Heidegger would later formulate, is what constitutes man’s *will*.

Plant and animal do not will because, muted in their desire, they never bring the Open before themselves as an object. They cannot go with the venture as one that is represented. Because they are admitted into the Open, the pure draft is never the objective other to themselves. Man, by contrast, goes ‘with’ the venture, because he is the being who wills in the sense described. (PLT 108)

It is at the remove of “desire” then, according to Heidegger, that man is set against “the Open,” thus rendering it visible and objective; set at odds with “the pure draft,” “man” becomes technician and draftsman, he “rises up as the producer who puts through, carries out, his own self and establishes this uprising as the absolute rule” (PLT 109).

If, however, it is understood that “desire” is what brings “the Open” into proximity with the human being “as an object” it follows that desire *must* remain insatiable. Though “man” may be set apart from the “pure draft”—in a position of absolute authority—it is not over the draft itself but over his *conception* of the draft that he has risen. His rendering it visible to himself is precisely what separates himself from it. Through his desire, man “brings the Open before (himself) as an object” and in doing so renders it absolutely impenetrable—opaque. But without this process (essentially of constituting within experience an always-ever insatiable, negative-space of desire) there would not also be the “extremely fleeting” moments that Rilke affords: “those first moments of love when one

human being sees his own vastness in another, his beloved, and in man's elevation toward God" (quoted in Heidegger PLT 106).

Fundamental to the possibility of these "moments of love" is of course the opacity of "the other"—an utter exteriority that takes the form of a "face" *within which* one might recognize oneself, not as one *is* but as one what is not. It is only in formal, "objective" terms that an encounter and therefore a recognition of the Other—of the Otherness that *is* selfhood—is made possible. Only, that is, by "facing opposite" the Other can one experience the possibility of the "simultaneity of need and desire," which Levinas defines as love: "*the equivocal par excellence*" (255). Every act of representation, every encounter with "the other" must contain, therefore, this possibility—just as within every act of representation there must remain an opening, a non-equivalence: the "astonishing divergence of the identical with itself" (Levinas, OTB 28), which is quickly closed again in the moment of intelligibility.

Language, being in no way equivocal, goes "less far" than love in that it retains in its signifyingness no possibility of equivalence or simultaneity with signification. *Desire* in language is always in excess of the object, as well as *need*.¹¹ In this way language parallels the unequivocal nature of "man" himself who, in being cast out from "the Open" is permitted, by means of his own desire, to bring it before him "as an object." Language contains within its very structure not the possibility of equivalence, but of the exposure of the space of "*différance*" fundamental to "man"—a space that makes possible the "call" by

¹¹ "Let us again note the difference between need and Desire: in need I can sink my teeth into the real and satisfy myself in assimilating the other; in Desire there is no sinking one's teeth into being, no satiety, but an uncharted future before me. Indeed the time presupposed by need is provided me by desire; human need already rests on Desire" (Levinas, TI, 117).

which he may be brought into proximity with that which must always remain excessive to him: “the Open,” “the Other,” and language itself.

By focussing not on the object itself and its resolution in a moment of intelligibility but on the manner in which the object is “objectified,” brought into proximity “as an object,” the poetry of Wallace Stevens and his inheritors works to break down the relationship between the “I” and the “non-I,” the “draftsman” and the “draft,” in order that a space of genuine encounter might take shape in the intermediate space of their divergence.

In closing, I would like to suggest that the evolution of the interpretation and representation of *representation itself* characterized by Stevens continues, true to his vision of the connectivity between the arts and with philosophy, beyond the realm of contemporary poetry. The work of the contemporary South African artist William Kentridge and British artist David Hockney are striking examples of the evolution of Stevens’s poetic vision beyond the page. Reading the work of these artists along the poetic lines described by Stevens, as equally as reading Stevens’s work along those delineated by these more contemporary artists, can be both instructive and illuminating. Similarly to the “re-doubled vision” effected by Stevens’s poems such as “The Poem That Took the Place of the Mountain” discussed in Chapter One, Kentridge’s focus is in large part on the *indeterminacy* by and through which his own work is determined. His stop-motion animation and film work often includes representations of Kentridge himself—at work on the drawings that constitute (at any given moment) the “finished piece.” This process naturally calls into question over the course of the film the idea of there being a “finished piece” at all. In keeping with the impulse behind much of Stevens’s poetry, Kentridge challenges the entrenched subordination of *praxis* to *poiesis*. It is this challenge that for

both artists constitutes the ethical drive of their work. “I believe that in the indeterminacy of drawing,” explains Kentridge, “the contingent way that images arrive in the work, lies some kind of model of how we live our lives. The activity of drawing is a way of trying to understand who we are and how we operate in the world. It is in the strangeness of the activity itself that can be detected judgement, ethics and morality” (Pressplay 43).

