

Bird, Darlene L. (2003) *(Extra)Ordinary evenings in New H(e)aven: the religious element in the poetics of Wallace Stevens*. PhD thesis.

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**(Extra)Ordinary Evenings in New H(e)aven:
The Religious Element in the Poetics of Wallace Stevens**

by

Darlene L Bird

A THESIS

Submitted to

THE CENTRE FOR LITERATURE, THEOLOGY AND THE ARTS

**in fulfilment of the requirements
for the degree of**

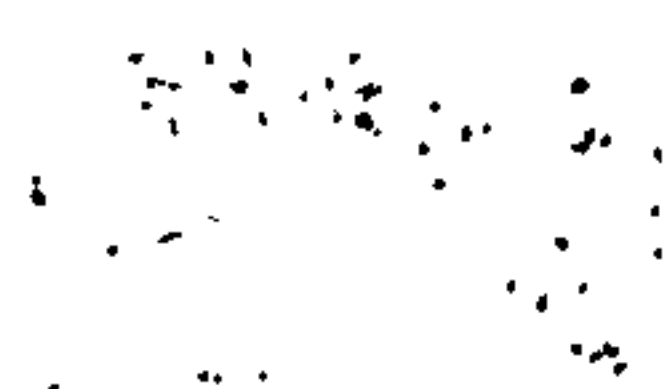
DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

UNIVERSITY OF GLASGOW

NOVEMBER 2003

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ABSTRACT

Wallace Stevens was profoundly affected by Nietzsche's declaration of the death of God and his poetry reflects an ongoing struggle to understand what it means to be a poet in an age of disbelief. Although Stevens' early poetry suggests that this loss of belief created a sense of crisis in the poet, his later work indicates a full acceptance, even an embracing, of this loss, recognising it as the inspiration for *poesis*. The thesis considers Stevens alongside of such thinkers as Nietzsche and (the later) Heidegger and shows how the poet came to regard the shaking of the metaphysical foundations as a gift offering the possibility for poetry.

LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

The following abbreviated titles are used throughout the thesis to refer to the works of Wallace Stevens.

CP *The Collected Poems* (1990)

OP *Opus Posthumous: Poems, Plays, Prose* (1990)

NA *The Necessary Angel: Essays on Reality and the Imagination* (1951)

L *Letters of Wallace Stevens* (1967)

Fore-Thoughts

Throw away the lights, the definitions,
And say of what you see in the dark
That it is this or that it is that,
But do not use the rotted names.

from *The Man with the Blue Guitar* (CP 183)

Little existed for him but the few things
For which a fresh name always occurred...

from "Local Objects" (OP 137)

The death of one god is the death of all.
Let purple Phoebus lie in umber harvest,
Let Phoebus slumber and die in autumn umber,

Phoebus is dead, ephebe. But Phoebus was
A name for something that never could be named.
There was a project for the sun and is.

There is a project for the sun. The sun
Must bear no name, gold flourisher, but be
In the difficulty of what it is to be.

from *Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction* (CP 381)

Preface

“The lack of foundations is the way of love...”
John Caputo¹

“And for what, except for you, do I feel love?”
Stevens (CP 380)

Is Stevens still, as Harold Bloom suggested in his monograph of 1977, the poet of our climate? Or has there been a dramatic change in climate since then? It was also in the 1970s that Robert N. Bellah claimed Stevens to be the greatest American ‘theological poet’ of the twentieth century and argued that his poetry offered meditations on living without belief—indeed, living “beyond belief”—in an age characterised by disbelief. But the question is do we share the anxiety of disbelief that so pervaded the twentieth century or has time brought something else? And *if* Stevens’ poetry is centred on a crisis of faith that we no longer share, can the poems still speak to us in some way? Perhaps we have gotten better at living with our disbelief in more recent years, embracing it, understanding it as a good thing. Having overthrown our certitude we have found freedom in not ‘knowing’ and in not needing to ‘know’ in some final way. The shift from Modernism to Postmodernism is characterised by this gradual movement from a sense of crisis and anxiety to one of calm acceptance.

Over the last couple of decades, there have been those who have wanted to fix Stevens in time, to place him on the shelf of High Modernism and look upon his poems as relics of a bygone era. But is this right? Do Stevens’ poems belong only to the past? The poet himself thought there would come a day when his poems would be nothing but dry bones left over from another time:

¹ John Caputo, *The Mystical Element in Heidegger's Thought* (New York: Fordham University Press, 1986), p.xxi.

Children picking up our bones
Will never know that these were once
As quick as foxes on the hill;

And that in autumn, when the grapes
Made sharp air sharper by their smell
These had a being, breathing frost.... (CP 158-59)

I would argue, however, that Stevens' poems are not yet ready to be handed over to those literary archaeologists excavating Modernity. They still have some life left in them for the contemporary reader who would respect them enough to allow them not to be 'toe-tagged' with the label 'Modernism'.

Although he lived in an age that saw the shaking of the metaphysical foundations, Stevens did not cry out against the inevitable changes that were brought about by this 'earthquake', as Nietzsche called it. In fact, he gradually came to understand this loss of belief to be a good thing and his poetry points to the liberation he experienced in living without a 'doctrine'. Though Stevens has been hailed as the poet who best captures the climate of the mid to late twentieth century, I believe he can also be a poet for our Postmodern age (if we must use labels) inasmuch as he allows the question of belief to remain open-ended.

Much has been made of Stevens' alleged deathbed conversion to Roman Catholicism in recent years, a subject I have chosen not to address in the chapters that follow. I have chosen not to address it not because I think that it is implausible—on the contrary, I think it quite likely. Rather, I do not wish to do what others who have written on the religious in Stevens have done, that is, read the experience into the poetry. Charles M. Murphy (*Wallace Stevens: A Spiritual Poet in a Secular Age*, 1997) and Janet McCann (*Wallace Stevens Revisited: The Celestial Possible*, 1995) are both guilty of doing precisely this. They appear to read Stevens backwards: they take as their starting point the conversion

experience and read the poetry with it in mind, doing a disservice to Stevens' *oeuvre*. McCann states at the beginning of her monograph that "the desire for transcendence [...] runs from his first to his last poems and is a part of the impulse in him that made him join the Roman Catholic Church during his last illness." And she makes the further mistake of asserting that the "nostalgia for lost truths and the desire for a replacement metaphysic are the motive for the entire work, from *Harmonium* onward,"² an idea that I argue firmly against in the pages that follow.

So what are we to make of Stevens' alleged conversion experience? It seems to me that a responsible way of thinking about it is to consider it his last great 'poem', or rather his last great experience of poetry, the only poetic act of which he was capable as he lay incapacitated in his hospital bed unable to read and write. I cannot help but think that Stevens had Blaise Pascal in mind when he partook of the sacrament as death encroached. In his essay "Imagination as Value" Stevens writes of Pascal's own deathbed experience and claims that "in the very act of dying, he had clung to what he himself had called the delusive faculty", the imagination (NA 135). Stevens quotes Pascal's sister who gives an account of her brother's last hours when he experienced a violent convulsion. She writes,

God, who wished to reward a desire so fervent and so just, suspended this convulsion as by a miracle and restored his judgment completely as in the perfection of his health, in a manner that the parish priest, entering into his room with the sacrament, cried to him: 'Here is he whom you have so much desired.' These words completely roused him and as the priest approached to give him communion, he made an effort, he raised himself half way without help to receive it with more respect; and the priest having interrogated him, following the custom, on the principal mysteries of the faith, he responded distinctly: 'Yes, monsieur, I believe all that with all my heart.' Then he received the sacred wafer and extreme unction with feelings so tender that he

² Janet McCann, *Wallace Stevens Revisited: The Celestial Possible* (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1995), p. 1.

poured out tears. He replied to everything, thanked the priest and as the priest blessed him with the holy ciborium, he said, 'Let God never forsake me.' (NA, 135)

Clearly Stevens was struck by the power of this scene, and it may well be that he remembered it in his last days, as he clung to that faculty that had sustained him all his life, the imagination.

Stevens, I argue, was religious without a definitive object of religion, unless that object was poetry. Poetry, with its "intricate evasions of as", was the one constant in his life and it was to poetry that he was whole-heartedly devoted even in the days leading up to his death. In the pages that follow, I explore Stevens' life-long love affair with poetry and consider how this love affair was able to flourish in an age of disbelief.

Chapter One: An Earth-Bound Poetics

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.

Henry James, as quoted by Stevens (L 506)

...the great poems of heaven and hell have been written and the great poem of the earth remains to be written.

from "Imagination as Value" (NA 142)

...content, / At last, there, when it turns out to be here.

from "Crude Foyer" (CP 305)

Wallace Stevens was one of the great 'religious' poets of the twentieth century, though not in the conventional sense. He was, we might say, religiously agnostic, whole-heartedly devoted to the question of the possibility for belief and to the writing of poems that were "Hymns of the struggle of the idea of god". Such hymns were written in celebration of the difficulty of living in the everyday world and of the struggle to find "God in the object itself" (CP 475). Like "Professor Eucalyptus of New Haven" who sought God "in New Haven with an eye that does not look beyond the object", Stevens' search for God did not stretch beyond his immediate habitation. Either God could be found there in New Haven under the roof of his own home or else not at all.

Living 'locally' as he did in "a world without heaven to follow", Stevens developed an earthly poetics reflecting a desire to find in the everyday world of his habitation the miraculous in the mundane.³ That is not to say, however, that

³Charles M. Murphy, *Wallace Stevens: A Spiritual Poet in a Secular Age* (New York: Paulist Press, 1997), p. 84. Murphy writes, "It is a perennial human tendency to confuse the divine with the extraordinary and miraculous, those exceptional moments when God 'intervenes' in human

he rejected notions of heaven altogether; rather he found a way of including heaven as a part of earth. In a journal entry dated August 1902 when he was yet a young man in his early twenties, Stevens wrote,

Last night I spent an hour in the dark transept of St Patrick's Cathedral where I go now and then in my more lonely moods. An old argument with me is that the true religious force in the world is not the church but the world itself: the mysterious callings of Nature and our responses. What incessant murmurs fill that ever-laboring, tireless church! But to-day in my walk I thought that after all there is no conflict of forces but rather a contrast. In the cathedral I felt one presence; on the highway I felt another. Two different deities presented themselves.... The priest in me worshipped one God at one shrine; the poet another God at another shrine.

Already in these early reflections is a hint of what would become Stevens' poetic motif: how to find religious satisfaction in "the world itself". To experience such satisfaction for Stevens required overcoming this perception of division between the forces of heaven and earth, a division that is overcome when he eventually acknowledges that "the idea of heaven is [...] merely an idea of the earth" (L 464).

Charles M. Murphy believes that "heaven could not be heaven for [Stevens] unless it included earth"⁴ but perhaps it is more accurate to say that earth could not be earth for him unless it included heaven. Only by incorporating the two could the poet find the religious satisfactions of the everyday as he experienced them at home on ordinary evenings in Connecticut.⁵ For it was

affairs. There is beneath this tendency a great alienation--from oneself and from the world we inhabit every day. 'Real' life, our true home, is perceived to be somewhere else, literally 'out of this world.' It was this distortion of religion that Wallace Stevens explicitly rejected. 'I am a native in this world / And think in it as a native thinks,' Stevens declares. Somehow God must be found in the ordinary events of everyday life, in a 'nice shady home' 'and daughters with curls' as Crispin [the protagonist of one of Stevens' poems] discovered at the end of his journey around the world in the deliberately homely description Stevens chooses. Every day must be miraculous.

⁴ Ibid, p. 38.

⁵ "For Wallace Stevens, the imagination, after its most adventurous and extravagant flights, always returned to its natural home in the ordinary setting of Hartford, Connecticut. The ordinary, Stevens believed, is always what one makes of it, and Stevens' poetic energy was released in his response to an ordinary world," writes Robert Pack in *Wallace Stevens* (New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 1958), p. xiii.

Here in his house and in his room,
In his chair, the most tranquil thought grew peaked

And the oldest and the warmest heart was cut
By gallant notions on the part of night—
Both late and alone, above the crickets' chords,

Babbling, each one, the uniqueness of its sound.
There was no fury in transcendent forms.
But his actual candle blazed with artifice. ("A Quiet Normal Life", CP 523)

In leading a quiet normal life among the actual objects of home, Stevens sought the religious fulfilments available merely in living *as* and *where* he lived.

And yet being at home in the everyday world was not always easy for a man who could not escape "The swarm of thoughts, the swarm of dreams / Of inaccessible Utopia" (CP 179). For although he claimed that "It was in the earth only / That he was at the bottom of things / And of himself" (CP 236), he was still filled with desire for the inaccessible utopias of his imagination. How to reconcile this longing for utopian perfection with an insistence on the sufficiency of the quotidian? Stevens manages this by insisting that the abstractions of the imagination are themselves a part of earth and, as such, are mutable, subject to the changing emotional climates of the mind. In his poetry, Stevens often expresses a longing to reach utopian perfection, to arrive at a point of completion where everything, including the mind, is still; nevertheless, he recognises and even celebrates the impossibility of ever arriving at some idealised, motionless 'still-point'.

Stevens' struggle to be 'at home' in an endlessly changing world is ultimately a struggle for place. Throughout his life Stevens was involved in a turbulent love affair with place, an all-consuming affair from which he could not extract himself. In an astonishing admission regarding his love of place, Stevens revealed that,

“Life is an affair of people not of places. But for me life is an affair of places and that is the trouble” (OP 185). That Stevens considered this love affair to be ‘trouble’ is particularly interesting. One wonders if it was an obsession that interfered with other areas of his life.

The on-going quest to be at home in the world was for Stevens a religious pursuit as he struggled to find a way of inhabiting this ever-changing, imperfect, contingent, ‘centerless’ world without resorting to doctrines that attempt to still the motion. This struggle for ‘place’ in a perpetually changing world that has no centre is something Stevens grapples with over and over in his poems. Sometimes it is expressed as a yearning for an impossible centre-point, a yearning that borders on despair, and at other times it is expressed as a celebration of transience and motion. Either way it provides him with endless material for poetry.

We have only to note the titles of the poems to see the importance that ‘place’ and ‘placelessness’ hold for Stevens: “The Hermitage at the Center,” “Life is Motion,” “Nomad Exquisite”, “Description Without Place”, “The Search for Sound Free from Motion”, to mention but a few. In one of his earlier poems, “The Place of the Solitaires”, Stevens insists on the necessity of motion, especially the ceaseless motion of thought:

Let the place of the solitaires
Be a place of perpetual undulation.

Whether it be in mid-sea
On the dark, green water-wheel,
Or on the beaches
There must be no cessation
Of motion, or of the noise of motion,
The renewal of noise
And manifold continuation;

And, most, of the motion of thought
And its restless iteration,

In the place of the solitaires,
Which is to be a place of perpetual undulation. (CP 60)

Many have commented on the emphasis on 'place' in Stevens, as Barbara M. Fisher does in her chapter "Love of Place" in *Wallace Stevens: The Intensest Rendezvous*. She writes,

Apart from the romantic value accorded to particular locations—at times to the planet itself—one finds aspects of place multiplying on every page of the poetry. The notion of place is all over the place in Stevens, and it becomes infinitely interpretable if *place* can be defined as 'here and now / And where we live and everywhere we live.'⁶

'Place' is for Stevens "everywhere we live", whether it be in the familiar rooms of home or in the imaginative recesses of the mind. With his nomadic imagination, Stevens covered vast distances, explored unknown worlds and faraway places, always to return to the familiar comforts of home:

How good it was at home again at night
To prepare for bed, in the frame of the house, and move
Round the rooms, which do not ever seem to change...

For him all places had something to offer, whether they provided the ecstatic enlargements experienced in a "world washed in his imagination" (CP 179) or the quieter, more sedate pleasures he found wandering round the rooms of his house.

The sense of inward and outward places is intentionally blurred in Stevens' poems so that we are often unsure whether he is describing an adventure of the imagination or merely "a walk around a lake". In fact, Stevens comes to recognise that all places are part of the geography of the mind and that no place can remain untouched by the imagination. Even 'home' is often described as a hotel rather than a permanent residence because it is ever-changing through the transformations of the imagination.

⁶Barbara M. Fisher, *Wallace Stevens: The Intensest Rendezvous* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1990), p.108.

The quest for place in our world of perpetual motion has long been understood to be a religious pursuit. Mircea Eliade states that, "Religious man, has always sought to fix his abode at the 'center of the world.'" ⁷ For Christianity, the tradition in which Stevens grew up, that centre is imaged in Christ. But leaving his Christian heritage behind, claiming its irrelevance for the modern world, Stevens is interested not in fixing a centre point, but in living with the *desire* for an impossible centre. The desire for an elusive middle point, the yearning for a place in which to dwell perpetually, is often a subject for his poems.

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, 430).

His poetry expresses a restless desire to be at home in the world, a desire that he acknowledges can never be satisfied; for this supreme fiction of an eternal home or central dwelling place for which Stevens—and perhaps all of us—yearns is unattainable.

This inability to be finally situated, to be finally 'in place', in a world that never comes to rest, is the subject of "Somnambulisma":

On an old shore, the vulgar ocean rolls
Noiselessly, noiselessly, resembling a thin bird,
That thinks of settling, yet never settles, on a nest.

The wings keep spreading and yet are never wings.
The claws keep scratching on the shale, the shallow shale,

⁷ Mircea Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane: The Nature of Religion*, trans. Willard R. Trask (New York: Harcourt, 1957), p.22 as cited by Fisher, p.115. Fisher explains, "...for Eliade the plane of human existence suffers precisely from 'homogeneity,' while sacred space implies a fixed point, or center, that serves to orient man to his cosmos. It is, however, Eliade's focus that casts some light on Stevens's repeated references to 'the centre that I seek.' 'Religious man,' says Eliade, 'has always sought to fix his abode at the 'center of the world.' *If the world is to be lived in*, it must be *founded*—and no world can come to birth in the chaos of the homogeneity and relativity of profane space. The discovery or projection of a fixed point—the center—is equivalent to the creation of the world," pp.114-115.

The sounding shallow, until by water washed away.

The generations of the bird are all
By water washed away. They follow after.
They follow, follow, follow, in water washed away (CP 304).

Nothing stays. All is in motion, subject to the decay of time. "In describing the bird's vain attempts to settle on a nest precariously located by a turbulent seashore, the text [...] underscores life's lack of repose."⁸ There is a sadness in such impermanence and yet,

Without this bird that never settles, without
Its generations that follow in their universe,
The ocean, falling and falling on the hollow shore,

Would be a geography of the dead: not of that land
To which they may have gone, but of the place in which
They lived, in which they lacked a pervasive being,

In which no scholar, separately dwelling,
Poured forth the fine fins, the gawky beaks, the personalia,
Which, as a man feeling everything, were his.

This bird that never settles is a "type of the ideal scholar, who, too, has not retreated to a separate dwelling inland but has affirmed the pervasiveness of being's *lack*" experienced there on the "boundary between sea and land."⁹ Here on the edge, in a place somewhere in between being and non-being, life and death, wakefulness and sleep (as the title suggests), the scholar / poet "has been able to withstand, indeed to thrive in, existential indeterminacy...."¹⁰

To be able to thrive in existential indeterminacy, to allow the question of place to be just that—a question—there must be a shift away from an aggressive epistemological pursuit of place to a more open-ended phenomenological inquiry

⁸ David Jarraway, *Wallace Stevens and the Question of Belief: Metaphysician in the Dark* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University, 1993), p.181.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid.

of the world. That is to say, there must be an openness to *discovering* the environment through the senses rather than *imposing* an order upon the world. In "Landscape with Boat"¹¹ Stevens demonstrates the futility of striving 'to know' and reveals the greater satisfactions experienced in engaging with the world through sensory perception.

An anti-master man, floribunda ascetic.
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. He wanted to know,
A naked man who regarded himself in the glass
Of air, who looked for the world beneath the blue,
Without blue, without any turquoise tint or phase,
Any azure under-side or after-color. Nabob
Of bones, he rejected, he denied, to arrive
At the neutral centre, the ominous element,
The single-colored, colorless, primitive.
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

¹¹ In this poem and in the later "Prologues to What is Possible" from *The Rock*, Stevens may be alluding to sections from Descartes' *The Principles of Philosophy* concerning ideas of internal and external place. In section 13 of *Principles*, Descartes notes, "as we regard different bodies we may find that the same thing at the same time changes its place, and does not change it. For example, if we consider a man seated at the stern of a vessel when it is carried out to sea, he may be said to be in one place if we regard parts of the vessel with which he preserves the same situation: and yet he will found continually to change his position, if regard to be paid to the neighbouring shores in relation to which he is constantly receding from one, and approaching another. And further, if we suppose that the earth moves, and that it makes precisely the same way from west to east as the vessel does from east to west, it will appear to us that he who is seated at the stern does not change his position, because that place is determined by certain immovable points which we imagine to be in the heavens. But if at length we are persuaded that there are no points in the universe that are really immovable, as will presently be shown to be probable, *we shall conclude that there is nothing that has a permanent place except in so far as it is fixed by our thought*" (emphasis added). *The Essential Descartes*, edited by Margaret D. Wilson (New York: Meridian, 1976), p. 341. In "Landscape with Boat" Stevens denies this idea of ever be able to arrive at a permanent place fixed by the mind, for even the simplest acts of living—sitting, watching, observing—make such an epistemological arrival impossible.

The “anti-master man” may well be Stevens himself, a parody of his own desire to see, to know, and to ‘arrive’. He *would* arrive at the longed-for, transparent, “neutral centre”. It was easy—“he had only not to live.” He had only to reject what he saw, to deny what he heard. In short, to reach the point of arrival, he had only to stop living in a physical world. Above all else, Stevens wants to find a way to live in the ever-revolving physical world and to make himself at home there among the changing seasons. But how to make oneself at home in a place that never stands still, how to satiate the need for ‘arrival’? The “anti-master man, floribunda ascetic” in spite of all his efforts to arrive at a neutral centre is doomed to fail because, as Bonnie Costello says, his “‘supposed’ space is not habitable.”

In his preoccupation with intellectually ‘arriving’ (his journey at sea supported by a boat he will not acknowledge), he refuses to ‘live’ and refuses the emotional arrivals available to him.¹²

It is only at the end of the poem that Stevens provides us with an alternative to the strivings of the “anti-master man”.

Had he been better able to suppose:
He might sit on a sofa on a balcony
Above the Mediterranean, emerald
Becoming emeralds. He might watch the palms
Flap green ears in the heat. He might observe
A yellow wine and follow a steamer’s track
And say, “The thing I hum appears to be
The rhythm of this celestial pantomime.” (CP 243)

Rather than searching for a centre beyond, above or beneath the earth, the protagonist of this final stanza, a better ‘supposer’ than his predecessor, looks to the earth itself and finds satisfaction in the landscape surrounding him. Sitting on

a sofa on a balcony above the Mediterranean, this figure admires “the empire of his eye in which description becomes revelation, adjective noun, ‘emerald / Becoming emeralds.’”¹³ Writes Costello,

Appearances alone (not nature or metaphysics) declare the legitimacy of his reign. If the ascetic was the anti-master man, this latter figure is no Old Master but a different kind of modernist. His empire of the eye has an ironic element as ‘the palms / Flap green ears in the heat.’ But he is imaginatively engaged with his surroundings. The boat (perhaps carrying the baseless anti-master-man) enters the landscape of this beholder to break his solipsism. It reminds us of another perspective, another form of engagement, its wake another impression of reality. The two figures in ‘Landscape with Boat,’ then represent a choice not between objectivism and solipsism, but between the deluded quest for transparency that leaves us at sea and a creative involvement with environment that affords aesthetic satisfaction but owns up to its limits.¹⁴

The “deluded quest for transparency” is but an intellectual pursuit for an absolute that necessitates the denial of what can be seen, heard and felt. And though Stevens at times catches himself desiring that “single-colored, colorless, primitive”, he admits that, “We never arrive intellectually. But emotionally we arrive constantly.” (OP 198) The emotional arrivals that provide aesthetic satisfaction come about through an on-going engagement with one’s environment.

There are times when Stevens *feels* that he has ‘arrived’ and writes of the satisfaction he experiences in this sense of having reached the unattainable middle, as he does at the start of “Credences of Summer” (CP 372):

Now in midsummer come and all fools slaughtered
And spring’s infuriations over and a long way
To the first autumnal inhalations, young broods
Are in the grass, the roses are heavy with a weight
Of fragrance and the mind lays by its trouble.

¹² Bonnie Costello, “Wallace Stevens: The Adequacy of Landscape”, *The Wallace Stevens Journal* 17.2 (Fall 1993):214.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Ibid.