Similarly, David Hockney’s recent exhibit (October 2010 to January 2011) at the Yves St. Laurent Gallery in Paris, “Fleurs Fraiches: Dessins Sur Iphone and Ipod,” draws attention to the primacy of *praxis* in artistic representation, and in fact forces the question: is it—can it—be anything else? The exhibit—which for practical as well as ideational reasons, was at first difficult to place¹²—featured a continuously cycling series of drawings on ipods and iphones, which recorded not only the “finished” image (“finished” in this sense can only be understood to mean the last and most detailed stage of development in an ongoing process of renewal) but the process by which it had been created: the viewer watches as the images continually take shape, forming and reforming slowly on the screen just as they did when first produced by Hockney using a computer drawing program. As I watched last January, the words, “Made for the screen, totally on the screen, it’s not an illusion” slowly appeared on one of the ipad screens—drawing attention to the “surface” quality of the work, but also, and due to that very quality, its absolute “reality.” Here, I thought, is Stevens’s “reality-imagination complex” at a new and more literal level. Another screen read, “It is thought that new technology is taking away the hand (I’m not so sure). If you look around a lot is opening up.” Underneath these words appeared the word “Love,” accompanied by a network of vividly coloured lines emanating from the word in multiple directions. By highlighting the ambiguous terrain between “reality” and

¹² The show was subsequently installed at the Royal Ontario Museum in Toronto and exhibited from October 2011 until January 2012.

“imagination,” and challenging the assumption that his art—in being “made for the screen” (that is, not “real”—“objective” or “concrete”—in the sense that we have become accustomed to in visual art), Hockney emphasizes the idea that our encounter with the world is one that, in “reality,” occurs primarily at the “surface.” This emphasis also serves to remind the viewer of the fundamental role of “the all-at-onceness” of consciousness and vision. Hockney’s attention to the surface, in other words, takes us *beyond* the surface—it acknowledges and explores the manner in which that which is “visible”—immediately apprehensible: the word “LOVE,” for example—is brought before us at all. Because we confront that which exceeds us “as an object” there remains, necessarily, an inherent gap between the intelligible world and our position “opposite” it. This gap (usually eradicated in a moment of intelligibility—in knowledge) can also be elaborated in the space of the question of intelligibility itself. I would conclude that it is this, finally—the elaboration of the space of this question—that poets, and other artists, “*are for*.”¹³

“To communicate is indeed to open oneself,” writes Levinas, “but the openness is not complete if it is on the watch for recognition. It is complete not in opening to the spectacle of or the recognition of the other, but in becoming a responsibility for him” (TI 119). Communication is not, in other words, a simple equivalence. It is not substitution—language for meaning, myself for the other. “The openness of communication is not a simple change of place, so as to situate a truth outside instead of keeping it to oneself. [...]

¹³ Heidegger’s essay, “What are Poet’s for?” concentrates its argument around Rilke’s conception of and articulation of “the Open” as that unifying “widest orbit” that surrounds “all that is”—which is, therefore, in Heidegger’s words “the Being of beings” (PLT 120). What poets “are for,” according to Heidegger, is precisely the confrontation of this “Being” through language, which is the very “precinct (*templum*), that is, the house of Being. The nature of language does not exhaust itself in signifying,” Heidegger insists, “nor is it merely something that has the character of sign or cipher. It is because language is the house of Being, that we reach what is by constantly going through this house. When we go to the well, when we go through the woods, we are always already going through the word ‘well,’ through the word ‘woods,’ even if we do not speak the words do not think of anything relating to language” (PLT 129).