Reflection ceases and the mind is stilled, or so it seems. "Change is not arrested but forgotten, though the mind's acquiescence in brief fixity is real."¹⁵ It is a religious moment, this 'now' of midsummer, as he feels himself released from the restlessness of thought and perceives himself to have arrived at the 'centre', between spring's "infuriations" and autumn's "inhalations". This perceived middle-point is a state of (seeming) emotional blankness, the same state conveyed in "A Clear Day and No Memories" (OP 138-139).

No soldiers in the scenery,
No thoughts of people now dead,
As they were fifty years ago:
Young and living in a live air,
Young and walking in the sunshine,
Bending in blue dresses to touch something—
Today the mind is not part of the weather.

Today the air is clear of everything.
It has no knowledge except of nothingness
And it flows over us without meanings,
As if none of us had ever been here before
And are not here now: in this shallow spectacle,
This invisible activity, this sense.

The word "Today" is positioned purposefully in the middle of the poem and functions much like the "Now" of "Credences". Time seems to have come to a halt. All is suspended. The mind at this moment is not "part of the weather", that is, it is *as if* it were not susceptible to the ever-changing climates of emotion.

But this sense of having 'arrived' is fleeting. The first stanza of "Credences" ends with "the mind lays by its trouble" indicating a cessation of thought, but already by the beginning of the second stanza the mind is once again engaged in reflection: "Now the mind lays by its trouble and considers. / The fidgets of remembrance come to this." The meditative or mystical state is interrupted by the "fidgets of remembrance." For Stevens the "mind can never be satisfied. Never."

¹⁵ George S. Lensing, *Wallace Stevens and the Seasons* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University

Therefore, he is destined to continue to seek that centre that is “a state of mind, / Nothing more, like weather after it has cleared” (OP 138) all the while knowing that the “fidgets of remembrance” will always return bringing with them a change in emotional climate.

In *Wallace Stevens and the Seasons*, George S. Lensing argues that “Credences” is Stevens’ “happiest poem” and believes that his

entire poetics rests upon ‘Credences of Summer’ because all the autumnal and wintry austerities and all the prologues of spring were undertaken precisely for the pleasure of this moment.¹⁶

There is, however, little evidence to support these claims. First, a close examination of the language of the poem indicates that this is not at all a happy poem; in fact, it would seem to be quite the opposite. We consider the second and third stanzas from the first canto:

Now the mind lays by its trouble and considers.
The fidgets of remembrance come to this.
This is the last day of a certain year
Beyond which there is nothing left of time.

Press, 2001), p.279.

¹⁶ Ibid., p.273. Lensing appears to have neglected to notice the profound irony that can be found throughout “Credences”. Even the title of the poem with its intentional use of the plural undermines Lensing’s idea that Stevens’ “entire poetics rests upon ‘Credences of Summer’”. The whole point of “Credences” is to demonstrate the impossibility of arriving at a final creed or belief—or even at a final poem upon which all the others might rest. For a more insightful consideration of the poem, we turn to David Jarraway who takes note of the poem’s position in *Transport to Summer*. He comments, “One of the most curious aspect of Wallace Stevens’ longer ‘Credences of Summer’ is the way the poet has chosen to position the text in the fifth book of his *Collected Poems*. Titularly the poem is a rousing invocation to belief celebrated in credences’ plural, but upon closer inspection its affirmations become slightly unhinged when we notice that ‘Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction’ is the poem Stevens elected to close out that book. By installing a gaping hole (notes *toward* some nontruth) where we might have expected a sum of the parts to have been lodged, Stevens not only problematizes severely the transcendence promised in the volume’s title, *Transport to Summer*, but undercuts even further the orthodox season naturally subtending those credences, turning belief itself into somewhat of a paradox.” See Jarraway, p.224. That Lensing and Jarraway should offer such distinctly different readings of this poem is not surprising. For as Bloom notes, “Credences” has always “been much in dispute among critics....” He says, “there is something equivocal about the poem that stimulates sharp disagreements among its readers.” After considering several readings of the poem, Bloom informs us that he favours Isabel MacCaffrey’s reading: “Stevens has [...] established conditions of maximum difficulty in which to assert the imagination’s power. Winter, ‘the nothing that is,’ cannot satisfy us for long, however scrupulously we submit to it; its perfect ineloquence invites the imagination’s additions. But summer offers a rival rhetoric; its richness ‘must comfort the heart’s core,’ its eloquence silences our speech.” In Harold Bloom’s *Wallace Stevens: The Poems of Our Climate* (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1977), p.243.

It comes to this and the imagination's life.

There is nothing more inscribed nor thought nor felt
And this must comfort the heart's core against
Its false disasters—these fathers standing round,
These mothers touching, speaking, being near,
These lovers waiting in the soft dry grass.

The phrases “last day”, “it comes to this”, “there is nothing more” and “false disasters”, do not convey a positive sense. All indications are that having (seemingly) ‘arrived’ at the longed for ‘midsummer’, Stevens is already experiencing the fidgets of discontent, and in a futile attempt to grasp the moment and hold it ‘in place’ he proposes to “Postpone the anatomy of summer”, to put off any intellectual analysis of the moment.

Just like the anti-master man who wanted to see the sky without the eye being “touched by blue”, here Stevens insists on seeing “the very thing and nothing else” without the evasions of metaphor¹⁷:

Postpone the anatomy of summer, as
The physical pine, the metaphysical pine.
Let's see the very thing and nothing else.
Let's see it with the hottest fire of sight.
Burn everything not part of it to ash.

Trace the gold sun about the whitened sky

¹⁷ In a further blow to Lensing's reading of this as Stevens' happiest poem, Jarraway writes, "The poem's quite militant intention to do away with the annoying evasions of metaphor in order to get at the essential meaning represented by the *locus*, to fix it, as the canto goes on to say, in 'an eternal foliage,' and an 'arrested peace,' ought to strike the reader as extraordinarily contradictory in a poem about the *douceurs* of summer. Such an excessively violent reaction given out by all the imperatives (postpone, burn, trace, look, and so forth) might seem to be antithetical to the pastoral ethos until we realize that Stevens' text is not really about the pastoral at all," in Jarraway, p. 236.

The Nietzschean overtones of much of Stevens' work (which we shall examine more closely later) is considered here by Leonard and Wharton who comment, "Although the third line proposes that we 'see the very thing and nothing else,' the first two lines have specified that we are not to 'anatomize' summer by breaking it into 'physical' and 'metaphysical'—that is, empirical and theoretical / theological, or, from these, the 'thing-in-itself' and 'consciousness,' or ordinary language's 'reality' and 'imagination' The 'very thing' we are to see is 'summer,' which is not the 'thing itself,' nor a literal season, but a seasonable complex of thought and feeling much like the 'great noon' which compels Nietzsche's Zarathustra to proclaim: 'Gone is the hesitant gloom of my spring! Gone the malice of my snowflakes in June! Summer have I become entirely, and summer noon!'" In J. S. Leonard and C. E. Wharton, *The Fluent Mundo: Wallace Stevens and the Structure of Reality* (Athens, Georgia: The University of Georgia Press, 1988), p.23.

Without evasion by a single metaphor.
Look at it in its essential barrenness
And say this, this is the centre that I seek.
Fix it in an eternal foliage

And fill the foliage with arrested peace,
Joy of such permanence, right ignorance
Of change still possible. Exile desire
For what is not. This is the barrenness
Of the fertile thing that can attain no more.

The emotional satisfactions of midsummer have already begun to pass as the intellectual faculty attempts to fix the moment, to suspend the inevitable change in climate. With the paradox of these last lines—"the *barrenness* / Of the *fertile* thing"—Stevens undoes the optimism of the very first stanza of the poem. The lush greenery of midsummer, once something to be desired, is now overgrown with weeds. It no longer satisfies.

Lensing's argument that all the "wintry austerities and all the prologues of spring" merely lead up to this midsummer moment is questionable in the light of the fifth canto. Here Stevens wonders, is it this moment that makes the others significant or is it all the other humdrum days that make this one worthwhile? He first announces,

One day enriches a year. One woman makes
The rest look down. One man becomes a race,
Lofty like him, like him perpetual.

But then interrupting himself, he reconsiders,

Or do the other days enrich this one?

Should this momentary sense of 'arrival' be privileged over all other moments? What of the days when the desired object remains out of reach? Are they not also of value? For a poet who once admitted that he preferred the emotional climates of the windy season of autumn, the idea of valuing midsummer above the other seasons, does not ring true. In his repeated affirmations of the everyday world in

which we live, Stevens demonstrates an appreciation for *all* the days of our lives, whether they offer the joy of plenitude in lush midsummer or the sorrow of vacancy in bleak midwinter. That is to say, Stevens does not venerate the emotional arrivals of summer, but places them alongside all the other ordinary moments of our experience. How different his attitude is from that of his contemporary, T. S. Eliot, who clearly values “the still point”, or what he calls “Zero summer”, over and above those everyday moments.

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.¹⁸

Eliot’s assertion that at “the still point, there the dance is” is indicative of his belief in a world beyond this one. For him, there is a place where all is free from motion, a place that is greater than the time-bound world in which we live. For Stevens, however, there is no outside or beyond. Any sense of having arrived at a centre point is just that, *a sense*.

Many have noted an affinity between Stevens’ descriptions of these meditative states, in “Credences” described as the ‘now of midsummer’, and Christian mysticism, and William Bevis has even suggested that Stevens was an unwitting

¹⁸ T.S. Eliot, “Burnt Norton” from *The Four Quartets*. It must be acknowledged that there are many interpretations of and attitudes towards Eliot’s mysticism. In his preface to *T. S. Eliot: Mystic, Son and Lover* (London: The Athlone Press, 1997) Donald J. Childs offers an excellent discussion on the topic and demonstrates how Eliot’s mysticism has been received by various critics including Bloom and Eagleton. Perhaps most interesting, however, is John Guillory and Perry Meisel’s critical response to Eliot’s “radical hermeneutic posture” of aphasia, “a mystical aphasia before ‘the still point of the turning world’”. Meisel believes that the consequence of adopting such a stance is “less responsibility towards language, more toward belief in unquestioned ground,” p. xi. As we shall see, Eliot’s mystical aphasia is directly opposed to Stevens’ idea that “The poem is the cry of its occasion, / Part of the res itself and not about it” (CP 473).

practitioner of Zen Buddhist meditation.¹⁹ Certainly there are allusions throughout the poems to meditation and mysticism, perhaps most clearly demonstrated in “Solitaire Under the Oaks”:

In the oblivion of cards
One exists among pure principles.

Neither the cards nor the trees nor the air
Persist as facts. This is an escape

To principium, to meditation.
One knows at last what to think about

And thinks about it without consciousness,
Under the oak trees, completely released. (OP 137)

“The man who asks questions seeks only to reach a point where it will no longer be necessary for him to ask questions” (OP 200), writes Stevens in “Adagia”, and here in “Solitaire Under the Oak Trees” he seems finally to have reached that point where he is released from those nagging questions. Knowing “at last what to think about”—nothing—he experiences a moment of meditative detachment; it is *as if* he has ‘arrived’, *as if* he has been released from the restlessness of a mind that is never satisfied. To think without consciousness, that is, to be unaware that one is thinking, or unaware of oneself while thinking, is a kind of meditative experience. It is in this moment, a moment of emotional arrival, that the

¹⁹ See chapter four of Lensing’s *Wallace Stevens and the Seasons*. See also William W. Bevis’ *Mind of Winter: Wallace Stevens, Meditation, and Literature* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1988). In chapter five of this project, we look at Bevis’ ideas as outlined in *Mind of Winter*. Bevis takes an experiential rather than philosophical approach to Stevens’ poems, arguing that, “One of Stevens’ most distinguishing and pervasive characteristics, his detachment, is meditative and therefore experiential in origin, and difficult to perceive from within our culture.” He goes on to say that, “meditative consciousness exists as a possible mode of operation of the central nervous system with fairly stable characteristics across cultures; reports of meditative consciousness repeat certain qualities, points of view, and psychological assumptions; the meditative model, once defined, fits very well a number of Stevens’ poems, passages and attitudes—precisely those which have most puzzled or dismayed readers and which have spawned the least convincing interpretations. Many of Stevens’ problem passages, his enigmatic interest in *nothing*, and indeed an entire tendency of his mind toward distance without irony, are very well explained by a meditative paradigm. His life, and especially his long walks, offer plausible evidence of meditative experience,” p.7.

perceived distance between one's self and one's surroundings is temporarily overcome.

In "Credences of Summer" Stevens at times mocks the desire for transcendence yet recognises that the yearning for perfection is part of the human condition.²⁰ Vendler rightly comments that, "Hunger, for Stevens, is our eternal condition: famished for fulfilment, we achieve it uncertainly and not for long, but radiantly nonetheless."²¹ "Credences" demonstrates just how fleetingly desire is satisfied before it returns in search of a new object.²² This eternal hunger that plagues us is neither good nor evil for the poet, but rather a part of what it means to be alive. In order to live in a world that never stops revolving, our desire must also be in continuous motion, ever deferred, ever renewed. And though we may relish in the short-lived emotional 'arrivals' when we occasionally feel ourselves 'transported to summer', we must not devalue all the other times when we experience the hungry desire of 'winter'.

In canto seven of "Credences" the satisfactions of summer having reached their peak begin to wane. There is a shift away from the confident proclamations of canto six—"The rock cannot be broken. It is the truth ... / ... It is the rock of

²⁰ In his book outlining Kantian philosophy, Roger Scruton explains, "We must not, as Kant puts it, aspire to 'unconditioned' knowledge. At the same time, it seems inevitable that we should do so....

"The effort of transcendence is, Kant argues, inevitable. Not only do we seek to transcend the conditions contained in the possibility of experience. We also seek to know the world 'as it is', free from the conditions to which it may be subject by such categories as substance and cause.... Reason always aims to view the world...from no point of view." In Roger Scruton, *Kant* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1982), pp. 46-47.

²¹ Helen Vendler, *Wallace Stevens: Words Chosen out of Desire* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1984), p.30

²²"For as soon as a man satisfies his desire by obtaining what he wants, he starts to desire something else and finds himself empty again; and if he satisfies his desire with this, he becomes empty once again and ready for another. And this never stops until we depart from this material world." St Gregory of Nyssa as cited in Beverly J. Lanzetta's *The Other Side of Nothingness: Toward a Theology of Radical Openness* (New York: State University of New York Press, 2001), pp. 31-2.

summer, the extreme..."—to the realisation that there is little joy in longing for something that one already has.

Far in the woods they sang their unreal songs,
Secure. It was difficult to sing in face
Of the object. The singers had to avert themselves
Or else avert the object. Deep in the woods
They sang of summer in the common fields.

They sang desiring an object that was near,
In face of which desire no longer moved,
Nor made of itself that which it could not find...

The singers are the Romantics, and perhaps Stevens himself, who continue to sing for an object of desire that is already exhausted in terms of the satisfaction it has to offer. The singers sing a song "of summer in the common fields" desiring "a near object that stops desire", fearing the "self-generated delusions of ungratified desire."²³ The canto continues:

Three times the concentrated self takes hold, three times
The thrice concentrated self, having possessed

The object, grips it in savage scrutiny,
Once to make captive, once to subjugate
Or yield to subjugation, once to proclaim
The meaning of the capture, this hard prize,
Fully made, fully apparent, fully found.

The repetition in lines seven and eight are reminiscent of a witch's incantation, and we note that the word choice in the remaining lines—savage, captive, subjugation—suggests violence. This is the violence the poet inflicts on his object of desire in order to win his "hard prize", the elusive present which he then captures in the poem.²⁴ Stevens here is talking about reducing the ecstatic

²³ Bloom, p.251.

²⁴ Vendler explains, "This hard prize, so grasped and so exhibited, over and over, is the ever elusive present, so likely, like the ghost of Anchises, to evade embrace." In Helen Vendler, *On Extended Wings: Wallace Stevens' Longer Poems* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1969), p.232. Similarly, Bloom understands "This hard prize, / Fully made, fully apparent, fully found" to be "the First Idea as reimagined thing...", p. 251.

enlargements of summer in order to tame them, to shape them into poetry. *Poesis* is here described as a violent activity, and the emphasis is on

'capture,' on appropriation of the 'object' as *materia poetica*, or, more generally, as material for the imagination—congruent with 'The poet's native sphere...is what he can make of the world' (OP, 198). The captured thing, both 'fully found' and 'fully made' is known in and through integrative transformations.²⁵

The poem, fully found and fully made through the imagination's rendezvous with 'reality', is not merely *about* the experience but *is itself* a part of the experience. "The poem is the cry of its occasion, / Part of the res itself and not about it" (CP 473), Stevens insists. That is to say, the poem does not point to a past transformative experience or explain it or even give it meaning. It is not about something that lies outside itself. Tony Sharpe explains,

...the reader may suppose that there is a 'meaning' behind the words on the page which they themselves obstruct, so that this desire is to transcend them and thereby gain access to some paradise of noumenal immediacy, yet Stevens insists that the words of the poem *are* the poem, and any attempts to rise above them--as if they were merely the foyer to some grander structure—end when we see that there is no 'beyond', and that *there* is really *here*.²⁶

Stevens' poems are not only "hymns appropriate to / The complexities of the world" (CP 447), they are a part of the world, fully made and fully found, locally, as the poet experiences the extraordinary 'transports to summer' at home on ordinary evenings in Connecticut.

In the penultimate canto of "Credences", the ecstatic enlargements of summer have come to an end. "Salacious weeds" have taken over and the "gardener's cat is dead, the gardener gone." "A complex of emotions falls apart," and the garden of summer is finally abandoned.

Fly low, cock bright, and stop on a bean pole. Let
Your brown breast redden, while you wait for warmth,

²⁵ Leonard and Wharton, p.89.

²⁶ Tony Sharpe, *Wallace Stevens: A Literary Life* (London: Macmillan Press, 2000), pp. 175-6.

With one eye watch the willow, motionless.
The gardener's cat is dead, the gardener gone
And last year's garden grows salacious weeds.

A complex of emotions falls apart,
In an abandoned spot. Soft, civil bird,
The decay that you regard: of the arranged
And of the spirit of the arranged, douceurs,
Tristesses, the fund of life and death, suave bush

And polished beast, this complex falls apart.
And on your bean pole, it may be, you detect
Another complex of other emotions, not
So soft, so civil, and you make a sound,
Which is not part of the listener's own sense.

There is a pervasive sense of sorrow at the passing of the once fertile season throughout the canto, and yet the last lines offer the slightest glimmer of hope. We are told that the sound made by the bird "is not a part of the listener's own sense", indicating that it seems to be coming from elsewhere, from outside the mind. As the satisfaction of summer wanes, the sound brings hope of some new satisfaction not yet experienced, the satisfaction promised by a coming change of season. For summer is not the only season capable of offering a fulfilment. In fact, Stevens appears to have been least inspired by "Zero Summer", preferring instead to create in colder climates.²⁷

²⁷ Vendler aptly comments, "Though he did write *Credences of Summer*, Stevens' most congenial seasons ranged from October through March.... In Stevens' autumn, a cold wind chills the beach, and the northern lights, with their fiery cold sublimity, have replaced the sun as illumination. In his region November, things are dead; as a snow man, he inhabits the January moment when one listens and beholds, but can utter nothing; later, he discovers 'at the antipodes of poetry, dark winter,' that there exists a Keatsian hint of inception and possible utterance, 'the cricket of summer forming itself out of ice' (A Discovery of Thought); still later, he sees that the natural world (and he is included, even reluctantly, given the apathy of old age, in that world), inevitably begins its almost invisible spring life—the first fly, the 'babyishness of forsythia,' 'the spook and makings of the nude magnolia,' the comic turn after the tragic burial.

"In short, Stevens' most authentic insights are those of a minimalist poet; his art is, he realizes, fully as laden with feeling as that of any other poet (and therefore not fleshless and skeletal); but the feelings are often the powerful wintry feelings of apathy, reduction, nakedness and doubt." From *Words Chosen Out of Desire*, pp.36-37.

In “The Motive for Metaphor” (CP 288), also included in *Transport to Summer*, Stevens makes what sounds like a very personal confession. He writes, “You like it under the trees in autumn / Because everything is half dead.” And,

In the same way, you were happy in spring,
With the half colors of quarter-things,
The slightly brighter sky, the melting clouds,
The single bird, the obscure moon—

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

Desiring the exhilarations of changes:
The motive for metaphor, shrinking from
The weight of primary noon,
The ABC of being,

The ruddy temper, the hammer
Of red and blue, the hard sound—
Steel against intimation—the sharp flash,
The vital, arrogant, fatal, dominant X.

For the poet “desiring the exhilarations of changes”, spring and autumn, seasons of in-betweens, are to be preferred over stagnant summer’s “arrogant, fatal, dominant X”. Stevens recognises the freedom in change and motion and welcomes the joy and sorrow that comes from living in a world in constant flux. Summer’s ‘arrivals’ do bring satisfaction, but her satisfactions are fleeting. In order to live in the everyday world, to “get into it and stay in it”, requires that Stevens place his faith not in the momentary arrivals of summer, but in all the other days when an arrival appears to be out of reach.

Chapter Two: Faith in the Question

“...the question of religion is first of all the question of the question.”²⁸
Jacques Derrida, *Acts of Religion*

"If the day writhes, it is not with revelations. / One goes on asking questions" (CP 429). In the absence of *final* 'revelations', Wallace Stevens spent his life asking questions. One question in particular lies at the heart of his poetry, one that he articulates clearly in the eighth canto of Part III of one of his best known poems, *Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction*. The canto begins by asking simply, "What am I to believe?" Indeed, what to believe beleaguered this poet who was "ill of a question like a malady, / ill of a constant question in his thought" (CP331).

This nagging question is what made Stevens' poetry possible; for Stevens' question of belief was largely concerned with the poetic process. He wondered what it meant to be a poet in "an age of disbelief" and much of his poetry is a reflection on the possibility for creative inspiration in a time "after the death of the gods." Traditionally notions of inspiration have been connected with the divine. But what if belief in divine inspiration is no longer tenable for the modern poet? Where, then, lies creativity?²⁹ Many of Stevens' poems are a reflection on the whereabouts of creative inspiration. If there is nothing 'out there', no divinity to lend its creative powers, then, the poet muses, does the capacity for *poesis* lie within? Moreover, does it matter if it is the poet himself rather than some divinity who is responsible for the 'making' of the world? Will the satisfactions of belief

²⁸ Jacques Derrida, *Acts of Religion* (London: Routledge, 2002), p.76.

²⁹ In his essay, "Society, Culture, and Person: A Systems View of Creativity," in *The Nature of Creativity*, edited by Robert J. Sternberg (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi argues that the most fundamental question regarding the psychology of creativity is not 'What is creativity?' but 'Where is creativity?', p. 325. Cited in Timothy Clark's *The Theory of Inspiration* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1997), p.26.

be different somehow if they come from 'below' rather than from 'on high'?

Returning to the eighth canto, Stevens asks

What am I to believe? If the angel in his cloud,
Serenely gazing at the violent abyss,
Plucks on his strings to pluck abysmal glory,

Leaps downward through evening's revelations, and
On his spredden wings, needs nothing but deep space,
Forgets the golden centre, the golden destiny,

Grows warm in the motionless motion of his flight,
Am I that imagine this angel less satisfied?
Are the wings his, the lapis-haunted air?

Is it he or is it I that experience this?

Is there a difference, wonders the poet, between the gifts of the 'given' and those of the 'made'? Is grace contingent upon some heavenly angel existing over and above the realm of the earth, or are the gifts of the earth and the fruits of the imagination not enough to bring satisfactions?³⁰ Stevens' question of belief is twofold: first, it is a question of *place*—from where does creativity come? Is it internal or external to the poet? Second, he wonders, does it matter whether divinity lies within himself or in some external region?

But it is not a resolution to these questions that Stevens seeks; rather, he wishes to suspend the answer, allowing the question itself to provide the source of inspiration for the poem. As David Jarraway has pointed out,

Belief, in the theological or religious sense, has always been, and no doubt will continue to be, a favorite crux in any complete reading of Wallace Stevens' poetry. Yet despite the canonical disagreement surrounding this issue, we have it on the poet's own authority that matters of faith were a perpetual source of creative inspiration throughout his lifetime.³¹

³⁰ In a similar vein, B. J. Leggett asks, "Is not the earthly and attainable experience of imagining an angel the equivalent of the state we imagine that angels enjoy—a state in which we forget worldly need and are satisfied for the moment without the consolation of some external power?" In B.J. Leggett's *Wallace Stevens and Poetic Theory* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1987), p.106.

³¹ Jarraway, p. 1.

In a letter to Hi Simons written in 1940, Stevens wrote,

It is a habit of mind with me to be thinking of some substitute for religion....
My trouble, and the trouble of a great many people, is the loss of belief in the
sort of God in Whom we were all brought up to believe. (LWS 348)

It was this loss of belief in the God of his heritage that opened up for Stevens the question that led to the writing of his best poems. Commenting on the above passage, Adalaide Kirby Morris says, "His substitute [for religion] is finally the search itself: poetry and the theory of poetry."³²

The *question* of faith and the *possibility* for belief are at the heart of Stevens' poetry. The words 'question' and 'possibility' are key here; for Stevens was not interested in the certainties and easy assurances offered by "the sort of God in Whom we were all brought up to believe"; rather, he was concerned with the uncertainties and anxieties which prevailed in the "age of disbelief" (his own words) in which he lived. Some of Stevens' earlier poems, most notably "A High-Toned Old Christian Woman" and "Sunday Morning", which David Daiches calls "the great agnostic poem in the English language,"³³ offer a critical perspective on Christianity, questioning its relevancy in the modern world. Pronouncing the Christian religion "an exhausted culture" (CP 202), Stevens deems it necessary to throw off the "holy hush of ancient sacrifice" where divinity comes nought but in "silent shadows and in dreams" in favour of the vibrant "comforts of the sun" and the voluptuous "beauty of the earth" as they are perceived by the senses.³⁴

³² Adalaide Kirby Morris, *Wallace Stevens: Imagination and Faith* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1974), p.10.

³³ David Daiches, *God and the Poets* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1984), p.170. It is also worth noting that William Hamilton begins his chapter "The Death of God Theologies Today" in *Radical Theology and the Death of God* by quoting two stanzas from "Sunday Morning". Thomas J. J. Altizer and William Hamilton, *Radical Theology and the Death of God*, (New York: The Bobbs-Merrill Company, 1966).

³⁴ Joseph Carroll remarks that the "unsettled state of Stevens' early religious views manifests itself most clearly in one of the most seemingly self-assured of his early poems. In "Sunday Morning," Stevens depicts an exchange between himself and a female companion, presumably his wife. The subject of this exchange is religious need, and in responding to his companion's expressions of

In the first stanza of "Sunday Morning" the protagonist is depicted lounging in her dressing gown on a Sunday morning, lingering over "late / Coffee and oranges in a sunny chair." She who would normally be found sitting upright in a pew on this day relishes the freedom of reclining in lazy indulgence, enjoying the freedom of the scent of over-ripe oranges and the sight of a green cockatoo. But this sense of freedom is soon interrupted by a twinge of guilt:

She dreams a little, and she feels the dark
Encroachment of that old catastrophe,
As a calm darkens among water-lights.
The pungent oranges and bright, green wings
Seem things in some procession of the dead,
Winding across wide water, without sound.
The day is like wide water, without sound,
Stilled for the passing of her dreaming feet
Over the seas, to silent Palestine,
Dominion of the blood and sepulchre. (CP 67)

The thoughts threaten to undermine her pleasures of the flesh as the decadent sights and alluring smells suddenly seem to her to be condemning in their worldliness. The stern words of St. Paul resound here: "do not gratify the desires of the flesh. For the desires of the flesh are against the Spirit..." (Galatians 5:16-17).

And then just as suddenly she is struck with a thought: "Why should she give her bounty to the dead?"

What is divinity if it can come
Only in silent shadows and in dreams?
Shall she not find in comforts of the sun,
In pungent fruit and bright, green wings, or else
In any balm or beauty of the earth,
Things to be cherished like the thought of heaven?

need, Stevens both directs a polemic against the Christian myth and attempts to provide an alternative to this myth in his own lyric utterance." In Joseph Carroll's *Wallace Stevens' Supreme Fiction: A New Romanticism* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University, 1987), p.48.

With the onslaught of these questions, she turns her attention away from silent Palestine, "Dominion of the blood and sepulcher", to the warm comforts of the sun and the everyday things of the earth which give pleasure. Daiches comments,

She goes in imagination to ancient Palestine and thinks of the crucifixion. Then she recoils. Why should she involve herself in a death that happened two thousand years ago? And anyway, what reality has that 'divinity' which one can know 'only in silent shadows and in dreams'? Should she not forget all that and rejoice in the colour, beauty, variety of the physical world at the present moment? Are there not *here* 'things to be cherished as much as there are in thoughts of heaven'?³⁵

In her new found freedom, she makes the boldest of assertions, that "Divinity must live within herself" in

Passions of rain, or moods in falling snow;
Grievings in loneliness, or unsubdued
Elations when the forest blooms; gusty
Emotions on wet roads on autumn nights;
All pleasures and all pains, remembering
The bough of summer and the winter branch.
These are the measures destined for her soul.³⁶

Thus, divinity, if it can be spoken of at all, is reliant upon the self and the ever-changing passions, moods, grievings and elations that are the everyday emotional responses to the world around us. It is the changing weather of human emotion, the varied climates of joy and sorrow that bring satisfactions to the soul. Connecting the internal and external climates--"passions of rain", "moods in falling snow"--, Stevens believes that

³⁵ Daiches, 171.

³⁶ Of this passage, Harold Bloom comments, "From the *ethos* of Christ as an absence, though a longed-for presence, we pass to the *pathos* of an internalized divinity, whose representatives are passions, moods, grievings, elations, emotions, pleasures, pains, remembrances, all of them measures, parts of a greater music. But this synecdochal stanza, though it opens with three rhetorical questions, addresses its largest question implicitly to itself. What is a divinity that is this discontinuous, this reliant upon seasonal cycle? The ominous word in the stanza is 'destined' in its last line, which reintroduces the limitations of character and incident. There is no wholeness to this divinity, but only an aggregate of passions, and where there is an aggregate there is no closure, not even an illusion of closure," in *Wallace Stevens: The Poems of Our Climate* (London: Cornell University Press, 1977), p.31.

We are physical beings in a physical world; the weather is one of the things that we enjoy, one of the unphilosophical realities. The state of the weather soon becomes a state of mind. (LWS, 348-9)

The "Ecstatic identities / Between one's self and the weather" (CP, 258) offer "ambiguous marriages between mind and environment."³⁷ The internal is affected by the external and it does not matter whether the state of mind is one of elation at the sight of a clear blue summer sky or one of sullen introspection at the scene of a bleak mid-winter day; pleasure and pain are to be cherished equally. Jarraway states that

If faith is to be at all viable in the modern era, it must recognize a divinity within the lady of the poem herself, as the second section argues, that is, within the quotidian of 'pungent fruit and bright, green wings' or of 'any balm or beauty of the earth,' but a quotidian that may also be a malady: 'All pleasures and all pains, remembering / The bough of summer and the winter branch'.³⁸

Like the "anti-master-man" of "Landscape with Boat" (CP 241-3), the speaker in "Sunday Morning" never before supposed "That [she] might be truth, [herself], or part of it."

[She] 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 the truth.

The world itself was the truth, the way it looked, the way it smelled on a Sunday morning. The pungent fruit and bright green wings of a cockatoo must not be cherished less than the thought of heaven; for the things of the earth and the pleasures (and pains) that they give offer the paradisaal fulfilment she desires.

But these pleasures are fleeting, she soon discovers. They do not satiate in a final way her yearnings for religious fulfilment. In the fourth stanza she says,

³⁷ Richard A. Macksey, "The Climates of Wallace Stevens," in Roy Harvey Pearce and J. Hillis Miller (eds) *The Act of the Mind: Essays on the Poetry of Wallace Stevens* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins Press, 1965), p. 187.

'I am content when wakened birds,
Before they fly, test the reality
Of misty fields, by their sweet questionings;
But when the birds are gone, and their warm fields
Return no more, where, then, is paradise?'

Beauty's impermanence comes initially as a disappointment as she realises that paradise is unsustainable, and in her desire for a constant sublime it follows that in the next stanza she should say, "But in contentment I still feel / The need of some imperishable bliss." As others have remarked there is an affinity here with a passage from Wordsworth's *The Recluse*:³⁹

What want we? have we not perpetual streams,
Warm woods, and sunny hills, and fresh green fields,
And mountains not less green, and flocks and herds,
And thickets of songsters, and the voice
Of lordly birds, an unexpected sound
Heard now and then from morn to latest eve,
Admonishing the man who walks below
Of solitude and silence in the sky? (ll. 126-33)

With the abundance of beauty around us—perpetual streams, fresh green fields, and the voices of lordly birds—what more do we want? More. We want an enduring sublime, one that will not fail. Though the streams may be perpetual, the joy they give is not; for "Beauty is momentary in the mind" (CP, 91).⁴⁰

But "Death," argues Stevens boldly, "is the mother of beauty." It is the very fact that these things do change that allows for the possibility for beauty. For that which is ever-lasting, impervious to change and death, will never be valued in the

³⁸ Jarraway, 34.

³⁹ J.V. Cunningham notes the Wordsworthian character of parts of "Sunday Morning" in "Tradition and Modernity," in *The Collected Essays of J.V. Cunningham* as cited by Joseph Carroll in *Wallace Stevens' Supreme Fiction*, pp. 49-50. Also, Carroll remarks that "Stevens draws on a Wordsworthian range of sensibility but detaches this sensibility from its transcendental base," p. 50.

⁴⁰ Bloom purports to hear "something of the voice of Walter Pater" echoing in both "Sunday Morning" and another poem by Stevens written around the same time, "Peter Quince at the Clavier." Bloom quotes from Pater's "Conclusion" to *The Renaissance*: "Every moment some form grows perfect in hand or face; some tone on the hills or the sea is choicer than the rest; some mood of passion or insight or intellectual excitement is irresistibly real and attractive for us,--for that moment only." Cited in *The Poems of Our Climate*, p.36.

same way as that which is finite. If "there were no change of death in paradise", if "ripe fruit" never fell but hung "always heavy in that perfect sky", what then? We, like the lady in the poem, would not be content. Eventually leaves fall, ripe fruit shrivels and rots, and joy turns to sorrow, as humanity's inconstant emotional climates are intimately connected with this cycle of life and death. Charles M. Murphy comments,

Death, the finality of it, seems to intensify the feeling of how precious is our earthly life. Maybe this is all the paradise we need, so sensuously evoked in the stanzas of the poem through sight, sound and smell. There is more tragic beauty in the ripe fruit falling than in fruit forever frozen in a perfect sky.⁴¹

In "Sunday Morning" Stevens celebrates death, even the death of the gods, and especially the death of that one god, the "God in Whom we were all brought up to believe". By arguing that "Death is the mother of beauty," Stevens calls upon the lady in the poem to give up her graveside vigil at the tomb in Palestine and to accept the inevitable changes brought about by time.

What happened in ancient Palestine occurred in a particular time and place, part of the great procession of events which is life in motion. We must accept this procession of events, this inevitability of change, she concludes. We must accept Time. The wide world of nature, the whole universe, exists in time and space, and as our imagination ranges over it we can sense the sad beauty of a time-bound reality. The sadness is part of the beauty.⁴²

Losing faith in the God of her heritage may bring this lady grief, but Stevens believes that if she is willing to endure the sadness of such loss, it will eventually yield a sense of joyful liberation. For "Loss of faith is growth" (OP, 198), or perhaps more accurately, loss of faith in an Absolute is growth.

With this shift away from the Absolute of heaven, the "Dominion of the blood and sepulcher" which prevailed for the past two thousand years comes to an end and the "tomb in Palestine", proclaims the poet, is no longer "the porch of spirits

⁴¹ Murphy, p. 42.

⁴² Daiches, p.174.

lingering. / It is the grave of Jesus, where he lay" (CP 70). Echoes of Nietzsche's Madman are evident here. Asks the Madman, "What are these churches now if they are not the tombs and sepulchres of God?"⁴³ For Stevens like Nietzsche, it is time to leave the graveyard of Christianity with the security of its assurances and step out into the uncertain "chaos of the sun". Here, as inhabitants of the earth,

Deer walk upon our mountains, and the quail
Whistle about us their spontaneous cries;
Sweet berries ripen in the wilderness;
And, in the isolation of the sky,
At evening, casual flocks of pigeons make
Ambiguous undulations as they sink,
Downward to darkness, on extended wings.⁴⁴

The sights, sounds, and smells of the earth as they are perceived by the senses provide the satisfactions of belief that were formerly the domain of Christianity. The amount of activity in this final stanza is indicative of the importance Stevens places on change and changingness in humanity's quest for what will suffice. Here, all is in motion: deer walk, quail whistle, berries ripen... nothing is stagnant or permanent, nothing is fixed or finished. The phrase "*casual* flocks of pigeons" suggests an order not quite complete or exacting, and the "ambiguous undulations" the birds make in the sky at twilight as they sink downward to darkness reinforce this sense of incompleteness or inbetweenness. Hovering on outstretched wings between heaven and earth, in a sky no longer light but not yet dark, the birds give no indication of setting down. They are suspended but not fixed and contribute to the sense of open-endedness of the poem.

Embracing change and death and accepting the impermanence of all earthly and, in this case, heavenly things, is what it means to have faith for Stevens.⁴⁵ But to find faith in impermanence is difficult indeed. In the words of Nietzsche,

⁴³ Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*. Translated by Josfine Nauckhoff (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), p. 120.

The eternal and exclusive becoming, the complete impermanence of everything actual, that constantly...becomes but never is...is a terrible and paralyzing thought. Its impact on us may be compared to the feeling in an earthquake when one loses confidence in a firmly grounded earth. It takes amazing strength to transform this effect into its opposite: sublimity and blessed astonishment.⁴⁶

B. J. Leggett in his book *Early Stevens: The Nietzschean Intertext* has made much of the Nietzschean undertones in "Sunday Morning."⁴⁷ He claims that from the very beginning of the poem there is a dichotomy between two states, between being and becoming. As the day of Christian celebration and remembrance, Sunday is traditionally given over to an other-worldly ideal, or the "world of being". But this day, this *particular* day, is also

The day of the sun, of 'Coffee and oranges in a sunny chair,' and for a moment the world of actual sun—always in Stevens and Nietzsche associated with becoming, the purely physical—manages to 'dissipate / The holy hush of ancient sacrifice.'⁴⁸

The woman of "Sunday Morning" finds herself between these states, between dreaming of that state which exists only as an abstraction in the mind, as a

⁴⁴ Helen Vendler *Part of Nature* see p.23.

⁴⁵ It is worth noting that Stevens was well-read in process thought and the works of A.N. Whitehead were to be found on the shelves of his library. Describing process thought, David Pailin, a contemporary scholar working in this area, writes: "the defining principle of process thought is that to be actual and hence to be a concrete reality is to be in process.... Positively, this means in terms of the process of becoming that for anything to be actual is for it to be at the point where the indeterminate becomes determinate—to be where, that is, a previously yet-to-be-determined range of possibilities at that moment ends in the realization of one particular state of being now that actual entity." David Pailin, *God and the Process of Reality* (London: Routledge, 1989), p.51. Grace Jantzen notes the implications of process thought for theology. She says that "part of what this amounts to is that the divine is in process; hence traditional attributes like timelessness and changelessness cannot be predicated of God. The divine is not static but Becoming, not aloof but feeling and responsive." Grace Jantzen, *Becoming Divine: Towards a Feminist Philosophy of Religion* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1998), p. 257.

⁴⁶ Complete Works (see Stack, p.84 for ref.)

⁴⁷ B. J. Leggett, *Early Stevens: The Nietzschean Intertext* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1992), pp.88-ff. In the first chapter of this work, "Nietzsche Reading Stevens," Leggett begins by asking, "In what sense, if any, is Wallace Stevens a Nietzschean poet?" Recognising the role of the reader in the production of texts, he argues that it is not so much that Stevens is a Nietzschean poet *per se* but that "Nietzsche's new presence in Stevens criticism is, in part, a result of the dominance of neo-Nietzschean critical theory..." (p.1). Furthermore, Leggett claims that "Stevens' reading of Nietzsche is of less consequence than Nietzsche's reading of Stevens," (p. 7) and that "the reader's activity in producing, say, a Nietzschean intertext for "Sunday Morning" completes something otherwise incomplete in the poem" (p.21).

⁴⁸ Ibid., p.92.

"thought of heaven", and living in the actual, ever-changing world that never *is* but is always *on the way* to becoming. It is difficult for her to choose which of these to inhabit; the ideal is powerfully tantalising, so much so that it threatens to render the actual insignificant by comparison. Says Leggett,

...the 'thought of heaven,' a mere concept as opposed to the actuality of the world of becoming, has the power to devalue the actual, and it does so through a process of idealization....

There is some irony in Nietzsche's assumption that a mere figment of the Christian imagination should have such a profound effect on that which so powerfully exists....⁴⁹

The motive of "Sunday Morning" is at least in part an attempt to expose this devaluing effect that Christianity has on the world of the senses and to re-affirm the value of the sensate. "Nietzsche's and Stevens' indictments of Christianity are based in large part on its denigration of the passions,"⁵⁰ something which they both strive to overturn by asserting the divinity within. These passions, which at times bring pleasures and at times bring pains, are inconstant, unpredictable, even chaotic; yet they are connected with—and connect us to—the place in which we live, the becoming world where "Deer walk upon our mountains and the quail / Whistle about us their spontaneous cries." The world as we experience it, in all of its imperfection and in its wanting, is all that we have; it is an imperfect paradise, full of possibility. The task of "Sunday Morning" argues Leggett, is

not to redefine the human spirit as something god-like and transcendent but to convince the woman that, just as it is—mortal, earth-bound, ambiguous, ephemeral—the life of becoming, the life that we have in fact been given, is exactly what we would choose if we were able to rid ourselves of Christian valuations of life. Insofar as the poem succeeds in doing this, it could be called the first post-Nietzschean poetry of *amor fati*....⁵¹

Writes Nietzsche, "If [man] had required a God in the past, he now delights in cosmic disorder without a God, a world of accident, to the essence of which

⁴⁹ Ibid., pp. 92-3.

⁵⁰ Ibid., p. 97.

terror, ambiguity, and seductiveness belong."⁵² But the dissolution of the gods does not strike terror in Stevens; quite the opposite. As David Daiches points out, "Sunday Morning" "is a poem of calm agnostic acceptance."⁵³ Though Nietzsche longed to turn the terror of impermanence into "sublimity and blessed acceptance," he never quite managed it. Stevens, however, comes closer to achieving it, finding faith in the ever-changing universe and the alternating states of human emotion that it inspires.⁵⁴

Having faith in the here and now, in the transience of all things, means finding ecstasy in the fleeting pleasures the earth provides and also, and this is key, finding a kind of sweet sadness in change and death. Stevens has faith in both joy *and* sorrow—faith in the "bough of summer" and the immediacy of joy experienced in the "comforts of the sun" and faith, too, in the "winter branch" and the latent tranquility of sorrow experienced after the "ripe fruit" of summer has

⁵¹ Ibid., p.96.

⁵² From *The Will to Power* (II, 399) as cited in Leggett, *The Nietzschean Intertext*. p.116.

⁵³ Daiches, p.175. Stevens' calm acceptance of the death of the gods in "Sunday Morning" can be contrasted with a poem by Robert Lowell, "Waking Early Sunday Morning", written in response to the Stevens poem. Like Stevens, Lowell recognises that the church has become something of an anachronism, with its "electric bells, / clearly chiming, "Faith of our fathers." But unlike Stevens, Lowell mourns this loss:

O Bible chopped and crucified
in hymns we hear but do not read,
none of the milder subtleties
of grace or art will sweeten these
stiff quatrains shovelled out four-square-
they sing of peace, and preach despair;
yet they gave darkness some control,
and left a loophole for the soul.

Lowell wonders, "When will we see Him face to face? / Each day, He shines through darker glass." For Lowell, there are "No weekends for the gods now..."

Pity the planet, all joy gone
from this volcanic cone;
peace to our children when they fall
in small war on the heels of small
war--until the end of time
to police the earth, a ghost
orbiting forever lost

in our monotonous sublime. (from *Near the Ocean*)

⁵⁴ "Stevens rescued himself from loss by reaching out for what had always bewitched and beckoned him, the world itself," Lensing rightly comments. From *Wallace Stevens and the Seasons*, p. 5.

fallen. But there is a difference, for while the pleasures of the 'sun' are immediate, the beauty that arises from death, so often the theme of the poets, is transformed into "sublimity and blessed astonishment" only when it is given over to expression. It is precisely because he is a poet that Stevens is able to declare with such force that "Death is the mother of beauty."

In a later poem, "Esthétique du Mal" (CP 313), Stevens notes the connection between pain and the sublime. The poem begins with a man in Naples "writing letters home / And, between his letters, reading paragraphs / On the sublime." For a month while reading and writing, "Vesuvius had groaned," and, thought the man,

It was pleasant to be sitting there,
While the sultriest fulgurations, flickering,
Cast corners in the glass. He could describe
The terror of the sound because the sound
Was ancient. He tried to remember the phrases: pain
Audible at noon, pain torturing itself,
Pain killing pain on the very point of pain.
The volcano trembled in another ether,
As the body trembles at the end of life.

In *Wallace Stevens: An Approach to His Poetry and Thought*, Robert Pack believes that "'Esthétique du Mal' can profitably be read as a sequel to 'Sunday Morning'" inasmuch as both consider "the question of whether earth can be a paradise"⁵⁵, that is, both poems ask if the earth, in all its mutability, its change and death, can be a source of religious fulfilment. Both poems open with the central figure concerned with pleasure and then turn the protagonist's attention to images of pain and death. Pack comments,

It is appropriate that the protagonist of the poem is reading about the sublime and thinking about Vesuvius, for the sublime is that strange mixture of beauty

⁵⁵ Robert Pack, p.34.

and terror, bliss and pain, that causes ecstasy and wonder and awe, revealing for an instant the mystery of the universe.⁵⁷

The strange and melancholy sensation that stems from remembered pain "is a part of the sublime / From which we shrink. And yet, except for us, / The total past felt nothing when destroyed" (CP 314). Perhaps humanity's greatest contribution to the earth is to feel the pain of its death and destruction, and equally it may be the earth's passing that provides the greatest contribution to humanity's need for religious fulfilment. Comments Pack,

If to be in paradise is to have a consciousness of the sublime, there must be change and therefore death, and therefore pain as well as bliss.

The idea of pain being inextricable from our sense of time and mutability, and from our sensuous experience of things, encourages our acceptance of earth in its totality.⁵⁸

"It was almost time for lunch. Pain is human," begins the second stanza of the first canto. Stevens' emphasis on the everydayness of pain as part of the human experience of life on earth is clear here. By anthropomorphizing Pain (it is in need of lunch) Stevens reveals a flippancy that Pack calls Stevens' "comic vision". He rightly asserts that,

Change, according to this vision, does not lead toward a goal, a destination, a state of human perfection, but continues to renew that which already is. There is a lightness to such a philosophy, and this lightness is often reflected in Stevens' style, even in a poem about pain.⁵⁹

⁵⁷ Ibid., p.35. See also Rose Macauley's *Pleasure of Ruin* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1953). Picturing destruction and ruin has always afforded pleasure, and the destruction of Pompeii in particular, notes Macauley, has provided countless poets, painters and sculptors "an infinity of pleasure." Among the many ruin-enthusiasts was Charles Dickens whose fascination with the victims of Vesuvius was rivalled only by Vesuvius itself. He wrote, "Stand at the bottom of the great market place of Pompeii, and look up the silent streets, through the ruined temples of Jupiter and Isis, over the broken houses with their inmost sanctuaries open to the day, away to Mount Vesuvius...and lose count of time and heed of other things in the strange and melancholy sensation of seeing the Destroyed and the Destroyer making this quiet picture in the sun.... The mountain is the genius of the scene...," in *Pleasure of Ruin*, p. 296.

⁵⁸ Pack, p.36.

⁵⁹ Ibid. p.40. Also, John Timberman Newcomb, commenting on Pack and other critics, including Daniel Fuchs, author of *The Comic Spirit of Wallace Stevens*, remarks that, "For these critics, there was more in a poetics of comedy and celebration than simply a way of laughing off the evils of the world. The celebratory impulse in Stevens could be seen as a secular sacrament of the value of life itself," in John Timberman Newcomb, *Wallace Stevens and Literary Canons* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1992), p. 188.

Stevens accepts that pain is a part of our earthly paradise and must be valued as such. And when he laughs at pain, as he does in "Esthétique du Mal", Stevens is not emulating the laughter of Zarathustra, whose guffaws are but a strained effort of the will to overthrow the terror of impermanence. Rather, he is stepping up to that "part of the sublime / From which we [have shrunk]".

Having faith in the difficulty of life means, for Stevens, keeping the question of belief open-ended. It means not positing an easy answer or clinging to the (empty) reassurances offered by the "sort of God in whom we were all brought up to believe." Stevens differs from Nietzsche in that he is not calling for a *will to power*, as such, but rather for a calm acceptance of the world as we experience it. Nevertheless, he often draws on Nietzsche to articulate his thoughts, as is evident in the third stanza of "Esthétique" when he claims that

The fault lies with an over-human god,
Who by sympathy has made himself a man
And is not to be distinguished, when we cry

Because we suffer....