affecting the greater reality which lies beyond (and yet is always inclusive of) this relation. What is that beyond, the text asks? “The world? The inhuman as human? That which thinks not, / Feels not, resembling thought, resembling feeling?” (CP 420). Even, or especially, in the conceptualization of that which lies beyond “the beholder,” we move immediately into a territory of resemblance. “World” does not exist except within this territory, and yet—it does. Its existence *beyond* the “human” is what makes it representable *to* the human, and the human representable to himself. The “beholder” is always ultimately passive in his observational, intellectual and sensory powers (“He is the possessed of sense, not the possessor” [420]), and his relationship with “world” is always unequal. But it is this fundamental *inequality* that constitutes the negative-space of encounter between him and the world—between, in other words, the “Other,” and “Being” itself. It is this inequality, this infallible gap between the “inhuman” and the “human,” “world” and “thing,” “reality” and subjective “imagination,” that, as Stevens writes in the closing lines of “Things of August’s” section six, “habituates” the beholder

to the invisible,
By its faculty of the exceptional,

The faculty of ellipses and deviations,
In which he exists but never as himself. (CP 420)

It is the invisible, that which always exceeds “the beholder’s” powers of apprehension and comprehension—as well as the “faculty of the exceptional, // The faculty of ellipses and deviations”—by which the world operates *beyond, and independent of* “the beholder’s” own powers of perception and representation that makes perception and representation (*being itself*, understood and confronted as such) possible. Subjectivity is explored in this passage as intrinsically tied to representation, and representation is explored as an inclusive space—where subjectivity is not yet divided, where “the beholder” exists and understands himself to exist but “never as himself.” Stevens opens up a negative-space of representation

here *beyond* individual subjectivity. The individual is de-centered, no longer existing “as himself” but revealing instead a more inclusive structure of being. The process of representation—by which non-meaning is rendered, or made to “resemble” meaning; by which the inhuman is made to “resemble” (rendered “*as*”) the human—is explored in Stevens’s poetry in and of itself. It is the delineation of this negative-space that allows for an engagement with what it means to *be* human at all, and that actively works, through an open engagement with this question, to describe and re-imagine the “human” itself¹⁴.

This emphasis in Stevens’s work on that which will remain always excessive to the work itself—its “openness,” in other words to a “closedness,” to its own limiting terms—displaces the central concern of the work from any definitive meaning or result to the process by which that meaning is (continuously) derived. It is this displacement—an emphasis on *incompleteness* rather than completeness—that constitutes its efficacy as, in William Kentridge’s words, “a way of trying to understand who we are and how we operate in the world” (*Press Play* 413). It is within what Kentridge has called the very “strangeness” of the activity of drawing, after all—within a space of attention, that is, to the processes and approach to *representation itself*, to the rendering of exactness with an inexact line, of inexactness with exaction—“that can be detected judgement, ethics and

¹⁴ When the Swedish founder of modern taxonomy, Carolus Linnaeus, first developed the classification *Homo sapien* (which he first identified by using only the word, *Homo*) he did not record, as he did for other species, any specific identifying characteristic, but—as mentioned previously, in Chapter Five—“only the old philosophical adage: *nosce te ipsum* {know yourself}” (Agamben, TO 25). Even later, with the further designation *sapien*, there was no evidence that the complete term corresponded to a *description*, as such. Instead, the addition of *sapien* acted only as a simplification of the original. “It is worth reflecting,” writes Giorgio Agamben, that this “taxonomic anomaly...assigns not a given, but rather an imperative as a specific difference” (TO 25). In other words: according to Linnaeus, the human being has no specific identifying characteristics that might separate him from other animals other than *his ability to recognize himself* (TO 26). “To define the human not through any *nota characteristic*, but rather through his self-knowledge, means that man is the being which recognizes itself as such, that *man is the animal that must recognize itself as human to be human*” (TO 26).

morality” (*Press Play* 419). All three, it is implied, must be considered not as an end, but (like the activity of drawing) a *means*. Poetry, as Stevens and the poets and artists working within the broad tradition I have attempted to sketch out in these final pages make clear, is uniquely adapted to explore the processes by which “judgement, ethics and morality” are delineated “from inside” (Hejinian 363)—from within the processes of their (necessarily continual) approach. Resistance among these artists to the pronouncement of any *specific* “judgement, ethics and morality” reveals *not* an evasion of political interest or motivation but instead a deep engagement with the broader question of intelligibility and representation itself, and therefore a “face to face” engagement with the defining reality of the way that meaning arises, and takes shape, in the world.

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