If only he would not pity us so much,
Weaken our fate, relieve us of woe both great
And small, a constant fellow of destiny,

A too, too human god, self-pity's kin
And uncourageous genesis... It seems
As if the health of the world might be enough. (CP 315)

The reference to the "too, too human god" is an unmistakable allusion to Nietzsche's *Human, All-Too Human*. In this canto Stevens considers the problem of an "over-human god" who by pitying us weakens our fate. This pitying god prevents us from finding the satisfactions offered by our paradisaal earth. Such a god, according to Zarathustra, "died of his pity for man."

A "too, too human god", a god that spoke to us and heard our complaints with a listening ear, who knew sympathy and empathised with our suffering, would make it impossible for us to have a true appreciation for the physical world in which we live. What we require instead is a 'faithful reality', a dispassionate giver that passes no judgements and offers no sympathy. "If there must be a god in the house," writes Stevens, "let him be one / That will not hear us when we speak: a coolness, / A vermillioned nothingness..." (CP 328).⁶⁰ If there must be a god in the house, let him "dwell quietly", leaving us the freedom to say of the world how it looks, how it feels without being hindered in our 'saying' by some primordial judgement that disallows a genuine engagement with things as they are encountered.

We must be, says Stevens elsewhere, "An unhappy people in a happy world," for to be

An unhappy people in an unhappy world--

Here are too many mirrors for misery.

Nor can we be

A happy people in an unhappy world--
It cannot be. There's nothing here to roll

On the expressive tongue, the finding fang.
A happy people in a happy world--
Buffo! A ball, an opera, a bar.

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

Read to the congregation [rabbi], for today
And for tomorrow, this extremity,

⁶⁰ These lines are taken from "Less and Less Human , O Savage Spirit" (CP 327-8), a poem, according to Leonard and Wharton, that "calls for Nietzsche's 'gods of Epicurus who [without the divisiveness of pity, envy, deliberate indifference] have no care and are unknown,' effectively encouraging appreciation of our own dexterities and the natural tones of life's surprising rightnesses...." In J. S. Leonard and C. E. Wharton's *The Fluent Mundo*, p. 121.

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. (CP 420)

There is a never-failing genius of living as unhappy people in a happy world. In such a place there is always more to 'read' and more to 'say'. Like the mystic cabbalist who, in her insatiable desire to excavate the sacred text, discovers endless "secretive syllables", so too the poet, by desiring to "name the world flatly", finds endless material "to roll / On the expressive tongue." To live as unhappy people in a happy world is to live with an over-arching sense of lack in a world of plenitude, a sense of lack that is overcome (if but for a time) when it is given utterance. It is up to the poet to make something of the sorrow of this discontentment.

The need to find some "imperishable bliss", as with the lady in "Sunday Morning", is driven by the human desire for completion, that is, the desire to be released from the constraints of time and to be finally a "happy people in a happy world". But as Stevens suggests, this is not only untenable but ultimately undesirable—and even laughable. To the idea of a "happy people in a happy world" Stevens exclaims, "Buffo! A ball, an opera, a bar." Just as we cannot live as unhappy people in an unhappy world because "there are too many mirrors for misery," neither is it possible to live contentedly in perfection. It is necessary that there be a sense of incompleteness and imperfection *on the side of the human* in order for life to be worth living. Another way to say this is that there must be some 'slippage' between the 'happy' world and our 'unhappy' perception of it in order for us to situate ourselves as finite beings in a universe that will most certainly survive us.

This 'slippage' between our unhappy selves and the happy world is bridged by desire which acts as a kind of elastic tether, tying us to the ever-changing, transient world in which we struggle to make ourselves at home. For Stevens desire is both the bane of our existence and our salvation. Desire for completion, perfection, for an unattainable absolute makes us an unhappy, discontented people. And yet it is this insatiable desire that allows us to make ourselves at home—or perhaps make ourselves *a* home—in a world that would otherwise be uninhabitable. For desire enables us to inhabit that space between lack and plenitude. Jarraway writes, "Desire in its strictest sense is an infection of time,"

and its force lies precisely in its inability to bring itself to any kind of culminating completion. Put the other way, desire's prolongation amounts to its ability to inhabit disconnection and fragmentation, to bear within itself 'the destiny of its non-satisfaction.'⁶¹

The human "desire to be at the end of distances" (CP 527) is a desire to be free from the constraints of time; it is an "eschatological desire,"⁶² one that longs for the distances to become within reach. However, the nature of desire means that it is forever pushing out, deferring, and is constantly being renewed in its non-satisfaction.

"Desire," asserts Helen Vendler, "its illusions and its despairs, is Stevens' great subject." She continues,

Another way to put it is to say that the human illusions engendered by desire are his great subject. We are helpless, he sees, in this matter. It is not possible for us to be without desire; we cannot help but engage in that process that Freudians call idealization and trace to Oedipal causes. Our common

⁶¹ Jarraway, p.193. See also Jacques Derrida's *Of Grammatology*, p.143. Of this connection between desire and change, Jonathan Dollimore says, "movement, motion, change, inconstancy are the very stuff not just of life but also of desire; that is to say, *mutability is also the inner dynamic of desire*.... In other words, mutability animates desire even as it thwarts it. Put slightly differently, the very nature of desire is what prevents its fulfilment, what makes it 'impossible'." In Jonathan Dollimore's *Death, Desire and Loss in Western Culture* (London: Allen Lane, The Penguin Press, 1998), p. xvii.

⁶² For more on this idea of "eschatological desire" see Richard Kearney's article, "Desire of God", in *God, the Gift and Postmodernism*, John Caputo and Michael J. Scanlons, eds. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1999), p.113.

names for idealization are romantic love, religious belief, and political engagement: these do not differ in essence, for Stevens, from the poet's creation of the aesthetic object of desire. All human beings engage in poesis in constituting an imagined world to live in; and the engagement in poesis is coterminous with life.⁶³

Indeed, Stevens' great subject is desire and his work does suggest that he would agree that "poesis is coterminous with life"; however, Vendler's reference to desire's 'illusions' is dubious. Poesis, constructing an imagined world in which to live, is not for Stevens connected with illusion; quite the opposite. He is insistent that the world in its seeming, in the way it looks, the way it feels, *is* the very thing itself, and to suggest otherwise is to fall into the trap of Platonism, something that he wishes to avoid.

Again, Stevens is interested in keeping the question open and is willing to face the difficulty of living without the comforts of an Absolute, whether it be an absolute offered by the "God in whom we were all brought up to believe" or in some other abstract Ideal. He knows that "The way through the world / Is more difficult to find than the way beyond it" (CP 446) and he accepts the pain and sorrow of Desire's relentless pursuit of that which will suffice. Looking to the world around him for the satisfactions of belief rather than to "empty heaven and its hymns" he is surprised to discover that there is a plenitude of sufficiency offered for the taking by that dispassionate giver, the earth.⁶⁴ And if there is sorrow upon this realisation, it is not because there is not enough, but precisely because there is so much. The happy world, abundant with gifts, triggers the desire of an unhappy, gluttonous people who want more but who are unable to grasp it all at once. Stevens knows that the key to making oneself at home in a world of overwhelming abundance is to desire what one already has. As Walt

⁶³ Helen Vendler, *Wallace Stevens: Words Chosen Out of Desire*, pp. 31-32.

Whitman, who as Bloom argues had a strong influence on Stevens⁶⁵, asks in the sixth canto of "A Song for Occupations,"

Will you seek afar off? you surely come back at last,
In things best known to you finding the best, or as good as the best,
In folks nearest to you finding the sweetest, strongest, lovingest,
Happiness, knowledge, not in another place but this place,
not for another hour but this hour...⁶⁶

If desire is Stevens' great subject then this is his great challenge: to desire those local objects of his immediate habitation.

By rejecting the escapism of a metaphysics, that is, by rejecting the God in whom he was brought up to believe, Stevens struggles to make himself at home in the everyday world. In his desire to spend an ordinary evening in New Haven (rather than an extra-ordinary evening in new heaven), he discovers the endless satisfactions of the quotidian. The local objects of his surroundings, "the pans above the stove, the pots on the table, the tulips among them" (CP 423), these are the everyday things of reality to which Stevens returns time and again for inspiration. Like Whitman who asks, "Will you seek afar off? surely you come back at last", Stevens acknowledges that, "We keep coming back and coming back / To the real: to the hotel instead of the hymns" (CP 471). The allure of heaven and its hymns cannot be sustained; eventually a longing for the physical world will return. For, according to Stevens,

The greatest poverty is not to live
In a physical world, to feel that one's desire
Is too difficult to tell from despair. Perhaps,
After death, the non-physical people, in paradise,
Itself non-physical, may, by chance, observe
The green corn gleaming and experience
The minor of what we feel.

⁶⁴ Janet McCann comments, "Desire for the unattainable can only be mocked by all the signs of earth's plenty," in *Wallace Stevens Revisited: The Celestial Possible*, p. 15

⁶⁵ See Bloom's *The Poems of Our Climate*, pp. 11-15.

⁶⁶ Walt Whitman, *Leaves of Grass*, Sculley Bradley and Harold W. Blodgett, eds. (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 1973), p. 218.

The non-physical people in paradise are those who reject the 'truths' of the quotidian in favour of some abstraction. They are the same people Stevens refers to as 'ghosts' in "Large Red Man Reading" (CP 423-4). These 'ghosts' who had lived so long in search of paradisaal perfection among the "wilderness of stars" eventually "returned to earth" in their desire to *feel*—to feel pain as well as pleasure. These ghosts,

were those that would have wept to step barefoot into reality,
That would have wept and been happy, have shivered in the frost
And cried out to feel it again, have run fingers over leaves
And against the most coiled thorn, have seized on what was ugly

And laughed...

These 'ghostly' people finding no satisfaction in the monotonous perfection of "the non-physical world" turn away from their heavenly paradise desiring the very imperfection that they originally spurned. They long to escape this other-worldly haven and return to the ugliness, the decay, the inconstancies and mutability of the everyday world. Like the lady in "Sunday Morning" who learns that through death "Alone, shall come fulfilment to our dreams / And our desires", these ghosts come to recognise the necessity for death—and the inevitable sorrow that it brings—in their desire for religious fulfilment.

The difficulty of living in this world of change and death without the safety-net offered by the God in whom he was brought up to believe is a challenge Stevens ultimately celebrates. Finding himself released from a constraining religious certitude, he discovers a new-found freedom with which he must learn to live. Unlike other poets of his time, Stevens does not indulge in a nostalgic longing for the religious groundedness of days gone by;⁶⁶ rather he welcomes the difficulty of

⁶⁶ "Since Stevens's 'main concern is with discovering, and through his poetry, *enacting* the possibilities for self-renewal in an impersonal and recalcitrant age,' he offered a healthy corrective

living without those false assurances. Living in a world uncompromised by notions of religious Truth, Stevens is able to affirm "where we happen to be".⁶⁸

to the tendency of much modern literature to wallow in the loss of former anchors of belief and certainty.... In explicit contrast 'to Eliot and later Auden, it becomes clear that Stevens is relatively free from religious and ideological nostalgia'; instead of futile nostalgic yearning 'there is instead a recognition... of where we happen to be,'" writes John Timberman Newcomb quoting Irving Howe. In *Wallace Stevens and Literary Canons*, p.191-2. Also, George S. Lensing rightly comments that Stevens "reacted, as every poet must, to his own experiences and found their origins in a wrenching sense of loss—but never fatalistically or with final despair. Stevens rescued himself from loss by reaching out for what had always bewitched and beckoned him, the world itself," in *Wallace Stevens and the Seasons*, p.5.

⁶⁸ Newcomb, p.192.

Chapter Three: The Paradox of Inspiration

[...]we are confronted with an enigmatic paradox that will not cease questioning us: if loss, bereavement, and absence trigger the work of the imagination and nourish it permanently as much as they threaten it and spoil it, it is also noteworthy that the work of art as fetish emerges when the activating sorrow has been repudiated.

Julia Kristeva⁶⁹

Whatever inspiration is, it's born from a continuous "I don't know."
Wislawe Szymborska⁷⁰

The effete vocabulary of summer
No longer says anything.

from "The Green Plant" (CP 506)

In the beginning the beginning will have been lacking and this lack will have given the beginning....

Marc Froment-Meurice⁷¹

In the last chapter we considered how Stevens' loss of belief in the God of his heritage opened up the possibility for writing poetry. Now we will explore more fully how this crisis of faith and the sorrow that accompanies it (at least initially) affects the creative process and we will show how it is that such loss can actually provide a source of inspiration for the poet.

It must be said that we need to tread carefully when using a loaded word such as 'inspiration', for as Timothy Clark has pointed out in his study *The Theory of Inspiration*, the word has come to have "so little status that, though part of the ordinary language and arguably the key term in the history of Western poetics, it almost never appears in guides to literary terms."⁷² That the term inspiration has become an embarrassment to such an extent that it has disappeared from the

⁶⁹ An excerpt from *Black Sun* (or *Soleil Noir*) in *The Portable Kristeva*, edited by Kelly Oliver (New York: Columbia University Press, 1987), p. 184.

⁷⁰ Wislawe Szymborska, "The Poet and the World", Nobel Lecture, 1996.

⁷¹ Marc Froment-Meurice, *That is to Say: Heidegger's Poetics* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1998), p. 19.

literary guides is not surprising in our (post)modern, post-Christian world; for the word inspiration has always implied a kind of mysterious transcendent force calling upon its prophet, the poet, to voice its will. In an age of disbelief such as ours ideas of transcendental inspiration are met with sufficient scorn. Yet, as Clark says in his

Introduction,

accounts of inspiration have persisted, ineradicably, as part of Western literary culture for more than three thousand years. They have provided a recurrent source of controversy, obfuscation, enthusiasm, wonder and even comedy throughout the time. No sooner is the term disqualified for various reasons than crucial aspects of it come back, sometimes from an unexpected direction.⁷²

Indeed, accounts of inspiration over the ages have come from some unexpected directions and have been attributed to some unusual sources. One such source of poetic inspiration that cannot be underestimated is melancholia, the feeling of despair that a poet experiences when he or she is faced with an overarching sense of lost inspiration. That is to say, the source of inspiration for poets often comes from the loss of inspiration. This paradox of finding creative inspiration in the absence of inspiration is not something unique to the modern poet, such as Stevens, but is alluded to by poets of every generation and has led to the writing of some of the greatest poetry from ancient times to modern.

Before looking at examples of poetry inspired by the loss of inspiration, we must first consider the following question: When a poet laments the loss of her creative powers what exactly is it that she is mourning? Is it something external to the poet that has been lost, some kind of outside influence that was once perceived to have been present, some invisible entity such as a muse or a divinity? Or, rather, is it something internal, a certain feeling or emotional climate that is

⁷¹ Timothy Clark, *The Theory of Inspiration*, p.2.

generated from within that the poet perceives to be necessary for *poesis*? Again, we ask the question, from where does creativity come?

Such questions may seem naive to us (post)moderns, but as Clark asserts the idea of inspiration persists even today in this most 'secular' of societies. No matter how many times the notion of inspiration has been refuted over the years, it has been reinstated in one way or another by the poet who finds himself unable to explain *why* it is that he must write or *what* it is that compels him to write. What is more, the poet upon completing a work often finds himself curiously disconnected from what he has created, making him feel as though something or someone else had created the work rather than himself. This is true among even the most agnostic of poets. Take, for example, Stevens' "Tea at the Palaz of Hoon":

What was the ointment sprinkled on my beard?
What were the hymns that buzzed beside my ears?
What was the sea whose tide swept through me there?

Out of my mind the golden ointment rained,
And my ears made the blowing hymns they heard.
I was myself the compass of that sea:

I was the world in which I walked, and what I saw
Or heard or felt came not but from myself;
And there I found myself more truly and more strange. (CP 65)

Stevens, who with a certain irony depicts himself here as anointed, a priestly poet, maker of the world in which he walks, claims that his inspiration comes nought but from himself. And yet how peculiar it is that he should find himself a stranger—or rather, strange—in this world of his own making.

The notion of inspiration appears to be directly linked with such feelings of estrangement or uneasiness. In "Tea at the Palaz of Hoon", Stevens offers a

⁷² Ibid, p. 1.

reflection on the peculiar sensation of feeling himself to be called into question by his own creation, a sensation that comes after the act of writing, which he then makes the subject of the poem. For Stevens, poetry is always the subject of the poem and here the *experience* of poetry is the subject of the poem. "Tea" gives an account of the mysterious after effect of writing, when the poet feels himself dislocated or estranged by his work of art, a work that, once completed, acquires a life of its own. We might also say that "Tea" is born out of the poet's experience of a mysterious *something* that confronts the poet in his own work.

"Tea at the Palaz of Hoon" is unusual in the sense that it is concerned with the after-effects of writing and the emergence of a mysterious something that the poet cannot identify but which nevertheless seems to have some kind of power over him. More often, however, poets write about the uneasy moment that precedes the writing of the poem, the time when creative inspiration is experienced not as a fullness but as a lack, or rather not as a presence but as an absence. That is, poets more often write about the *nothing* of poetic inspiration rather than about the *something*. Consider, for example, the first stanza of Herbert's "The Temper (II)":

It cannot be. Where is that mighty joy
Which just now took up all my heart?
Lord, if must needs use thy dart,
Save that, and me; or sin for both destroy.

Herbert laments the loss of his muse, Joy. He longs for her return so that he may, in true seventeenth century style, continue in what he considers to be the poet's greatest endeavour: to offer praises to God. Yet, the poet knows a secret—one that is intimated in the title of the poem—that this feeling of loss, this change in temper, also has the power to inspire. Herbert knows that when it comes to the creative process, the absence of joy is just as inspirational as its presence, a theme

he deals with at length in "The Glimpse," the first three stanzas of which appear below:

Wither away delight?
Thou cam'st but now; wilt thou so soon depart,
And give me up to night?
For many weeks of ling'ring pain and smart
But one half hour of comfort for my heart?

Methinks delight should have
More skill in music, and keep better time.
Wert thou a wind or wave,
They quickly go and come with lesser crime:
Flowers look about, and die not in their prime.

Thy short abode and stay
Feeds not, but adds to the desire of meat.
Lime begged of old (they say)
A neighbour spring to cool his inward heat;
Which by the spring's access grew much more great.

Having glimpsed Delight, the poet now mourns her departure and feels a more intense grief than if he had never known her at all. "Thy short abode and stay / Feeds not, but adds to the desire of meat," complains Herbert, all the while aware that Delight's sudden and sustained disappearance is no less the subject for poetry than her fleeting appearance. Present or absent, Joy is creative.⁷⁴

Wordsworth too was inspired by the muse of loss and the loss of the muse. Like so many of the Romantic poets, he was interested in ruins and fragments and found in the debris of past annihilations the inspiration for building anew in words and images the glory of lost empires and the joy of dreams that never came to fruition. But more than the decay of ancient buildings and the grief of dreams unrealised, it is the sorrow over lost sentiment that lies at the very centre of his poetry. We recall the familiar lines:

There was a time when meadow, grove, and stream,
The earth, and every common sight,

⁷⁴ For an excellent discussion of 'Joy' see George Dekker's *Coleridge and the Literature of Sensibility* (London: Vision Press, 1978).

To me did seem
Apparelled in celestial light,
The glory and the freshness of a dream.
It is not now as it has been of yore;
Turn wheresoe'er I may,
By night or day,
The things which I have seen I now can see no more.

Echoing Herbert, Wordsworth wonders, "Wither is fled the visionary gleam? / Where is it now, the glory and the dream?" The irony here is that the poet wonders where his wonder has gone. The poem turns on fears of loss of inspiration that inspire the writing of the poem. And the fact that the poet asks of the "visionary gleam," Wither has it fled? indicates that it is still present in his longing for it. Wordsworth seems to be well aware of this irony.

"Ode: Intimations of Immortality" is a joyous lament to all that has failed. The failure of thought and feeling is the very source of this poem. The "Ode" continues:

The Rainbow comes and goes,
And lovely is the Rose,
The Moon doth with delight
Look round her when the heavens are bare;
Waters on a starry night
Are beautiful and fair;
The sunshine is a glorious birth;
But yet I know, where'er I go,
That there hath passed away a glory from the earth.

The poet praises the beauty that he insists he can no longer perceive as he once did in his youth. The memory of how nature once stirred in him an immediacy of sentiment, a joy no longer available to him in maturity, leads to a poignant expression of loss, an expression equal, we might argue, to the beauty of the earth in its power to evoke an emotional response. This sorrow over the loss of feeling calls upon the poet to give voice to it.

Now, while the Birds thus sing a joyous song,
And while the young Lambs bound

As to the tabor's sound,
To me alone there came a thought of grief:
A timely utterance gave that thought relief,
And I again am strong.

As the grief over lost sentiment is given over to expression, the poet feels himself strengthened and restored. He finds sustenance in voicing this loss. In faith he goes on to declare that

Though nothing can bring back the hour
Of splendour in the grass, of glory in the flower;
We will grieve not, rather find
Strength in what remains behind,
In the primal sympathy
Which having been must ever be,
In the soothing thoughts that spring
Out of human suffering,
In the faith that looks through death,
In years that bring the philosophic mind.

Wordsworth like Herbert and, as we have already seen, Stevens, has a profound faith in loss. Loss itself is seen as a source of strength and hope when it is given over to expression and memorialised in the poem. This "faith that looks through death" is the faith of the poet who is not afraid to look upon human suffering and name it, who is inspired to make something out of the misery of loss.

Keats, too, found his muse in misery. In "Ode on Melancholy" he says of his mistress

She dwells with Beauty—Beauty that must die;
And Joy, whose hand is ever at his lips
Bidding adieu; and aching Pleasure nigh,
Turning to poison while the bee-mouth sips:
Ay, in the very temple of Delight
Veiled Melancholy has her sovran shrine,
Though seen of none save him whose strenuous tongue
Can burst Joy's grape against his palate fine;
His soul shall taste the sadness of her might,
And be among her cloudy trophies hung.

The poet alone is privy to Melancholy's secret—that she co-habitates with Delight in the temple of Beauty. In equal measure the two provide the necessary materials for the poet, whose "strenuous tongue / Can burst Joy's grape against his palate" and taste beauty, even the beauty of sorrow.

Like all 'true' poets, Keats knows that melancholy (and its close relative Boredom) is not a loss of feeling, but a feeling of loss. This is an important distinction in our attempt to understand the poet's experience of the (sense of) loss of inspiration. If it were truly a case of lost feeling, the poet's "strenuous tongue" would fail him entirely. For without feeling—even the *feeling* of the loss of feeling, as in the case of Wordsworth—here would be nothing to say. What distinguishes the poet from the 'ordinary' person, is, as Keats says, that the poet is able to see "Veiled Melancholy" and unmask her in the poem; it is an unmasking of his own feeling of loss, even his own feeling of lost feeling.⁷⁴

Perhaps Stevens' "Chaos in Motion and Not in Motion" can serve to clarify. In this poem, Ludwig Richter—Stevens himself?—experiences the terror of finding himself with nothing more to say and feels the intense frustration of having lost his ability to feel.

Oh, that this lashing wind was something more
Than the spirit of Ludwig Richter...

The rain is pouring down. It is July.
There is lightning and the thickest thunder.

It is a spectacle. Scene 10 becomes 11,
In Series X, Act IV, et cetera.

People fall out of windows, trees tumble down,

⁷⁴ In a letter written on 21 December 1817, Keats mentions his idea of "Negative Capability," a quality that he says is necessary "to form a Man of Achievement, especially in Literature." Negative Capability, according to Keats, is "when a man is capable of being in uncertainties, mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason...." By this Keats seems to be saying that the poet must endure—and indeed welcome—those times when he (or she) feels the agony of the loss of creative inspiration.

Summer is changed to winter, the young grow old,

The air is full of children, statues, roofs
And snow. The theatre is spinning round,

Colliding with deaf-mute churches and optical trains.
The most massive sopranos are singing songs of scales.

And Ludwig Richter, turbulent Schlemihl,
Has lost the whole in which he was contained,

Knows desire without an object of desire,
All mind and violence and nothing felt.

He knows he has nothing more to think about,
Like the wind that lashes everything at once. (CP 357-8)

Even with all that is going on around the protagonist—people falling out of windows, trees tumbling down—that "turbulent Schlemihl," Ludwig Richter, feels overwhelmed by a lack of inspiration. He despairs over being "all mind and violence and nothing felt." This is the feeling of the poet who "knows he has nothing more to think about / Like the wind that lashes everything at once." The poet has nothing more to think about—which is *like* the wind that lashes everything. Here Stevens demonstrates the irony of feeling frustrated by the lack of creative inspiration as he names this feeling of lost feeling, expressing it in the form of a simile. Language ultimately relieves him of his burden and in this way is the salvation of the poet. (We remember Wordsworth: "To me alone there came a thought of grief: / A timely utterance gave that thought relief.")

Coleridge's "Dejection: An Ode," almost certainly influenced Stevens' "Chaos in Motion and Not in Motion" and may well have contributed broadly to Stevens' ideas on imagination and inspiration. That familiar complaint uttered by Coleridge in the third stanza of the Dejection Ode, "My genial spirits fail", has very often been the focus of critics who seek to define the term 'genial' as the poet uses it here. Asks David Jasper, "What, precisely, does 'genial' mean in this

context? According to Dr Johnson, it is 'festive' or 'that gives cheerfulness', linked therefore with the concept of joy." Jasper continues,

[...]for Coleridge, who knew the German language well by 1802, the failure of his *genial* spirits would suggest, on the one hand, a loss of that joyful creativity and productiveness which the poet shared with God, and, on the other, the decay of his 'genius', that gift which makes him a poet among men. He is robbed of inspiration and revelation.⁷⁶

Mourning the waning of his creative genius Coleridge recollects in the sixth stanza,

There was a time when, though my path was rough,
This joy within me dallied with distress,
And all misfortunes were but as the stuff
Whence Fancy made me dreams of happiness:
For hope grew round me, like the twining vine,
And fruits, and foliage, not my own, seemed mine.
But now afflictions bow me down to earth:
Nor care I that they rob me of my mirth;
But oh! each visitation
Suspends what nature gave me at my birth,
My shaping spirit of Imagination.

In days gone by when joy dallied with him and hope grew round him, Coleridge claims that the products of this experience were not of his own making although they *seemed* to come from himself. His past poetic creations emerging, as he claimed, out of joy came not from any powers belonging to himself but were a divine gift. With the loss of this gift, or at least with the *perceived* loss of this gift, the poet feels that he may no longer "hope from outward forms to win / The passion and the life, whose fountains are within." The outward forms no longer provide inspiration for the poet who now finds himself abandoned, left alone with his "viper thoughts, that coil around [his] mind, / Reality's dark dream!" But finding these thoughts to be of no help to him he turns to "listen to the wind, / Which long has raved unnoticed."

Thou Wind, that rav'st without,

⁷⁶David Jasper, *Coleridge as Poet and Religious Thinker* (Allison Park, Pennsylvania: Pickwick Publications, 1985), pp.67-8.

Bare crag, or mountain-tairn, or blasted tree,
Or pine-grove whither woodman never clomb,
Or lonely house, long held the witches' home,
Methinks were fitter instruments for thee,
Mad Lutanist! who in this month of showers,
Of dark-brown gardens, and of peeping flowers,
Mak'st Devils' yule, with worse than wintry song,
The blossoms, buds, and timorous leaves among.

This wind announcing the impending storm is invisible yet all powerful. We might see a connection with Stevens' "Chaos in Motion and Not in Motion" here as Coleridge claims to have nothing to write about, no inspiration, no enthusiasm, and yet there is a frenzy of activity throughout the stanza right up until the last few lines. He addresses the Wind,

Thou Actor, perfect in all tragic sounds!
Thou mighty Poet, e'en to frenzy bold!
What tell'st thou now about?
'Tis of the rushing of an host in rout,
With groans, of trampled men, with smarting wounds—
At once they groan with pain, and shudder with the cold!

It is unclear whether Coleridge perceives this lashing wind to be external or internal. We recall that with Stevens it was understood to be a manifestation of his interiority; Coleridge, however, does not identify it as belonging to himself or to a power existing outside of himself. As with Stevens' destructive wind in "Chaos in Motion and Not in Motion" the stormy weather of Coleridge's "Dejection" appears to be born out of indifference, that is, the poet, it would seem, is writing of his intense frustration of feeling underwhelmed by everything around him. In an earlier stanza before the onslaught of the storm, Coleridge remarks,

All this long eve, so balmy and serene,
Have I been gazing on the western sky,
And its peculiar tint of yellow green:
And still I gaze—and with how blank an eye!

The poet claims that he sees but not feels the beauty of his surroundings. His 'blank eye' can take in the sights but he perceives himself to be bereft of the emotional faculty to engage with them. Perhaps another way of saying this is that he sees the beauty but cannot give voice to it. In this way, he is like the character in Stevens' "The Man Whose Pharynx was Bad" (CP 96).

The time of year has grown indifferent.
Mildew of summer and the deepening snow
Are both alike in the routine I know.
I am too dumbly in my being pent.

The wind attendant on the solstices
Blows on the shutters of the metropolises,
Stirring no poet in his sleep, and tolls
The grand ideas of the villages.

The "grand ideas" no longer satisfy, and the poet's creative powers slumber in indifference. He claims that he cannot speak, for he has nothing to say. Here we can see how "thought, fixed on a particular sublime, loses its generative energy."⁷⁷ The once satisfying idea has become lacklustre and the poet suffers from boredom. We note that the images all have to do with a centre, a middle-point, where the poet feels himself to be suspended emotionally, and once again there is reference to an impotent wind that, though it "Blows on the shutters of the metropolises," is unable to inspire.

Among the many images of loss appropriated by poets over the centuries, perhaps none is so prevalent as the windy season of autumn. Themes of autumn recounting death and decay are very often about the death and decay of the poet's creative powers. This is the time "after the leaves have fallen" (CP 502) when the creative vitality of summer has come to an end, and a new creative force is found in the misery of the howling wind.

⁷⁷ Leonard and Wharton, p. 110.

A familiar example of such autumnal poetry is Shelley's "Ode to the West Wind" which reflects the poet's faith in the sweet sadness of death, especially the sweet sadness of the death of inspiration. In the final stanza the poet calls upon the "breath of Autumn's being," the West Wind to

Make me thy lyre, even as the forest is:
What if my leaves are falling like its own!
The tumult of thy mighty harmonies

Will take from both a deep, autumnal tone,
Sweet though in sadness. Be thou, Spirit fierce,
My spirit! Be thou me, impetuous one!⁷⁷

Drive my dead thoughts over the universe
Like withered leaves to quicken a new birth!
And, by the incantation of this verse,

Scatter, as from an unextinguishable hearth
Ashes and sparks, my words among mankind!
Be through my lips to unawakened Earth

The trumpet of a prophecy! O Wind,
If Winter comes, can Spring be far behind?

Shelley's familiar verse summoning the Spirit of Autumn to drive his "dead thoughts over the universe / Like withered leaves to quicken a new birth!" is a celebration of death and stands as a testimony to the poet's faith in the ability for loss—especially the *articulation* of loss—to bring about the new. Shelley here is the prophet of Autumn, testifying to the power of death, even the death of his own creativity. By the very incantation of this verse is misery overcome and joy restored.

In contradistinction to Shelley's Romantic embracing of death stands Baudelaire's dark despair in "Chant d' Automne."

⁷⁷ It is worth noting that Stevens echoes Shelley's call to the pneumatic muse, "Be thou me", in the sixth canto of *Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction* (CP 394). The point of Stevens' allusion—"Bethou me, said sparrow, to the crackled blade.... Bethou, bethou, bethou me in my glade"—is unclear; however, it may be that he is domesticating this spirit by laying claim to it. Barbara M.

Bientôt nous plongerons dans les froides ténèbres;
Adieu, vive clarté de nos étés trop courts!
J'entends déjà tomber avec des chocs funèbres
Le bois retentissant sur le pavé des cours.

Tout l'hiver va rentrer dans mon être: colère,
Haine, frissons, horreur, labeur dur et forcé,
Et, comme le soleil dans son enfer polaire,
Mon cœur ne sera plus qu'un bloc rouge et glacé.

J'écoute en frémissant chaque bûche qui tombe;
L'échafaud qu' on bâtit n'a pas d'écho plus sourd.
Mon esprit est pareil à la tour qui succombe
Sous les coups du bélier infatigable et lourd.

Il me semble, bercé par ce choc monotone,
Qu'on cloue en grande hâte un cercueil quelque part.
Pour qui?--C'était hier l'été; voici l'automne!
Ce bruit mystérieux sonne comme un départ.

(Soon cold shadows will close over us
and summer's transitory gold be gone;
I hear them chopping firewood in our court—
the dreary thud of logs on cobblestone.

Winter will come to repossess my soul
With rage and outrage, horror, drudgery,
And like the sun in its polar holocaust
My heart will be a block of blood-red ice.

I listen trembling to that grim tattoo—
build a gallows, it would sound the same. .
My mind becomes a tower giving way
under the impact of a battering-ram.

Stunned by the strokes, I seem to hear, somewhere,
a coffin hurriedly hammered shut—for whom?
Summer was yesterday; autumn is here!
Strange how that sound rings out like a farewell.)⁷⁸

Baudelaire anticipates the coming season when the muse will abandon him. He knows the far away sound of "that grim tattoo" because he has heard it before. Loss is something he has come to expect; in fact, it is so familiar that he can

Fisher comments that "This is no soaring Shelleyan skylark, but a domestic sparrow who inhabits a windy suburban garden...." In *Wallace Stevens: The Intensest Rendezvous*, p. 2.

describe its devastation even before it has occurred. Unlike Shelley, Baudelaire does not openly confess hope in this loss. There are no promises of spring, no prophecies of resurrection. Rather, the poem itself is all that testifies to the poet's faith in the impending death of his creative powers.

It is interesting to consider this poem by Baudelaire along side of a late work of Stevens', "Not Ideas About the Thing but the Thing Itself" (CP 534). In this poem Stevens also hears a far away sound—but it is not the "grim tattoo" of autumnal death but the "scrawny cry" of spring and its possibilities.

At the earliest ending of winter,
In March, a scrawny cry from outside
Seemed like a sound in his mind.

He knew that he heard it,
A bird's cry, at daylight or before,
In the early March wind.

The sun was rising at six,
No longer a battered panache above snow...
It would have been outside.

It was not from the vast ventriloquism
Of sleep's faded papier-mache...
The sun was coming from outside.

That scrawny cry—it was
A chorister whose c preceded the choir.
It was part of the colossal sun,

Surrounded by its choral rings,
Still far away. It was like
A new knowledge of reality.

This sound coming from "outside" heard vaguely "at the earliest ending of winter" is the sound of the Muse returning after her lengthy hibernation. Like Baudelaire who knows the voice of Loss even from afar, Stevens recognises in the scrawny cry the call of his mistress, the Muse. Both poems have to do with that time of in-

⁷⁸ Charles Baudelaire, *Les Fleurs du Mal*, translated by Richard Howard. (Boston: David R.

betweens, represented by a change of season—the former from summer to autumn, the latter from winter to spring—that time when the subject of the poem is not yet clear and distinct, when the feeling—whether it be of misery or joy—a s not yet taken on a 'visibility' in words. This uncertainty over what the coming change in climate will bring is emphasised by the use of the audio over the visual. We consider Baudelaire's lines: "I hear them chopping firewood in our court..." / "I listen trembling to that grim tattoo..." / "Stunned by the strokes, I seem to hear, somewhere, / a coffin hurriedly hammered shut...." Through images of hearing rather than seeing, the poet manages to describe this sense of indeterminacy. Whether it be the sorrowful feeling that the muse will abandon the poet or the joyful feeling that the muse is about to return, it is sound rather than sight that captures this state of vagueness. Of course the irony here is that the poet cannot describe what the change will look like—and yet he cannot not describe it. In both the Baudelaire and the Stevens poems this vague sense of being in-between 'creative climates' and not having a clear subject actually becomes the subject of the poem as the barely audible beckoning of Loss and Possibility is given over to description in vivid imagery.

In "Not Ideas About the Thing But the Thing Itself" Stevens insists that the sound he hears comes from "outside." This is in contrast to the earlier "Chaos in Motion and Not in Motion" in which he identifies the lashing wind as the spirit of the poet himself. Stevens frequently toys with such ideas of 'inside' and 'outside' in relation to poetic inspiration, never arriving at a final conclusion. Sometimes it seems, as with the "Not Ideas" poem, that the muse is external to the poet, calling from outside the mind. At other times, in the perceived absence of inspiration, the

Godine, 1982), p.61-62 and p.239.

poet feels the despair of knowing that the misery that is itself creative is nothing more than the spirit of the poet himself. Stevens never allows himself to draw any conclusions about where the source of poetic inspiration lies; he refuses to settle the question because he knows that the question of the source is itself at the very heart of poetry. Should this particular question ever be settled the poet would be silenced for all time; there would simply be nothing more to say.

The particular question—here
The particular answer to the particular question
Is not in point—the question is in point. (CP 429)

The question of the source of inspiration is in point. Is it external or internal? Furthermore, is there a difference between external and internal?⁷⁹ In "Not Ideas" the "scrawny cry from outside / Seemed like a sound in his mind." The word "seemed" is significant here. The far away sound *seemed* like a sound in the poet's mind. The key to understanding this poem is to recognise that for Stevens the way that something seems is not its mere appearance but the very thing itself. A thing *is* in the way that it seems, in the way that it appears, there simply being no other way of experiencing it.⁸⁰ (Writes Stevens elsewhere, "to seem—it is to be" (CP 339).) The phenomenology of seeming is crucial to this poem, as suggested by the title, "Not Ideas About the Thing But the Thing Itself," reminiscent of Husserl's "to the things themselves."

By insisting that the sound came from outside yet seemed like a sound in his mind, the poet intentionally blurs the distinction between inside and outside, thereby leaving the question regarding the dwelling place of the muse up in the

⁷⁹ For an interesting discussion of notions of 'inside and outside,' see James S. Cutsinger's article, "Inside without Outside: Coleridge, the Form of the One, and God" in *The Interpretation of Belief*, edited by David Jasper (New York: St Martin's Press, 1986).

⁸⁰ See Marjorie Perloff's *The Poetics of Indeterminacy: From Rimbaud to Cage* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1981), pp. 19-21. Writes Perloff, "For Stevens, being must ultimately

air. The question of whether inspiration comes from within or without is itself generative of poetry.⁸¹ Returning for a moment to Baudelaire with "Hymne a la Beaute" we see how such musings over the muse creates the poem:

Viens-tu du ciel profond ou sors-tu de l' abîme,
O Beauté? ton regard, infernal et divin,
Verse confusément le bienfait et le crime,
Et l'on peut pour cela te comparer au vin.

Tu contiens dans ton œil le couchant et l'aurore;
Tu répands des parfums comme un soir orageux;
Tes baisers sont un philtre et ta bouche une amphore
Qui font le héros lâche et l'enfant courageux.

Sors-tu du gouffre noir ou descends-tu des astres?
Le Destin charmé suit tes jupons comme un chien;
Tu sèmes au hasard la joie et les désastres,
Et tu gouvernes tout et ne réponds de rien.

Tu marches sur des morts, Beauté, dont tu te moques;
De tes bijoux l'Horreur n'est pas le moins charmant,
Et le Meurtre, parmi tes plus chères breloques,
Sur ton ventre orgueilleux danse amoureusement.

L'éphémère ébloui vole vers toi, chandelle,
Crépète, flambe et dit: Bénissons ce flambeau!
L'amoureux pantelant incliné sur sa belle
A l'air d'un moribond caressant son tombeau.

Que tu viennes du ciel ou de l'enfer, qu'importe,
O Beauté! Monstre énorme, effrayant, ingénu!
Si ton œil, ton souris, ton pied, m'ouvrent la porte
D'un Infini que j'aime et n'ai jamais connu?

De Satan ou de Dieu, qu'importe? Ange ou Sirène,
Qu'importe, si tu rends, —fée aux yeux de velours,
Rhyme, parfum, lueur, ô mon unique reine !—
L'univers moins hideux et les instants moins lourds?

(Do you come from on high or out of the abyss,
O Beauty? Godless yet divine, your gaze
indifferently showers favor and shame,

reside, not in 'some divine labyrinth' beyond the sense world, but only here and now, within 'things as they are.'"

⁸¹ Along the same lines, David R. Jarraway argues that "Stevens' strategy...is to work against metaphysical closure, to counter 'part' with 'counterpoint,' that is, to resist our tendency to presence univocal or mimetic truth by maintaining the forms of truth themselves in a polyvocal conversation with each other," in *Wallace Stevens and the Question of Belief*, p.16.

and therefore some have likened you to wine.

Your eyes reflect the sunset and the dawn;
you scatter perfumes like a windy night;
your kisses are a drug, your mouth the urn
dispensing fear to heroes, fervor to boys.

Whether spawned by hell or sprung from the stars,
Fate like a spaniel follows at your heel;
you sow haphazard fortune and despair,
ruling all things, responsible for none.

You walk on corpses, Beauty, undismayed,
and Horror coruscates among your gems;
Murder, one of your dearest trinkets, throbs
on your shameless belly: make it dance!

Dazzled, the dayfly flutters round your wick,
crackles, flares, and cries: I bless this torch!
The pining lover for his lady swoons
like a dying man adoring his own tomb.

Who cares if you come from paradise or hell,
appalling Beauty, artless and monstrous scourge,
if only your eyes, your smile or your foot reveal
the Infinite I love and have never known?

Come from Satan, come from God—who cares,
Angel or Siren, rhythm, fragrance, light,
provided you transform—O my one queen!
this hideous universe, this heavy hour?)

Baudelaire speculates on the origins of creative inspiration. Does it come from God or from Satan; is it "spawned by hell or sprung from the stars"? In the end, the poet knows that it matters not from whence it comes. Whether Beauty comes "from on high or out of the abyss" her power to transform "this hideous universe" is the same. In this poem the very question over the dwelling place of the Muse lightens "this heavy hour" weighed down with the misery of boredom.

That the poet cannot uncover the mystery of the source of inspiration enables the writing of the poem. Inside or outside, from heaven or from hell, the Muse eludes the poet's grasp. There is no determining her origins, just as there is no

uncovering what Stevens calls "the plain sense of things" (CP 502). Even when it seems to the poet that he has exposed the source and arrived upon the Muse's doorstep, this feeling of having reached the end of the imagination disintegrates the moment it is articulated in the poem, as language in its exhaustibility never allows for a final arrival. It is not possible to capture the Muse in language and hold her in place, to assign her a location 'inside' or 'outside'; for her existence is made possible by an elusiveness of presence that is equally an elusiveness of absence. She is never finally present, nor ever finally absent, and on this the poem depends.

Fat girl, terrestrial, my summer, my night,
How is it I find you in difference, see you there
In a moving contour, a change not quite completed?

You are familiar yet an aberration.
Civil, madam, I am, but underneath
A tree, this unprovoked sensation requires

That I should name you flatly, waste no words,
Check your evasions, hold you to yourself.
Even so when I think of you as strong or tired,

Bent over work, anxious, content, alone,
You remain the more than natural figure. You
Become the soft-footed phantom, the irrational

Distortion, however fragrant, however dear.
That's it: the more than rational distortion,
The fiction that results from feeling. Yes, that.

They will get it straight one day at the Sorbonne.
We shall return at twilight from the lecture
Pleased that the irrational is rational,

Unflicked by feeling, in a gilded street,
I call you by name, my green, my fluent mundo.
You will have stopped revolving except in crystal. (CP 406-7)

Stevens longs to hold in check the elusive Muse so that he may call her by name, that he might 'have' her. If only he could name the source of his creativity he

could stop the world turning and arrive at a transparency of 'being'. But Stevens is aware that any sense of arrival is a "fiction that results from feeling," and one arrival leads to another. For to arrive at, what Keats calls, the "temple of Beauty," the residence of the Muse, is impossible as long as there exists the ever-changing climate of human emotion and the necessity to express that change in words.

Chapter Four: The Mystical Element in Stevens' Poetry

If the idea of God is the ultimate poetic idea, then the idea of the ascent into heaven is only a little below it.

from "A Collect of Philosophy" (OP 274)

Because of the soul's capacity for emptiness, we learn that there is no final revelation and no ultimate name.

from *The Other Side of Nothingness*, Beverly Lanzetta⁸³

We will now re-visit something first mentioned in chapter one and hinted at in chapters two and three, that is, Stevens' inherent mysticism. Some might protest using the word 'mysticism' in connection with Stevens, arguing that the poet did not possess what is traditionally accepted as a 'religious sensibility', and preferring instead to speak of the poet's engagement with meditation. Meditation, after all, may be seen as a 'secular' activity and the practitioner need not be of any particular religious persuasion, whereas mysticism is generally understood to be religious in nature. We might also point out that meditation is very often connected with Buddhism, and mysticism with the theistic faiths.⁸⁴

So if Stevens is not a Christian (at least not in the traditional sense), as we have already argued, why classify his poetics as mystical rather than meditative, especially since the poet himself more often employs the term meditation? And what is the difference between mysticism and meditation, assuming there is one? Before we answer that, we need to take a brief look at William Bevis' ground breaking work, *Mind of Winter: Wallace Stevens, Meditation and Literature*, in

⁸³ Lanzetta, p. 127.

⁸⁴ We are aware that, although there is a long tradition of the mystical within the theistic religions, mysticism itself is not necessarily affirming of theism. As Lanzetta and other contemporary scholars have noted, "Reaffirming a tone prevalent from the beginning in Christian mysticism,

which the author takes great pains to demonstrate that the poet underwent intense meditative experiences similar to those of Zen Buddhists, though he denies that there is any religious element to these meditative practices. The author makes a strong and convincing argument that Stevens was a practitioner of meditation, and the poetry does support this kind of reading; however, there are some major flaws both in his approach and in the conclusions he reaches.⁸⁵

Bevis tells us at the start of his work what it was that inspired this volume: "With many other readers, I was intrigued by the various forms of nothingness, blankness, poverty, detachment, the truly remarkable vacuities in Stevens' work."⁸⁶ He takes the following lines from "The American Sublime" as an example,

And the sublime comes down
To the spirit itself,

The spirit and space,
The empty spirit
In vacant space. (CP 131)

Reflecting on the "empty spirit / In vacant space", Bevis says,

And just when we think we have located those vacancies in fin-de-siecle ennui, they become celebratory, the nihilists become jubilant while 'searching for the fecund minimum,' and we are left wondering just what kind of minimum this might be....⁸⁷

Between 1879 and 1955 Stevens somehow became "a master of meditative detachment,"⁸⁸ and Bevis takes as his central argument that the poet's meditative

current thought upholds that apophatic mysticism overturns the ontological foundation of theism," p. 9.

⁸⁵ It should be noted that we choose to wrestle with Bevis' work here because the author has been, and continues to be, an important contributor to Stevensian scholarship. Since the publication of *Mind of Winter* others have followed in Bevis' footsteps, looking at Stevens' poetics from the standpoint of Zen Buddhism. (See, for example, Zhaoming Qian's article, "Late Stevens, Nothingness and the Orient," *The Wallace Stevens Journal* 25.2 (Fall 2001): 164-172.)

⁸⁶ Bevis, p. 3.

⁸⁷ Ibid.

⁸⁸ Ibid., p. 9.

interests came to offer "a perfect foil to his imaginative interests."⁸⁸ He believes that

Stevens' passive, blank, detached aspect—an aspect essentially comic even though words such as *passive* or *blank* often have negative connotations in our culture—is the source of much of his power and a complementary opposite of imagination. The meditative Stevens is in constant tension with the imaginative Stevens.⁸⁹

As we shall later see, this juxtaposing of the meditative and the imaginative in Stevens' work is problematic. But setting that aside for now, we continue with Bevis' argument.

Not surprisingly, the author of *Mind of Winter* is most keen to demonstrate the Zen-like quality of "The Snow Man" with its "the nothing that is", which until now he believes has gone either unnoticed or has been deemed unacceptable by Western readers culturally unequipped to apprehend the absolute 'nothingness' of meditative passivity. The poem, quoted below in its entirety, has generated endless commentary over the years, but, says Bevis, has not been fully appreciated for its "neutral description of a certain bare state of mind."⁹⁰

One must have a mind of winter
To regard the frost and the boughs
Of the pine-trees crusted with snow;

And have been cold a long time
To behold the junipers shagged with ice,
The spruces rough in the distant glitter

Of the January sun; and not to think
Of any misery in the sound of the wind,
In the sound of a few leaves,

Which is the sound of the land
Full of the same wind
That is blowing in the same bare place

For the listener, who listens in the snow,

⁸⁸ Ibid., p. 4.

⁸⁹ Ibid., p.8.

⁹⁰ Ibid., p. 28.

And, nothing himself, beholds
Nothing that is not there and the nothing that is. (CP 9-10)

This is certainly a puzzling poem. What does it mean to "have a mind of winter", and just who is this "snow man", this 'no man', who "nothing himself" beholds both "Nothing that is not there" and "*the* nothing that is"? And is this, as Bevis argues, a truly "neutral description" of the experience of nothing? Dissatisfied with Western readers of "The Snow Man" who, regardless of their critical agendas, have invariably come to the conclusion that *nothing* must be *something*, Bevis calls for us to take seriously the possibility that Stevens is quite literally writing of the experience of nothing.⁹² That is, he is writing about a meditative experience characterised by a total absence of the imagination. If critics have continued to miss this crucial point, it is because they have had little with which to compare it. He writes, "Attempting to follow Stevens' leap from meditative perception to poetry, we find that our culture offers almost no description of meditative consciousness, or no-mind (inaction, Chinese, *wu-wei*)." For he argues that,

When we turn to our classic Western mystics such as Plato or Plotinus, the gnostics, some Catholics, or even Emerson, we find idealist conclusions or theism, something instead of nothing, even though many individuals report experiences that *seem to have been meditative*. Buddhists, on the other hand, have analyzed the most passive states and written about them largely in a skeptical, even atheist spirit, offering what Herbert Guenther calls a 'true

⁹² Bevis traces Stevens' experience of nothing in "The Snow Man" to William James' chapter on "Mysticism" in *The Varieties of Religious Experience*. He believes that Stevens may have been influenced by the following passage on the "nothing" of Hindu and Buddhist experience as related by James:

All the different steps in yoga are intended to bring us scientifically to the superconscious state of samâdhi...There is no feeling of I, and yet the mind works, desireless, free from restlessness, objectless, bodiless...

The Buddhists use the word 'samâdhi' as well as the Hindus; but 'dhyâna' is their special word for the higher states of contemplation...In the third stage the satisfaction departs, and indifference begins...Higher stages still of contemplation are mentioned—a region where there exists nothing, and where the mediator says: 'There exists absolutely nothing,' and stops.

From William James' *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (New York: Mentor, 1958), pp. 307-308, as cited by William Bevis in "Stevens, Buddhism, and the Meditative Mind" in *The Wallace Stevens Journal* 25.2 (Fall 2001): 152-153.

phenomenology, the systematic investigation of our experiences as experiences.' ...[W]e must first face the enormous difference between any idea, including that of *nothing*, and a state of consciousness that is aconceptual. That is the fence dividing most Western intellectual traditions from meditative experience.⁹³

There are numerous holes in Bevis' argument here as he sweeps aside the mystics, dismissing them by saying that many have reported experiences that (merely) *seem* to have been meditative.

For Bevis what distinguishes Christian mystics and Buddhist meditators is the experience of pure consciousness as "a physiological mindset" that has been developed by practioners of meditation in the Far East but has remained largely unknown in the West. He argues that "meditative consciousness exists as a possible mode of operation of the central nervous system" and that it is this experiential quality of meditation that he is interested in and not meditative experience "as a means of personal or philosophical salvation."⁹⁴ He claims,

This is not a religious book; I am no more interested in the religious aspects of Buddhism than I am in religious aspects of Stevens, who seems to me brilliantly secular yet constantly flirting with ultimate concerns....⁹⁵

The use of the word 'secular' here is telling. As with many of Stevens' critics, Bevis divides the world neatly between the sacred and the profane, and places Stevens safely and securely within the 'profane' camp, though he admits that the poet flirts "with ultimate concerns". This, however, is problematic for two

⁹³ Ibid., pp. 11-12 (emphasis added in the first sentence). For a recent and insightful discussion of the similarities and differences between Eastern and Western experiences of 'nothing', see chapter seven of J. P. Williams' *Denying Divinity: Apophasis in the Patristic Christian and Soto Zen Buddhist Traditions* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000). Also, in opposition to Bevis who believes that there exists a great "dividing fence" between Eastern and Western mysticism, John Caputo demonstrates the close affinity between Eckhart's mysticism and that of the Zen masters, an affinity that rests on a similar understanding of nothingness (*Abgeschiedenheit*) and 'letting be' (*Gelassenheit*). In John Caputo, *The Mystical Element in Heidegger's Thought* (New York: Fordham University Press, 1986), pp. 203-217.

⁹⁴ Ibid, pp. 6-7.

⁹⁵ Bevis, p.6.

reasons: first, because it is indicative of a rather outdated and, we might even say, naive understanding of the religious and second, because it does not attend to Stevens' project, which as we have said is to find *religious satisfaction* in the world itself.

But what of the mystics and Bevis' claim that theirs is not a genuine meditative experience and therefore their accounts do not offer a true phenomenology? Is it necessary to practice meditation with an "atheist spirit" in order to have an authentic meditative experience of detachment? What are we to make of statements by such mystics as Meister Eckhart who says, "For when the detached heart has the higher aim, it must be toward the Nothing"?⁹⁶ Is Bevis suggesting here that only Buddhists and other 'true' (read 'atheistic') meditators undergo unmediated meditative experiences? It would seem that just as Bevis is too quick to dismiss the religious element in Stevens he is too eager to embrace the notion of an unmediated state of meditative consciousness, available only to those who hold no theistic beliefs.⁹⁷

There are four important points we glean from Bevis' work that will be the subjects for our discussion in the pages that follow. They are: 1) Can the case be

⁹⁶ from "On Detachment" in *Meister Eckhart: Selected Treatises and Sermons*, translated by James M. Clark and John Skinner (London: Fount Publishers, 1958), p.143.

⁹⁷ Bevis appears to be unaware that most modern philosophical studies of Christian mysticism have also concentrated on the experiential rather than on the theological. In fact, there have been so many studies centering on the *experience* of human consciousness in mysticism that recently a number of theologians have attempted to redress the imbalance, as they see it. Denys Turner's *The Darkness of God*, Grace Jantzen's *Power, Gender and Christian Mysticism* and Mark A. McIntosh's *Mystical Theology* are some examples of recent studies in mysticism that seek to return to the religious and theological elements of mysticism and mystical texts. McIntosh notes that there has been a "crucial shift in the history of Christian spirituality from an emphasis on the ineffability of the *divine mystery* to an emphasis on the ineffability of the *mystic's experience*. The first emphasis implies the notion, first clearly articulated by Gregory of Nyssa, of God's unboundedness and infinity. The second implies that what counts as 'mysticism' chiefly is pre-linguistic and unthematized experience, or a 'pure consciousness event'." McIntosh is highly critical of this second approach. He believes that "as long as the real significance of mystical speech is divorced in this way from public ecclesial life and thought, this interpretation of mysticism as primarily inner experience works covertly to disenfranchise religious communities in

made that Buddhists or other atheistic meditators have more authentic experience of meditative consciousness than (theistic) mystics and are therefore able to offer descriptions that are 'truer' phenomenological accounts? 2) Building on the first question, is it possible to speak of 'neutral descriptions'? 3) Does Stevens himself posit imaginative and meditative experiences against one another? 4) Finally, returning to the question we began with in this chapter, can we rightly classify Stevens' poetics as mystical or must they be 'meditative' (by which we mean 'nonreligious' in this case) as Bevis asserts?

Our criticism of Bevis' work begins with a statement by Steven Katz from his important essay "Language, Epistemology, and Mysticism":

There are NO pure (i.e., unmediated) experiences. Neither mystical experience nor more ordinary forms of experience give any indication, or any grounds for believing, that they are unmediated. That is to say, all experience is processed through, organized by, and makes itself available to us in extremely complex epistemological ways. The notion of an unmediated experience seems, if not self-contradictory, at best empty. This epistemological fact seems to me to be true, because of the sorts of beings we are, even with regard to the experiences of those ultimate objects of concern with which the mystics have intercourse, e.g., God, Being, nirvana, etc.⁹⁸

Katz argues that all experience is preconditioned by "a complex, culturally acquired, sociopsychological mold consisting of concepts, beliefs, and expectations that the experiencing subject brings to experience."⁹⁹ This means that one's religious beliefs (or even one's *lack* of religious beliefs) have a strong bearing on the kind of meditative or mystical experience he or she will have and how that experience is described.

favour of the academic arbiters of religion." In *Mystical Theology: The Integrity of Spirituality and Theology* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1998), pp. 136-137.

⁹⁸ from "Language, Epistemology, and Mysticism" in *Mysticism and Philosophical Analysis*, edited by Steven Katz (London: Sheldon Press, 1978), p.26, as cited in Nelson Pike's *Mystic Union: An Essay on the Phenomenology of Mysticism* (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1992), p.195.

⁹⁹ Pike summarising Katz's argument, p. 195.

Mystical experiences have the content they have because mystics come to the experience with certain religious concepts and beliefs, which, together with the symbol systems they employ and their expectations concerning what they will experience, partially create the content of the mystical experiences they have. So now let us ask: What content do mystical experiences have? What kinds of experiences are so created? Katz answers that Hindus have experiences that are, phenomenologically, of Brahman, and Christians have mystical experiences that are, phenomenologically, of a supreme person called 'God'. In fact, as regards their phenomenological content, there are as many different kinds of mystical experiences as there are cultures in which they occur.¹⁰⁰

If we accept Katz's argument, then there is no reason to believe that Buddhists have more genuine experiences of meditative detachment than Christians or even secular humanists, for that matter. That their accounts differ we may attribute to the hermeneutical stance they take in relation to their experience. As Katz says, "beliefs shape experience, just as experience shapes belief".¹⁰¹ We note that Stevens himself well understood this connection between experience and culture: "Well, the gods grow out of the weather. / The people grow out of the weather; / The gods grow out of the people" (CP 210), he wrote. By 'weather' Stevens refers to both the emotional and cultural climates in which our experiences are anticipated and interpreted. Living in "an age of disbelief" as he

¹⁰⁰ Ibid. Wayne Proudfoot takes a similar view in *Religious Experience* (Berkeley, California: University of California Press, 1985). He notes, "The identification of an experience as mystical, as nirvana or devekuth or communion with God, assumes the belief that it is authoritative, revelatory, and that it provides support for the teachings of the tradition within which it is identified and interpreted. Buddhist meditational practices are designed to achieve certain states in order to exemplify Buddhist doctrines," p.153. Also, for an interesting and insightful account of the changing approaches to the study of mysticism and mystical experience, see Leigh Eric Schmidt's recent article, "The Making of Modern Mysticism" in the *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 71 (June 2003): 273-302. Schmidt offers a genealogy of what he calls, "the liberal construction of mysticism".

¹⁰¹ Ibid., p. 196. Derrida seems to be making much the same point in his chapter "Awaiting (at) the Arrival" in *Aporias* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1993). Though he is not speaking directly of mysticism, we can see the connection with Katz's argument that there are no unmediated experiences. Derrida, in speaking of the cultural conception of death, tells us that "All people do not die in the same way. Throughout time, they have not died in the same way. Moreover, it is not enough to recall that there are cultures of death and that from one culture to another, at the crossing of the borders, death changes face, meaning, language, or even body," p. 43. Drawing upon Heidegger's existential analysis of *Dasein*, Derrida argues that "In order to identify the different ways of living (*erleben*) the demise (*Ableben*), that is, the ways of living as such the moment of 'leaving life'... one must already know what death means, and how to

did, Stevens recognised that his experiences reflected his culture of disbelief; for he could not divorce himself from, what he called, the mythology of his region.

Because they are always informed by a pre-established set of beliefs, descriptions of meditative consciousness, then, can never be anything other than interpretive. That is *not* to say, however, that they are 'merely' interpretive. We are not suggesting that these interpretations are in some way false, illusory, or mere cultural constructs. The fact that they are at least in part created by the practitioner's expectations does not diminish their value as phenomenological reports. Quite the contrary. These interpretations are indeed phenomenological descriptions, or what Stevens (drawing on the vocabulary of Kant) calls 'seemings'. "Such seemings are the actual ones," he says. Moreover, according to the poet,

Description is revelation. It is not
The thing described, nor false facsimile.

It is an artificial thing that exists,
In its own seeming, plainly visible... (CP 344, emphasis added)

How is this so? How is it that "*description is revelation*"? If we take Katz's argument that there are *no* unmediated experiences, then we must accept that experience and interpretation cannot be separated from one another. The mystical experience is genuine; it *actually* took place, and the description of this experience by the practitioner is equally genuine, regardless that the description bears the indelible mark of the practitioner's point of view. This is to say that there are no phenomenological descriptions of meditative detachment that do not bear the mark of the mystic or meditator. It matters not what cultural heritage the

recognise death properly speaking." If we take the experience of meditative detachment as a kind of death—a 'little death'—we can easily see how this is relevant to our project.

practitioner comes from nor that she be sceptical, pious, atheist, or even what Stevens calls, "a disbeliever in reality" (OP 117); the description *is* a revelation.

What we have here is a hermeneutic circle with beliefs shaping experience and experience shaping beliefs. Katz provides us with an excellent example of how this circle works in his analysis of Jewish and Christian mystical experience. He begins by explaining how it is that from a very young age the Jewish mystic is taught a set of doctrinal truths, truths that he later brings to his mystical experiences. For example, he is taught that the universe was created by one God who is ontologically distinct from humankind and that this God enters into covenants with humans. These theological truths formed in conjunction with a whole host of supporting texts, symbols, rituals, community values, and so on, come together to define *in advance* the kind of "experience he *wants to have*, and which he then does have."¹⁰² "He thus has an experience that is, phenomenologically, of a personal God, of the Divine Throne, of the hidden Torah, or the like."¹⁰³ Equally, however, it defines the kind of experience he *will not have*. Katz argues that "one thing the Jewish mystic does not experience is identity with God"; that is, he will not experience what is called 'union without distinction'.¹⁰⁴ He explains,

In the Jewish tradition the strong monotheistic emphasis on God's uniqueness is understood to entail not only his numerical unity and perfection but also his qualitative, ontological, distinction from his creations.... As a consequence, Jewish mystics envision the ultimate goal of mystical relation, *devekuth*, not as absorption into God, or as unity with the divine but rather as a loving intimacy, a 'clinging to God', a relation which at all times is aware of the

¹⁰² Katz as cited in Pike, p.197 (emphases are original).

¹⁰³ Pike summarising Katz, p. 197.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid. Pike is particularly interested in examining the types of mystical experience, particularly the Christian mystical experience of 'union without distinction'. In his chapter called "Variations on Full Union and Rapture" Pike cites Bernard of Clairvaux's *Treatise on Loving God* in which the mystic describes an experience of the "mind ... so 'drunk with love' that it becomes 'one with [God] in spirit.'" Bernard reports that in this state you "lose yourself as though you did not exist" and that you "have no sense of yourself" for you are "emptied out of yourself and almost annihilated." See Pike, pp. 32-34.

duality of God and mystic, i.e. which *experiences* God as Other rather than Self.¹⁰⁴

To further his argument, Katz then contrasts the experience of the Jewish mystic with that of the Christian. He asserts that there are two kinds of Christian mystical experiences, the "non-absorptive" type which resembles that of Jewish *devekuth* (though with some differences), and the "absorptive" or "unitive" type "in which the goal sought and experience reached is a transcendence of the distinction between self and God."¹⁰⁵ Therefore, unlike Jewish mystics, some Christian mystics have the experience of 'union without distinction'.

But why should some Christian mystics have 'unitive' experiences? Katz tells us,

What permits, perhaps even encourages, this unitive, absorptive mysticism of the divine he and the finite I found in Christian mysticism, though absent from its Jewish counterpart, is, I believe, the formative influence of the essential incarnational theology of Christianity which is predicated upon an admixing of human and divine elements in the person of Jesus which is outside the limits of Jewish consciousness.¹⁰⁶

Taking into consideration the many different kinds of mystical experience, including that of the Buddhist's experience of nirvana, Katz comes to the following conclusion:

This much is certain: the mystical experience must be mediated by the kinds of beings we are. And the kinds of beings we are require the experience be not only instantaneous and discontinuous, but that it also involve memory, apprehension, expectation, language, accumulation of prior experience, concepts, and expectations, with each experience being built on the back of all these elements and being shaped anew by each fresh experience. Thus experience of x—be x God or *nirvana*—is conditioned both linguistically and cognitively by a variety of factors including the expectation of what will be experienced.¹⁰⁷

¹⁰⁴ Direct quote from Katz by Pike, p. 197.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid., p. 198.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid., p. 200. Katz also notes the influence of Plotinus on Christian mysticism.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid., pp.200-201.

Before we turn our attention back to Stevens to see what all this has to do with his poetics, we must first ask this question: Does this kind of approach to mysticism do it a disservice? Is Steven Katz (along with Nelson Pike and others) usurping the potency of mystical experience by placing it tidily into its historical, psychological and social context? If we look at mysticism this way, can we still 'believe' in it? That is, can we still see it as a 'special', even holy, experience or is it merely one experience among many? ¹⁰⁹ By drawing on Katz's psycho-social approach to mysticism, we are in no way denying mysticism's value as an authentic experience able to offer religious fulfilment. We do not want to water down or to explain away mystical experience (which we admit is a danger if we were to take Katz's argument any further); rather, we want to argue that it is an

¹⁰⁹ In "The Making of Modern Mysticism," Leigh Eric Schmidt says that "There is hardly a more beleaguered category than 'mysticism' in the current academic study of religion," p. 273. He cites the work of Katz, Proudfoot and others as damaging the uniqueness of religious experience. Through their work, he says, religious experience "was no more unmediated, unique, ineffable, or perennial than any other kind of experience," p. 274. Grace Jantzen agrees. She argues that contemporary philosophers have been "seduced by a particular picture of mysticism, inherited largely from William James, which involves them in a stately dance of claims and counterclaims about experience and interpretation, language and ineffability, credulity and doubt. The movements of this dance," she says, "are by now well defined; but what is hardly noticed is how little resemblance they bear to the things which preoccupied the medieval men and women whom they themselves would consider to be paradigm mystics," p. 3. Jantzen complains that contemporary philosophers in their investigation of mysticism are asking all the wrong questions, questions that were not central to the mystics themselves, but which have been largely derived from Kantian epistemology. These philosophers "conduct their discussion of mysticism, wittingly or not, under the long shadow of Kant. Central to their definition of mysticism, therefore, is the work of Schleiermacher and William James, who tried to retrieve religious and mystical experience from Kantian strictures by seeing such experiences as unique, intense, subjective states of consciousness occurring 'on the verges of the mind' (James), different from normal consciousness and thus escaping Kant's critical theory." But the classical mystics of course had not read Kant, says Jantzen, and therefore "their preoccupations were quite different from what one might think if one read only modern philosophical discussion of mysticism," p. 8. In Grace Jantzen's *Power, Gender and Christian Mysticism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995). We would like to point out, however, that while the classical mystics were not asking the same questions as modern philosophers, Wallace Stevens in fact was. He was very much aware of "the long shadow of Kant" and he had most certainly read James closely. Stevens' mystical experiences were informed by the same questions that preoccupy modern philosophers—questions of truth, belief, knowledge, and language. He did not share the thought world of the classical mystics who assumed the existence of God; rather he shared the thought world of the very philosophers that both Schmidt and Jantzen criticise. His mysticism, then, must be considered in light of this.

experience that crosses religious and cultural boundaries and is able to offer a true sense of fulfilment even for a 'religious agnostic' like Stevens.

Wallace Stevens' mystical experiences must be understood in the light of the 'kind of being' that he is—and equally in relation to the 'kind of being' he is not. That is to say, Stevens is not the "brilliantly secular" Zen master that Bevis makes him out to be. Moreover, he is neither secular (whatever that means) nor Buddhist. He is, rather, a modern American poet who, having lost his belief in the "God in whom he was brought up to believe", experiences intense meditative moments that are not exactly akin to Zen-like 'Nothing', nor are they exactly akin to the Christian 'presence in absence'. Stevens' mysticism is peculiar to a man who lacked belief in 'the beyond' and who therefore sought mystical union with *the world itself*. He experienced a transcendence of immanence, we might say.

For the poet,

What
One believes is what matters. Ecstatic identities
Between one's self and the weather and the things
Of the weather are the belief in one's element.
The casual reunions, the long-pondered
Surrenders, the repeated sayings that
There is nothing more and that it is enough
To believe in the weather and in the things and men
Of the weather and in one's self, as part of that
And nothing more. (CP 258)

Placing his faith in his element, that is, placing his faith in *where he lives*, Stevens finds that the everyday world is enough. The "casual reunions, the long-pondered / Surrenders", when mind and world seem to come together and obliterate distinction between self and environment, offer a momentary fulfilment. And although he acknowledges that the "way through the world / Is more difficult to find than the way beyond it" (CP 446), Stevens celebrates this difficulty in living

in the everyday world, a "world that is still profound" where "Man sits and studies silence and himself" (CP 447).

Stevens' experience of the mystical is that of mind uniting with world, and it is his goal, in the words of Henry James,

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.¹⁰⁹

The "only thing" for Stevens like James is to live in a physical world; thus, the poet's mystical experiences are not born out of an attempt to escape from his local environment but rather out of a desire to inhabit it more fully, more deeply. For as Stevens tells us in the last canto of "Esthétique du Mal", "The greatest poverty is not to live / In a physical world...". Furthermore, he believes that "The adventurer / In humanity has not conceived of a race / Completely physical in a physical world" (CP 325), lines that are probably best understood when contrasted with a passage from Evelyn Underhill's *Mysticism*. Writes Underhill,

Mysticism, then, offers us the history, as old as civilization, of a race of adventurers who have carried to its term the process of a deliberate and active return to the divine fount of things. They have surrendered themselves to the life-movement of the universe, hence have lived with an intenser life than other men can ever know; have transcended the "sense-world" in order to live on high levels the spiritual life.¹¹⁰

For Underhill the mystics are a race of adventurers privileged above other men and women in their ability to transcend the "sense-world" and arrive at the "divine fount of things". But Stevens turns this notion on its head. He does not wish to escape from the sense-world but to inhabit it, to relish it, and to embrace the joy and sorrow that it brings. According to Underhill, the mystics have "lived an

¹⁰⁹ Henry James as quoted by Stevens (L 506).

intenser life" than 'ordinary' people because they have managed to escape the world of the senses, but Stevens questions this. He muses, "Perhaps, / After death, the non-physical people, in paradise, / Itself non-physical, may, by chance, observe / The green corn gleaming and experience / The minor of what we feel." *What we feel* living in the sense-world—desire, despair, rapture, misery—is a part of our earthly existence; it is this that allows us to live an 'intense life' and for that reason emotions ought to be celebrated, not denied. This embracing of the physical world (of which the ever changing emotional climates are a part) makes Stevens' mystical experiences unique. He is, we might say, the first of a new race of adventurers desiring to be "completely physical in a physical world."

With this in mind, let us now return to "The Snow Man", a poem that, as we recall, Bevis reads as a "neutral description" of Nothing. But is this really a description of the Zen-like experience of Chinese *wu-wei* or no-mind? And is Bevis right in arguing that it is a poem reflecting a meditative state "characterized by an absence of mental and emotional activity"?¹¹²

"The Snow Man" is eerily still, reflecting the icy landscape of Stevens' own interior.¹¹³ The poem progresses with an almost inhuman precision, an exactness that leaves no room for feeling yet *emerging out of feeling*. This listener "who listens in the snow" in the final stanza is the poet himself who pauses to hear the peculiar hush of his own wintry landscape. This poem is certainly not a neutral description, but rather a description that emerges out of a feeling of blankness or coldness. It is a description of an extended meditation on the self, a self that

¹¹¹ Evelyn Underhill, *Mysticism: A Study in the Nature and Development of Man's Spiritual Consciousness* (New York: Dutton, 1911), p. 41.

¹¹² William W. Bevis, "Stevens, Buddhism, and the Meditative Mind", *The Wallace Stevens Journal* 25.2 (Fall 2001): 148-163.

Stevens finds cold and empty. Stevens frequently made his interior landscape the subject of his contemplation and more often than not he discovered on these inward voyages an emotional blankness. But rather than mourn this blank, he celebrated it, even took pleasure in it. In a letter to Sister M. Bernetta Quinn, a long time correspondent, Stevens wrote:

This morning I walked around in the park here for almost an hour before coming to the office and felt as blank as one of the ponds which in the weather at this time of year are motionless. But perhaps it was the blankness that made me enjoy it so much. (L 762).¹¹³

At first it seems odd that Stevens should admit to enjoying this feeling of blankness, but we can understand it better when we read his comment on "The Snow Man". He says, "'The Snow Man' is about the necessity of identifying oneself with reality in order to understand it and enjoy it" (L 464). For Stevens, these contemplative moments when mind unites or identifies with world (and 'world' in this instance is the poet's internal landscape) provide a feeling of

¹¹² Remarking on another of Stevens' poems, Marjorie Perloff says that "The landscape of 'The Auroras of Autumn' is thus the externalization of the poet's psyche; its configurations and equivocations point always to his interiority." See *The Poetics of Indeterminacy*, p. 22.

¹¹³ Stevens often describes his interior as cold and blank, and for some time he saw this coldness of feeling as a personal failing and berated himself for it in a journal entry dated July 31, 1899. But over the course of time, according to Richard Ellmann, "gradually Stevens began to think of a kind of song that would affirm rather than deny coldness or frost. In fact, there is a persistent lowering of the temperature of his mind's native land." Richard Ellmann, "How Stevens Saw Himself," in *Wallace Stevens: A Celebration*, edited by Frank Doggett and Robert Buttel (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980), p.163. Also, regarding "The Snow Man", J. Hillis Miller writes, "In the impoverishing of the world when the gods disappear man discovers himself, orphaned and dispossessed, a solitary consciousness. Then are men truly 'natives of poverty, children of malheur' (CP, 322). The moment of self-awareness coincides with the moment of the death of the gods. God is dead, therefore I am. But I am nothing. I am nothing because I have nothing, nothing but awareness of the barrenness within and without." From J. Hillis Miller, *Poets of Reality* (London: Oxford University Press, 1966), p.219. Nathan Scott says similarly, "Since the Holy Spirit has disappeared and the region of our habitancy is no longer a place of grace and glory, the things and creatures of earth must be offered the one asylum that now remains--namely, that inland sanctuary remote from the exposed frontiers of the world which is provided within, by the creative largesse of the human spirit itself," in Nathan Scott's *Visions of Presence in Modern American Poetry* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993), p.41. We would, however, argue against Scott here when he claims that the "region of our habitancy is no longer a place of grace and glory." It is *precisely* at the moment of the disappearance of the gods when our 'region' becomes *the* place of grace and glory, a point that Stevens makes over and over again in his poetry.

certain 'rightnesses', a sense of having arrived at the longed-for 'centre' where the world seems to have stopped revolving and all, including the mind, is at rest.

By placing his faith in his 'element', Stevens can enjoy even the cold, blank, emptiness of his own internal climate. In fact, all indications are that he preferred the icy vacancies of 'winter' over and above the florid plenitude of 'summer', as can be gleaned from a close examination of his poems of winter and summer. Moreover, Stevens himself declared that "cold's glacial beauty is his fate" (CP 426) and he enjoyed these cold vacancies, both within and without. Thus, "The Snow Man" is a hymn to the *feeling* of emptiness and to the *capability* of the imagination that is capable of imagining a barrenness both inside and out. It is not a poem of an unmediated arrival at Nothing devoid of imagination, as Bevis would have us believe. Nor, as Bevis asserts, does Stevens posit the imaginative and the meditative against one another. On the contrary, such meditative moments of negation are indeed dependent upon the imagination. Meditation for Stevens is an exercise of the imagination or what he calls "an exercise in viewing the world".¹¹⁵

In direct opposition to Bevis' reading of Stevens' negations in *Mind of Winter*, Barbara Fisher in her chapter "Something for Nothing" considers the frequency with which Stevens employs terms of negation and comes to the conclusion that

¹¹⁵ Charles M. Murphy, former rector of the North American College, Vatican City, writes, "...I recall a seminarian at the time that I was rector always sitting, summer or winter, on the same bench every day to meditate. I once asked him why he did this. He replied that by having this fixed place in the universe he could detect the subtle changes that occur as one season passes into the next. In a similar way Wallace Stevens spent hours in Elizabeth Park near his home sitting and observing the divinity that disguises itself in subtleties of the weather," in *Wallace Stevens: A Spiritual Poet in a Secular Age*, p. 72. Murphy's statement would be strengthened if he were to remove the word "disguises" and say that Stevens sat and observed the "divinity in subtleties of the weather".

through his poetry he achieves the “‘feel’ of a perceptual vacuum” that has its “parallels in mystical theology.”¹¹⁶ She says that

Along with the salient nothings—the ‘nothing that is not there and the nothing that is’—Stevens’s categories of bleakness include images of emptiness, whiteness, invisibility; northern cold, ice and snow; pure transparent crystal and dark water without reflections, ‘like dirty glass’ (CP 503).¹¹⁷

Fisher sees the *negativa* in Stevens’ poetry as “having nothing to do with negativity as a retreat from reality”, but rather as an ongoing engagement with reality, and she argues that his negations must be recongised as having a positive value. Something *does* come from nothing, according to the author, who believes that “there are echoes of Henri Bergson’s vitalist proposition... that all human action begins in the desire to fill an emptiness, to “‘embroider ‘something’ on the canvas of ‘nothing’”.” This certainly helps make sense of some of the later poetry, particularly in the final collection, *The Rock*, where Stevens tells us that “the poem makes meanings of the rock, / Of such mixed motion and such imagery / That its barrenness becomes a thousand things / And so exists no more” (CP 527). Here the barrenness of the rock inspires the poet to “cover the rock with leaves”, or as Bergson says to “embroider ‘something’ on the canvas of ‘nothing.’” But does it not work the other way around also, that is, that when in possession of something one longs for nothing? Stevens says, “not to have is the beginning of desire. / To have what is not is its ancient cycle” (CP 382). The desire to have *nothing* comes from being in possession of *something* and no longer wanting what one has. This is the source of Stevens’ ascetic tendencies, about which Fisher comments that there appears

in a number of poems a compelling urge to burn away, empty out, strip off. It is a passion to penetrate to the very soul of things. In the grip of this mood

¹¹⁶ Fisher, p. 36.

¹¹⁷ Ibid., p. 35.

Stevens abandons verbal gesture, ornament, the flirts of fancy, and seriously courts the void. The temptations of the florid and the baroque vanish when this side of his temperament takes hold; the language becomes noticeably stripped down and spare. Sensuous objects are relinquished for a glimpse of the *res* itself. Stevens wants at these moments to work his way back, somehow, to first perception.¹¹⁸

At these times, Stevens wants to “see the very thing and nothing else.” He wants to “see it with the hottest fire of sight” and to “burn everything not part of it to ash” (CP 373). Indeed, as we have already seen in chapter one, Stevens expresses throughout his poetry a desire to arrive at a metaphysical ‘centre’ by attempting to deconstruct his own preconceptions and to rid himself of what he ‘has’.

Stevens’ poetry vacillates between two points, between the desire to make something of nothing (“to cover the rock with leaves”) and the desire to undo the something and return to nothing (“to be stripped of every fiction”).¹¹⁹ Regarding this desire to ‘undo’, Jonathan Dollimore believes that the “restless, dissatisfied energy which is the stuff of life is always shadowed by that desire to *become unbound*.” This is, he says, “the desire for oblivion, for a dissolution of consciousness, the irresistible desire to regress back to a state of zero tension before consciousness, before life, before effort, before lack.”¹²⁰ In the words of John Donne,

We seem ambitious, God’s whole work to undo;
Of nothing he made us, and we strive...
To bring ourselves to nothing back.¹²¹

¹¹⁸ Ibid., pp.37-38.

¹¹⁹ Fisher believes that at some point there was an “important transition in Stevens’s attitude toward negation, and his essentially positive pursuit of the *negativa* is, philosophically speaking, a transition from Nietzsche to Bergson, from decreation to the procreative empty space of vitalism,” p. xxv. We would argue, however, that the poetry does not suggest such a definitive shift from the decreative to the procreative, but rather a constant inter-play between the two. Neither ‘Nietzschean decreation’ nor ‘Bergsonian vitalism’ is posited above the other in Stevens’ poetry.

¹²⁰ Jonathan Dollimore, “Death and the Self,” in *Rewriting the Self: Histories from the Renaissance to the Present*, edited by Roy Porter (London: Routledge, 1997), p. 256.

¹²¹ From Donne’s *Anniversaries* in *The Complete English Poems*, ed. A. J. Smith, Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1971. Cited by Dollimore in “Death and the Self”.

Stevens' desire to "become unbound" and bring himself back to nothing is the theme of "The Dwarf":

Now it is September and the web is woven.
The web is woven and you have to wear it.

The winter is made and you have to bear it,
The winter web, the winter woven, wind and wind,

For all the thoughts of summer that go with it
In the mind, pupa of straw, moppet of rags.

It is the mind that is woven, the mind that was jerked
And tufted in straggling thunder and shattered sun.

It is all that you are, the final dwarf of you... (CP 208)

With the onslaught of September the possibility of summer has come to an end. The idea that once gave pleasure while it was still 'alive' in the vaguaries of the mind has now become too clearly defined, too determinate. The poet here longs to throw off this weighty idea that no longer satisfies so that he might be free once again to experience the enlargements of possibility.

As Fisher notes, "negation can be a discipline," and in Stevens the practice of stripping away does indeed have its parallels in mystical theology. One thinks, for example, of Meister Eckhart, who desired to be stripped of all desire, including his desire for God. "I find no other virtue better than a pure detachment from all things," said Eckhart. "Therefore I pray to God that he may make me free of God, for my real being is above God if we take 'God' to be the beginning of all created things."¹²² Stevens also wishes to be free of 'God', if we define God

¹²² Meister Eckhart quoted in Denys Turner's *The Darkness of God: Negativity in Christian Mysticism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), p.173. Regarding Eckhart's idea of detachment, see also the introduction to John Caputo's *The Mystical Element in Heidegger's Thought* (New York: Fordham University Press, 1986). Says Caputo, "In Eckhart, one finds a powerful deconstructive effort aimed at undoing the onto-theo-logical God, an unrelenting drive to free us, to free God, from the constructs and idols of metaphysics. Eckhart is always looking for ways to get beyond 'God', that is to say, what men call God, whether on the basis of metaphysical theology or even revealed faith.... Whatever we *know* about God is not God, for that is God

variously as the “First Idea”, the “motionless centre”, or even the “blessed rage for order”. Both Eckhart and Stevens long to be free—not from desire exactly—but from the desire to *possess*, whether it be the desire to possess a tangible object or an intangible idea, such as the idea of God. Denys Turner asks, “What, then, is the practice of detachment?”

I think that as we can say that detachment is the solution, so the problem is not human desire itself, but its possessiveness. The strategy of detachment is the strategy of dispossessing desire of its desire to possess its objects, and so to destroy them. For Eckhart it is not just that, in addition to our other desires, we also desire to possess; as for John of the Cross, possessiveness for Eckhart is pandemic; *all* our desires are infected by it, all that we desire we desire *qua* object of possession; no matter how unpossessible an object may be in itself, possessiveness will convert it into a possible object of possession, will make a property of it, will ‘privatise’ it, as it were. It is for this reason that the undetached person denatures her world and cannot properly enjoy it. She cannot meet with reality on its own terms, but only on her own.¹²²

To “meet with reality on its own terms”... this is the strategy of detachment. By detaching oneself from objects of desire, by letting go and letting be (what Eckhart calls *Gelassenheit*, a word that is later appropriated by Heidegger), we are able to accept reality on its own terms, to cherish the things of the earth without grasping them.¹²³ Turner continues,

Detachment, for Eckhart, is not the severing of desire’s relation to its object, but the restoration of desire to a proper relation of objectivity; as we might say, of reverence for its object. Detachment is therefore the basis of the true

insofar as he has been brought under the sway of human knowledge. Whatever we *want* of God is not God for that is God *insofar* as he has been brought under the sway of human willing. The only way to God—that is, to the truly divine God, what Eckhart sometimes called the Godhead beyond all God—is to shut down the whole operation of knowing and willing, that is to say, to suspend the operations of subjectivity, to disconnect the *ego cogito*, and let God be, let God be *God*,” p. xviii.

¹²² Ibid, p. 183.

¹²³ Regarding Eckhart’s idea of *Gelassenheit*, Beverly Lanzetta remarks, “Detachment becomes the linguistic analog of the soul’s reenactment of the mystery in which God relinquishes all naming and identifying. Detachment is a higher intimacy that is ‘so close to nothingness that there is nothing so subtle that it can be apprehended by detachment, except God alone.’

“The Meister portrays a deconstructing God, a God who liberates the soul from the absolutizing of a final truth or an ultimate name. His experience of nothingness opened a new eye on Christian theology, one that compelled him to exclaim of God: ‘He is pure nothing: he is neither this nor that,’” in *The Other Side of Nothingness*, p. 74.

possibility of love, which is why, for Eckhart, it is more fundamental than love, being the condition of its possibility.¹²⁵

The same could be said of Stevens' understanding of detachment, that is, that the "true possibility of love" comes from letting be, and letting be for a poet involves liberating the object of desire from the confines of language that has become lacklustre. Meeting with reality on its own terms requires that Stevens throw away the "rotted names" (CP 183), that he strip away worn-out words and suspend naming altogether for as long as possible.

"And for what, except for you, do I feel love?" Stevens asks at the start of "Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction". The object of love in the canto is undefined, unnamed:

And for what, except for you, do I feel love?
Do I press the extremest book of the wisest man
Close to me, hidden in me day and night?
In the uncertain light of single, certain truth,
Equal in living changingness to the light
In which I meet you, in which we sit at rest,
For a moment in the central of our being,
The vivid transparence that you bring is peace. (CP 380)

Basking in "uncertain light" Stevens and his nameless companion meet and sit in the "central of [their] being" at rest. The will to possess is not in evidence. This is a meeting of equals—this is the poet meeting "with reality on its own terms." We

¹²⁵ Turner, p. 183. See also John Caputo's *Radical Hermeneutics*. Caputo explains that for Eckhart, "*Gelassenheit* means living 'without why,' by which he means something quite interesting. The soul's relationship to God should be 'without why'.... That means that the soul should not act on the basis of demonstrated or even revealed truths about God, or for the sake of what it wants to gain from God, for these are both 'why's'—bases and grounds and expectations—and as such treat God as some exterior principle. Living without why, with *Gelassenheit*, means seeking nothing exterior or outside—or, better, not seeking at all—but simply letting God's life well up in us and flow through us as an inner principle of life. We should love God as we love life, Eckhart said, for Himself, not as we love our cow, that is, for its milk. *Gelassenheit* means then a certain splendid releasing of life which Eckhart identifies with love—for Eckhart the highest and clearest case of *Gelassenheit* is love—which lets life rise up and flow over, which puts away the machinery of metaphysics and the mean desires of egoism in order to let the truly divine God flow in Himself, in the world, and in others." In *Radical Hermeneutics: Repetition, Deconstruction, and the Hermeneutic Project* (Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1987), p. 265.

note that the use of pronouns is significant in this passage. The other remains unnamed, only referred to by the second person pronoun, 'you', until lines six and seven when 'I' and 'you' give way to 'we' and 'our'. "[*W*]e sit at rest, / For a moment in the central of *our* being" seems to suggest the mystical experience of union without distinction, or an undifferentiated unity. In Stevensian terms this is the uniting of the imagination with reality. Detachment for the poet involves resisting the temptation to grasp 'reality' by allowing the object to remain nameless for a time: "The sun / Must bear no name, gold flourisher, but be / In the difficulty of what it is to be" (CP 381). Such moments when the imagination lets go and lets be, when it resists the desire to possess 'reality', are "times of inherent excellence,"

As when the cock crows on the left and all
Is well, incalculable balances,
At which a kind of Swiss perfection comes

And a familiar music of the machine
Sets up its Schwärmerei, not balances
That we achieve but balances that happen,

As a man and woman meet and love forthwith.
Perhaps there are moments of awakening,
Extreme, fortuitious, personal, in which

We more than awaken, sit on the edge of sleep,
As on an elevation, and behold
The academies like structures in the mist. (CP 386)

These "balances" happen when the imagination resists the urge to organise and arrange, when it allows the other to be—to be without a name.

Detachment brings freedom not only to the would-be object of desire but also to the one who suppresses the will to possess. Both the desired and the desirer are liberated in detachment. Both become "large in possibility". "The Latest Freed Man" (CP 204), a work that could be profitably read as a companion piece to

“The Dwarf”, expresses this sense of mutual detachment better than any of Stevens’ poems. In the poem, the ‘freed’ man, who has grown weary “of the old descriptions of the world”, suddenly discovers the freedom of being like a “man without a doctrine” living in a landscape without a doctrine. Sitting on the edge of his bed at six in the morning, the man speaks aloud: “I suppose there is / A doctrine to this landscape. Yet, having just / Escaped from the truth, the morning is color and mist, / Which is enough....” In this moment of liberation the man feels the freedom of “being without description”. Being without description in a landscape without a doctrine, the man is suddenly struck by the freshness of things around him, the “freshness of the oak-leaves” and “everything bulging and blazing and big in itself...”. Says Stevens elsewhere, “The freshness of transformation is / The freshness of a world. It is our own, / It is ourselves, the freshness of ourselves...” (CP 397-398).

In “A Word with José Rodríguez-Feo” Stevens writes, “We must enter boldly that interior world / To pick up relaxations of the known” (CP 334). The motive for meditation is to enjoy such moments of the imagination when reason relaxes its grip on the ‘known’, allowing for the emergence of something new and previously unknown. At such times Stevens becomes “an ignorant man again” (CP 380). This exercise in viewing the world anew involves an overthrowing of an order by way of a momentary escape from reason’s desire to arrange and hold captive. Writes Stevens in his essay “Imagination as Value”,

The truth seems to be that we live in concepts of the imagination before the reason has established them. If this is true, then reason is simply the methodizer of the imagination. It may be that the imagination is a miracle of logic and that its exquisite divinations are calculations beyond analysis, as the conclusions of the reason are calculations wholly within analysis (NA 154).

Stevens' experience of mystical contemplation is one where the powers of the imagination, capable of "exquisite divinations", are enhanced while the desire to possess—to capture by ordering and arranging—is diminished. These are moments of the irrational, moments of distortion when the world is seen again with an "ignorant eye".¹²⁵

"You must become an ignorant man again," says Stevens, "And see the sun again with an ignorant eye...." This means throwing off the rotted names, the lacklustre language that holds the thing captive and allowing it to be in "the difficulty of what it is to be", that is, allowing it to be without a name.

How clean the sun when seen in its idea,
Washed in the remotest cleanliness of a heaven
That has expelled us and our images...

There is a project for the sun. The sun
Must bear no name, gold flourisher, but be
In the difficulty of what it is to be. (CP 381)

Stevens' mysticism has to do with un-naming, un-doing and 'un-knowing', or in his words, "becoming an ignorant man again." It is a process of dis-possessing 'reality' and loving it enough to allow it to be. Only when reality has been dis-possessed can there be a meeting of equals, a rendezvous between reality and the

¹²⁵ Timothy Clark notes that "...a crucial part of the process of composition is understood as a desired or even calculated suspension of reasoning or deliberation, a temporary mania or insanity. This suspension is valorised as a mode of access to 'deeper' or spontaneously productive areas of the psyche. The irrationality that is inspiration, though analogous to a kind of insanity, is understood to be *sui generis*, a peculiar, unique and probably rare state of being. The creative is less irrational than, so to speak, 'supra-rational.' It achieves feats unattainable by any merely rational or procedural method." From *The Theory of Inspiration*, pp. 2-3. Curiously, nowhere in Clark's study does he mention mysticism or the mystics in relation to creative inspiration, although he does note the connection between inspiration and religious experience, albeit he is skeptical of any suggestion of the religious. He says that many accounts of inspiration, particularly those of the nineteenth-century, "confirm a basically liberal conception of personhood—inspiration is invariably the 'liberation' of a supposedly truer or deeper self from out of the pressures of convention, cliché, tradition, false thinking or inauthenticity. The fascination of these episodes also lies in their seductive status as modern versions of miracle. Glimpses of the creative process remain like brief visions of a promised land. They are, in effect, secularized versions of religious conversion narratives such as those of St Paul and St Augustine, with their dramatic peripeteia and scenes of recognition," p. 5.

imagination. According to Stevens, the very nature of poetry "is an interdependence of the imagination and reality as equals" (NA 27), and it is through this meeting of equals that something new emerges:

Two things of opposite natures seem to depend
On one another, as a man depends
On a woman, day on night, the imagined

On the real. This is the origin of change.
Winter and spring, cold copulars, embrace
And forth the particulars of rapture come.

Music falls on the silence like a sense,
A passion that we feel, not understand.
Morning and afternoon are clasped together

And North and South are an intrinsic couple
And sun and rain a plural, like two lovers
That walk away as one in the greenest body. (CP 392)

When 'reality' is loved enough that the will to possess is abandoned, the detached person experiences "an elevation", "the highest of all flights".¹²⁶ Such "peak experiences," which belong as much to the agnostic poet as to the medieval Christian mystic, offer a temporary release from gnawing desire and bring a sense of fulfillment characterised by feelings of "wholeness, rightness, and well-being."¹²⁷ Says Eckhart,

¹²⁶ Meister Eckhart, *Meister Eckhart: Selected Treatises and Sermons*, translated by James M. Clark and John Skinner (London: HarperCollins, 1958), p. 143-144.

¹²⁷"It is curious," writes Robert Bellah, "how the notion that such experiences are the exclusive property of religious virtuosi ever got started, since they are probably as old and as widespread as the human race itself." Robert N. Bellah, *Beyond Belief: Essays on Religion in a Post-Traditional World* (London: Harper and Row, 1970), p.199. Although the work is somewhat dated now, it is interesting to note that Bellah cites Stevens as "the greatest American 'theological poet' of the twentieth century," and argues that "he may be particularly useful in helping us discern the structure of contemporary religious consciousness," p. 197. See also chapter six, entitled "Beyond Belief", of Denis Donoghue's *Adam's Curse: Reflections on Religion and Literature* (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 2001). Donoghue launches a scathing attack on Bellah, declaring that "you would never discover from his books what religion is, apart from the empty formulae of his gestures toward it. Nor would you discover how religion has come to be dark with mystery.... Religion, according to his lowest common denomination of it, has no necessary involvement with belief," p. 101. And addressing Bellah's proclamation of Stevens as the "greatest American theological poet", Donoghue writes, "I admire Stevens's poetry, but I don't understand the sense in which he is said to be a theological poet, unless Bellah has in view—as I'm afraid he has—some form of secular theology which is designed to get rid of theology," p. 94. He

...if the heart is to find preparedness for the highest of all flights, it must aim at a pure nothing and in this there is the greatest possibility that can exist. For when the detached heart has the higher aim, it must be towards the Nothing.¹²⁹

And why, according to the Meister, must the “detached heart” aim “towards the Nothing”? “Because,” he says, “in this is the highest receptivity.”

Take a parable from nature: if I want to write on a wax tablet, then no matter how noble the thing is that is written on the tablet, I am none the less vexed because I cannot write on it. If I really want to write I must delete everything that is written on the tablet, and the tablet is never so suitable for writing as when absolutely nothing is written on it.¹³⁰

Eckhart’s example is particularly poignant for the poet who requires a *tabula rasa* on which to write anew. If Stevens is enamoured with negation, if he is in love with the ‘icy vacancies of winter’, it is precisely because it is through the *negativa* that he is fully receptive to the possible *discoveries* of the imagination. Through the disciplined process of stripping away and journeying into that interior to “pick up relaxations of the known”, he discovers something previously unknown, unnamed, and undiscovered, something that has the power to take him by surprise.

Throw away the lights, the definitions,
And say of what you see in the dark

That it is this or that it is that,
But do not use the rotted names.

How should you walk in that space and know
Nothing of the madness of space,

Nothing of its jocular procreations?
Throw the lights away. Nothing must stand

Between you and the shapes you take

goes on, "It is not surprising that Bellah quotes Stevens in a book on 'religion in a post-traditional world.' He evidently thinks that Stevens, more than any other writer, articulates a religious sensibility that sustains itself without belief and aspires somehow to go beyond belief in a direction that can't be indicated," pp. 100-101. But Donoghue's own understanding of Stevens' religious sensibility is clearly limited, as demonstrated by his whole discussion of the poet's notion of 'belief', outlined on pp. 94-96.

¹²⁹ Ibid.

¹³⁰ Ibid.

When the crust of shape has been destroyed.

You as you are? You are yourself.

The blue guitar surprises you. ("The Man With the Blue Guitar", CP 183)

We note the repetition of the word 'Nothing' here and the paradox of Nothing's "jocular procreations". By shedding the lights, the definitions, the rotted names, the shapes, it is as if the poet has regressed back (progressed forward?) to the Nothing, to that wax tablet wiped clean of all writing. But the Nothing cannot stay; it cannot linger. As soon as the "crust of shape has been destroyed" a new shape begins to emerge demanding a new name. Out of the *experience* of Nothing comes Something. *Creatio ex nihilo*.

Before continuing with these thoughts in the next chapter, we must first answer that question with which we began: Does Stevens qualify as a mystic? The difficulty in answering this question stems from the more general problem of finding a working definition for the word 'mystic'. What exactly is a mystic and what is mysticism? Is a mystic, as Richard H. Jones believes, one who undergoes 'mystical experiences' that occur as the result of "the process of turning one's attention inward and stilling all normal cognitive and emotional activities," a process of "forgetting", a definition that, by the way, sounds much like Bevis' understanding of Buddhist meditation?¹³¹ Is a mystic, then, to be defined as one who undergoes certain special types of experiences not immediately available to the general public? And if mysticism is primarily *experiential* then are certain drug-induced experiences to be counted as mystical? In his introduction to *The Darkness of God*, Denys Turner deals with the whole question of mysticism and, what he calls, "the problem about the role of 'experience' within 'the

mystical””.¹³² For Turner the recent focus on the experiential in mysticism is problematic because it does not take seriously the accounts of the medieval mystics who were by and large not interested in experience as such, in spite of their frequent use of such ‘experiential’ words as ‘inwardness’ and ‘ascent’. He explains,

...whereas our employment of the metaphors of ‘inwardness’ and ‘ascent’ appears to be tied in with the achievement and the cultivation of a certain kind of experience—such as those recommended within the practice of what is called, nowadays, ‘centring’ or ‘contemplative’ prayer—the mediaeval employment of them was tied in with a ‘critique’ of such religious experiences and practices. Whereas we appear to have ‘psychologized’ the metaphors, the Neoplatonic mediaeval writer used the metaphors in an ‘apophatic’ spirit to play down the value of the ‘experiential’; and that, therefore, whereas it would come naturally to the contemporary, ‘psychologising’ mind to think of ‘the mystical’ in terms of its characterizing *experiences*, the mediaeval mind thought of the ‘mystical’, that is to say, the ‘hidden’ or ‘secret’, wisdom as being what the Author of *The Cloud of Unknowing* called a ‘divinity’ which is ‘hidden’ precisely *from* experience.¹³³

It is not surprising that contemporary studies of mysticism have neglected the religious in favour of the experiential when we consider just how misunderstood ‘the religious’ is today. William Bevis and his repudiation of the religious element in Stevens is one example of how contemporary scholars are embarrassed by any suggestion of the religious as they anxiously insist that theirs is a ‘secular’ (read ‘scientific’) study. Bevis’ repeated claim to be interested in Stevens’ meditative practices is a way of distancing himself from the more uncomfortable and uncertain (that is, unmeasurable) elements of Stevens’ poetics. By stressing the experiential, which, as Bevis is keen to demonstrate, is measurable in some way¹³⁴, over the religious, modern scholars are claiming mysticism as a field for

¹³¹ Richard H. Jones, *Mysticism Examined: Philosophical Inquiries into Mysticism* (Albany, New York: State University of New York Press, 1993), p.1.

¹³² Turner, p. 4.

¹³³ Ibid.

¹³⁴ Bevis, as we have already mentioned, is primarily interested in meditation (as opposed to mysticism, as he understands it) as a particular state of consciousness characterised by transience,

scientific and rational inquiry. Through removing the uncertain, irrational, inexplicable, and even mysterious element in mysticism, it becomes an examinable, and, therefore, 'respectable' field for 'serious' scholars. Even the term 'ineffable', so closely associated with mysticism, has been subjected to this kind of scientific scrutiny, with scholars concentrating on the ineffability of *experience*. "In other words," writes McIntosh, "language for talking about the indescribable wonder of God (who cannot *be* experienced *in se*) becomes the language of having a wonderfully indescribable experience of God."¹³⁵ Certainly both Nelson Pike and Steven Katz, as we have already seen, fall into this category of scholars of mysticism who are more interested in the experiential than they are in the theological or religious elements of mysticism, though they do not completely divorce one from the other.

On the other side of the debate between the experiential and the religious are those theologians who take little interest in the experiential arguing that what is central to mysticism is not the inner states of consciousness but the "breaking through of wisdom."¹³⁶ That is to say, the important thing about contemplation is what it brings in terms of a "new *understanding*, a new encounter with wisdom," says McIntosh.¹³⁷ What is important is not experience but *revelation*.

But it seems that both of these viewpoints are too one-sided. What is needed is a proper balance when considering experience and, what we might call, revelation in mysticism, a balance predicated upon the belief that the experience is an

ineffability, "sensations of time and space changed or transcended" and "sensations of self-loss—that is, absence of thought or feeling according to later reports, and minimal cortical activity *as measured by machines* during meditation." He continues, "Such a state of consciousness differs in report and *measurable characteristics* from other states such as waking, dreaming, day-dreaming, and hypnotic trance, and such calm self-loss differs also from the other mystical categories of the occult, vision, and ecstasy (excited self-loss)." From *Mind of Winter*, p. 12. Emphases added.

¹³⁵ Mark A. McIntosh, p. 68.

¹³⁶ Ibid, p. 12.

¹³⁷ Ibid.

integral part of the revelation. Turning to the writings of the mystic Teresa of Avila, we consider her description of the state she calls the 'Prayer of Quiet' in *The Way of Perfection* and how it demonstrates the relationship between mystical experience and revelation:

This is a supernatural state, and, however hard we try, we cannot reach it for ourselves; for it is a state in which the soul enters into peace, or, rather, in which the Lord gives it peace through His presence, as He did that just man Simeon. In this state, all the faculties are stilled. The soul, in a way which has nothing to do with the outward senses, realizes that it is now very close to its God, and that, if it were but a little closer, it would become one with Him through union.... [The soul] cannot understand how it knows Him, yet it sees that it is in the Kingdom...and it feels such reverence that it dares ask for nothing. It is, as it were, in a swoon, both inwardly and outwardly, so that the outward man (let me call it the 'body', and then you will understand me better) does not wish to move, but rests, like one who has almost reached the end of his journey, so that it may the better start again upon its way, with redoubled strength for its task.¹³⁸

Teresa differentiates between those who enter into a meditative state "whenever they like", as a "hedgehog or a tortoise withdrawing into itself", and those, like herself, who enter into a 'supernatural' state "only when God is pleased to grant [...] this favour."¹³⁹ The mystic can prepare herself for this state but she cannot enter into it without God granting it *as a gift*. She writes, "One preparation for listening to Him, as certain books tell us, is that we should contrive, not to use our reasoning powers, but to be intent upon discovering what the Lord is working in the soul...."¹⁴⁰

...the soul whom the Lord has been pleased to lead into this Mansion will do best to act as I have said. Let it try, without forcing itself or causing any turmoil, to put a stop to all discursive reasoning, yet not to suspend the understanding, nor to cease from all thought, though it is well for it to remember that it is in God's presence and Who this God is. If feeling this should lead it into a state of absorption, well and good; but it should not try to

¹³⁸ Teresa of Avila, *The Way of Perfection*, translated and edited by E. Allison Peers from the critical edition of P. Silverio de Santa Teresa, C.D. (Garden City, New York: Doubleday, Image Books, 1964), chapter 31.

¹³⁹ Teresa of Avila, *Interior Castle*, translated by E. Allison Peers (London: Sheed and Ward, 1974), p. 41.

¹⁴⁰ Ibid.

understand what this state is, because that is a gift bestowed upon the will. The will, then, should be left to enjoy it, and should not labour except for uttering a few loving words, for although in such a case one may not be striving to cease from thought, such cessation often comes, though for a very short time.¹⁴¹

According to Teresa, an authentic mystical experience is different from other experience; for her it is a "supernatural state", that is, one that cannot be reached merely through one's own efforts. She feels herself called to enter into this supernatural state to experience the peace that "the Lord gives." Two things stand out in these passages: first that the mystic is *invited* to enter into this state, and second that she is *given*, what she calls, the peace of God. Here we have *the key to the religious element of mystical experience*: the mystic's sense of being called into mystic union and being offered a gift. Both the calling and the gift-giving happen freely for the one who is 'listening' for the invitation to receive.

Herein lies Bevis' problem with Western mystics, that they always find 'something' instead of 'nothing'. We recall that he argues that Stevens' meditative practices were not in any sense religious, nor did they yield 'something'. However, in spite of Bevis' protestations, if we look closely at Stevens' poetry, we do in fact find clues to suggest that there are indeed parallels with the Christian mystics who believed that their experiences were brought about through an invitation to mystic union and that, through this union, they received a gift.

For Stevens, the *experience* of the merging of reality and the imagination brings something new into being. And experience must not be devalued in this process; it is necessary for the making of the thing. We recall Stevens' emphasis in "Sunday Morning" on passions, moods, grievings and elations—all sensory

¹⁴¹ Ibid, p. 43.

experiences to be valued equally. He does not elevate one experience above another; all are part of the changing climates of the mind, those internal changes that respond to the changing climates of reality. Nothing attests more to Stevens' faith in change to bring about something new than his never-ending meditations on the seasons.

If Turner, McIntosh and others have been unhappy with contemporary studies of mysticism that have focused on experience to the exclusion of 'revelation', it may be because there appears to be an underlying assumption among these scholars of 'experientialism' that there is but one kind of experience that can be classified as 'mystical', an assumption that Stevens would most certainly reject. The great paradox of Stevens' mysticism is that for him to be *detached*, to let go and let be, to suppress the desire to possess and to grasp, means being *attached* to the flux and flow of reality and welcoming all the many experiences it brings.

Chapter Five: A Poetics of *Gelassenheit*

That which is the most difficult to find is, as the proper and the near, what we must look for the longest. And as long as it is being looked for, it is never lost. Any hasty and hurried search is not a search but a wild wandering about from one thing to another. The constant suspension of meditation belongs to the search. Meditation is like the withheld breath of modesty facing the awaited marvel. The search properly speaking is a constant hesitation, not the hesitation of someone who is simply perplexed and indecisive, but the hesitating of someone who dwells a long time, takes his time, looks in front and behind himself, because he is seeking and dwelling in experience. The discovery and the appropriation of the proper are one with the dwelling of the step.

Martin Heidegger¹⁴²

...mystics (mystein: quiet; keep it a secret) and negative theologians (I cannot say a thing) are among our greatest poets....

John Caputo¹⁴³

The name keeps the secret.

Marc Froment-Meurice¹⁴⁴

Not ideas about the thing but the thing itself

Wallace Stevens (CP 534)

In the last chapter we considered how a third thing, poetry, is born out of the union between reality and the imagination, and we said of this third thing that it is an entity that once 'born' lives independently of its 'birth parents'. Importantly, for Stevens, it is not to be considered merely as a witness *to* or a description *of* an experience, and by experience here we mean the mystical experience of the rendezvous of reality and the imagination. This third thing does not merely point to something else, something outside itself; it is rather *a thing in itself*. This is to say that the poem is, in the words of Martin Heidegger, a "self-sufficient

¹⁴² From Heidegger's *Holderlins Hymne "Andenken"* as cited by Froment-Meurice, p. 222.

¹⁴³ John D. Cauto, *Against Ethics: Contributions to a Poetics of Obligation with Constant Reference to Deconstruction* (Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1993), p. 75.

presence”.¹⁴⁴ In the following pages we will take leave of Stevens for a while and turn first to the problem of what we might call ‘mystical ineffability’ and then to some of the later works of Heidegger contained in *Poetry, Language, Thought* to see how it is that the poem comes to be understood as ‘not an idea about the thing but the thing itself’. For Heidegger, more than any other thinker, provides the theoretical underpinning for understanding poetry as a “self-sufficient presence” which emerges out of what we will call ‘a poetics of *Gelassenheit*’.

The notion of the poem as an independent entity is important as it relates to the mystical experience of ineffability and the understanding of the relationship between language and ‘reality.’ A basic characteristic of mysticism is this problem of capturing in words that which is invisible, incomprehensible, unknowable, and uncreated. It is, essentially, a problem of *naming the unnameable*. Plotinus explains,

The [One] is only thus, as it is, and not otherwise. But even the expression ‘it is thus’ is inaccurate, for thereby it would be limited and thereby made into a definite something (and an individual having number). For then it would again take its place amongst things of which it can be said that they are thus or not. But the [One] is exalted above all these things.¹⁴⁵

Nevertheless, regardless of the impossibility of naming the unnameable and saying the unsayable, mystics do *name* and *say*. “In one of his typical remarks about the Godhead,” says Richard Jones, “Meister Eckhart declares ‘Everything in the Godhead is one, and of that there is nothing to be said.’ Well, did he not

¹⁴³ Marc Froment-Meurice, p. 232

¹⁴⁴ Martin Heidegger, *Poetry, Language, Thought*, translated by Albert Hofstadter (New York: Harper and Row, 1971), p. 29. Hereafter referred to as *PLT*.

¹⁴⁵ Plotinus as cited by Rudolph Otto in *Religious Essays* (London: Oxford University Press, 1931), p. 84.

just say something about it?"¹⁴⁷ Indeed, mystics do very often give a name to this Nothing that will bear no name, not even the name 'Nothing'.

There are different ideas concerning 'mystical ineffability' that stem from the two basic understandings of mysticism that we briefly addressed in the last chapter. We recall that for some, mysticism is considered to be purely experiential, while for others (like Plotinus and Eckhart above), it involves an encounter with the divine and "the breaking through of wisdom." For the former 'ineffability' is about the ineffability of experience, that is, the inability to describe adequately the mystical experience of union without distinction in words. The assumption made by these 'experientialists' is that language is predicated upon a subject-object split, that it always points to something outside itself; therefore, when the mystic experiences the feeling of union without distinction, words are understood to be wholly inadequate to convey this unitive or non-dualistic experience. On the other hand, for the latter group, language is considered to be inadequate either because it is unable to capture in words that which is thought to be *beyond* all words and all names or because (and there is a marked difference here) language is thought to be incapable of describing it *completely*.¹⁴⁸ Either way the distrust of language for this second group arises from the deep humility of the mystic who has reverence for that which is finally unknown and unsayable. It is, we might say, a reverence for keeping that which is hidden, hidden.

¹⁴⁷ Jones, *Mysticism Examined*, p. 101.

¹⁴⁸ J. P. Williams emphasises the difference between these two concepts of ineffability in his chapter "Dogen's Apophasis". Williams says that according to Zen Master Dogen "the ineffability of reality is not a question of there being no words which would describe it, but rather that there are no words which would describe it completely," p. 129. This is a particularly important point if sacred texts are to continue to have any relevancy.

Mystics often claim that silence is the only appropriate response to the ineffability of ____.¹⁴⁹ But how is silence to be conveyed? Does it not require contextualisation in order for it to be a 'significant silence'? Is silence conveyed merely through not speaking? Or can there be another kind of silence, one that speaks? Also, is it not possible for silence to be tyrannous, that is, is it not possible to have a "tyranny of silence" just as it is possible to have a tyranny of speech?¹⁵⁰

What is needed is a silence that is faithful to the ineffability or 'unsayableness' of ____; what is needed is a silence that speaks, and in speaking keeps what is hidden, hidden and what is secret, secret. But how is it possible to retain silence while 'speaking silence'? Moreover, how is it possible to keep the secret of ____ secret, while showing its secret?

These are the very questions that preoccupy Martin Heidegger in his essays "The Origin of the Work of Art" and "What Are Poets For?", questions largely inspired by his reading of the poet Hölderlin. In 1914 Heidegger says that he was struck by an "earthquake" and this earthquake was not the start of the First World War, as one might expect, but rather his reading of the poet Friedrich Hölderlin (1770-1843). Heidegger became so enthusiastic about the poet that he declared

¹⁴⁹ The reader will appreciate the apparent difficulty in this chapter of finding an appropriate signifier. We have chosen to use '____' to indicate the 'unsayable' in order to avoid the confusion and inconsistency of employing a number of different terms used by different thinkers, such as 'reality' (Stevens), 'Being' (Heidegger), 'the gods' (Hölderlin), 'the Name' (Marion), 'the Godhead' (Eckhart) and so on.

¹⁵⁰ Williams notes that Dogen believed that "silence is easier than words to misread: silence needs a context to give it meaning, and when taken out of context can fail to teach anything or, worse, may teach the wrong thing.... Dogen's concerns about the abuse of silence are not merely philosophical but spring from a deep concern that the soteriology on offer to the wider community should be viable. Dogen therefore, tirelessly and repeatedly, makes it his business to drive a wedge between the unspeakable and what [] has [been] called the 'tyranny of silence': silence is not the sole possible response to reality, nor is it ever a possible sole-response," pp. 130-131.

that “My thinking stands in an unavoidable relationship to the poetry of Hölderlin.”¹⁵¹

Commenting further on Hölderlin in “What Are Poets For?”, Heidegger says that through his poetry we can “come to learn what is unspoken,”¹⁵² for as a poet, Hölderlin understood the paradox of speaking the unspoken and naming that which resists all names.

Nenn’ ich den Hohen dabei? Unschikliches liebet ein Gott nicht,
Ihn zu fassen, ist fast unsere Freude zu klein.
Schweigen müssen wir oft; es fehlen heilige Nahmen,
Herzen schlagen und doch bleibt die Rede zurück?

Will I name the High? A god does not like the unseemly.
To grasp him our joy is almost too small.
Often we must remain silent. They are lacking, the sacred names.
Hearts beat, and yet discourse remains behind?¹⁵³

It is ‘unseemly’ to name the god; therefore, silence is to be preferred. But again, how to speak this silence, and what role does the poet have? Says Hölderlin:

Aber weil so nahe sie sind die gegenwartige Götter
Muss ich seyn, als wäre sie fern, und dunkel in Wolken
Muss ihr Name mir seyn, nur ehe der Morgen
Aufglantz, ehe das Leben in Mittag glühet
Nenn’ ich stille sie mir, damit der Dichter das seine
Habe, wenn aber hinab das himmlische Licht geht
Denk’ ich das vergangenem gern, und sage—blühet indess.

But since they are so close, the present gods,
I must be as though they were far away and obscure in the clouds
Must to myself be their name; only, before the morning
Dawns, before life blazes up in noon
I will name them silently to myself, so that the poet has his part,
But when / if the celestial light goes down
I willingly have that light of the past in mind, and say—flower nonetheless.¹⁵⁴

¹⁵¹ As quoted in Timothy Clark’s *Martin Heidegger* (London: Routledge, 2002), pp. 98.

¹⁵² Heidegger, *PLT*, p. 96. Elsewhere Heidegger says that “we never know a mystery by unveiling or analysing it to death, but only in such a way that we preserve the mystery *as* mystery.” As cited by Timothy Clark in *Martin Heidegger*, p.119.

¹⁵³ As cited by Froment-Meurice, p. 89. Translated into English by Jan Plug.

¹⁵⁴ *Ibid*, pp. 95-96.

“I will name them silently to myself, *so that the poet has his part*”. This is what Heidegger say poets are for: they take part in naming the gods ‘silently’, while at the same time letting the gods ‘be’ in silence. They take part in naming the gods not with the view to ‘capture’ them in words but with the intent to let them ‘be’, to let them ‘presence’ through language.

“In the name of the sacred, in the name of sacred necessity,” writes Marc Froment-Meurice,

naming is an utter necessity, but naming in silence. Naming is necessary, and yet “they are lacking, the sacred names.” Or should we say that the name is necessary *because* it causes a lack or failure. A name, even a sacred one, will always only be a name, not the sacred itself. Unless [*Sauf*]—it is saved [*sauf*], passed over in silence, a silence that, even more than any name, would witness the ‘lot’ of the poet.¹⁵⁵

“Naming in silence” requires that the poet makes certain not to transgress the unsayableness of _____. What is unsayable must remain unspoken in the poem. But how is it possible for the poet to name that which resists all naming without transgressing?

The vocation of the poet is to ‘listen’ _____ into ‘being’. There is involved a calling and a listening that opens up a space for _____ to presence. _____ calls to the poet for its secret to be shown; it does *not* call for its secret to be ‘told’, as in a revealing of what the secret *is*. For there can be no ‘telling’ of what is unknown and unknowable, but there can be a ‘showing’ of the secret.¹⁵⁶ Insofar as poetry *shows* the secret while *keeping* the secret, poetry allows for the silence appropriate to the ineffable to be retained. Thus, it is poetry that speaks the

¹⁵⁵ Ibid, p.96. See also John Caputo’s “Apostles of the Impossible: On God and the Gift in Derrida and Marion” in *God, the Gift and Postmodernism*, pp. 185-ff.

¹⁵⁶ Says Heidegger in “The Way to Language”: “The saying is a showing.... It lets what is coming to presence shine forth, lets what is withdrawing into absence vanish.... It liberates what comes to presence to its particular presencing, spirits away what is withdrawing into absence to its particular kind of absence.” Martin Heidegger, *Basic Writings: Martin Heidegger*, edited by David Farrell Krell (London: Routledge, 1993), pp.413-414.

silence; it is poetry that 'shows' the secret while keeping the secret.¹⁵⁷ That is, poetry allows ('lets be', *Gelassenheit*) that which cannot be spoken to remain unspoken. Poetic naming, what Froment-Meurice calls "naming in silence", then, liberates _____ by harkening to its call and letting it presence.

The poet avoids transgressing by 'letting be', *Gelassenheit*—by letting _____ be _____. We recall that Eckhart uses this term *Gelassenheit* in "On Detachment" when he speaks of the "true man" who "lets God be God". For Eckhart *Gelassenheit* is "concerned with getting rid of self-seeking" and, "giving oneself over to the 'divine will'."¹⁵⁸ The root of the word, *lassen*, means to "let go, relinquish, to abandon," and for Eckhart this means that the "soul in *Gelassenheit* must relinquish everything which would impede God's advent into the soul."¹⁵⁹ But this is not the only meaning of *lassen*. The root '*lassen*' can also mean to "'let' or 'permit,' and so it suggests openness and receptivity."¹⁶⁰ (We recall Eckhart's analogy of the wax tablet.) This means for Eckhart that "the soul which has left behind all the obstacles to the birth of God can at the same time permit or let the Father bear his Son there."¹⁶¹ Thus, the "first moment is negative—to relinquish creatures—and the second is positive—to permit the Son's birth." By

¹⁵⁷ Says Froment-Meurice, "The poem springs forth from the call to speak what demands *and* refuses language", p. 18. And in the last chapter, "Farewell", he concludes: "Thus saying is a reserve in a double sense: a prohibition (to unveil the 'secret' of disclosing) and at the same time the resource that keeps the same secret in its a-phasic purity, a secret for which there is no place to be said and whose saying will not take place. The secret must [faut] not be said because this saying fails [faut], if I may say so. But we will only be able to fail the word and thus betray the word's lack, like its already exposed secret, as the most manifest, manifestness itself, Being. *Being is the name of the secret, as the name is the Being of the secret.* And the secret is nothing other than the name of Being, a name all the more secret for saying nothing, nothing other than what must be (secret) and fails Being (the Secret)," p. 233. Also, see Timothy Clark who says, "The poetic...is language which manifests itself partly as a secret, namely, as that which legibly makes known that something is hidden, withdrawn, unsaid, without directly revealing anything but the reserve of secrecy." In Clark's *Martin Heidegger*, pp. 117-118.

¹⁵⁸ Caputo, *The Mystical Element*, pp. 180-181.

¹⁵⁹ Ibid, p. 119.

¹⁶⁰ Ibid.

¹⁶¹ Ibid.

this we can see how it is that “the birth of the Son is in some way the work, or better the ‘co-work,’ of the soul itself.”¹⁶²

Heidegger, seeing the possibilities inherent in this idea for his own work, appropriates Eckhart’s term and uses it in relation to the poet who by ‘letting be’ ‘allows’ the presencing of that which is an absence. This dual definition of *Gelassenheit* appeals to Heidegger because it allows for ‘mortals’ like Hölderlin to play a role in the ‘presencing’ of _____. Poets are not merely passive receptors, conduits through which _____ speaks; that is, they are not merely scribes taking dictation. Rather, they listen to the bidding of _____ and, harkening to its call, they open up the space for it to come to presence. Poets, then, ‘allow’ for the presencing of _____, that is, they both ‘let be’ and ‘permit’ its showing.

But how does the poet permit such presencing?

The poet permits presencing by naming that which calls and thereby providing it with limits or boundaries that allow it to make an appearance. For naming “liberates the thing inasmuch as it at the same time redresses it in a skin with which the thing can make a body in order to have figure, countenance, allure, dress.”¹⁶³ Poetic naming provides the limits that enable appearance. This can happen because limits not only restrict but they also make space for something to be. The limit is “not that at which something stops but [...] that from which something *begins its presencing*.”¹⁶⁴ Of this, Edward Casey comments in *The Fate of Place*,

¹⁶² Ibid, p. 173. Thus, says Caputo, “Eckhart unwittingly fathered the long tradition of God’s ‘need’ of man”, p. 181.

¹⁶³ Froment-Meurice, p. 21.

¹⁶⁴ Heidegger, “Building Dwelling Thinking”, *PLT*, p. 154.

Within a limit, room is made—and thus place. To lack limit is to lack place, and conversely: not to be in place is to be unlimited. A limit is a positive power within which place is made.¹⁶⁴

It is language that sets out limits thereby creating a dwelling place. It is language that ‘builds’ the dwelling in which _____ can dwell and come to appearance.

Heidegger insists that “language alone brings what is, as something that is, into the Open for the first time.”

Where there is no language, as in the being of stone, plant, and animal, there is also no openness of what is, and consequently no openness either of that which is not and of the empty.

Language, by naming beings for the first time, first brings beings to word and to appearance. Only this naming nominates beings to their being from out of their being. Such saying is a projecting of the clearing, in which announcement is made of what it is that beings come into the Open *as*.¹⁶⁵

Thus, by naming, language brings something to appearance *for the first time*. This is to say that language brings something *new* into existence. It does not merely re-name (as in the so-called process of ‘de-familiarisation’); rather, it brings into being a new thing, a new thing that has no previous existence.

We are getting very close now to making our main point in this chapter, the point with which we began: the poem as a thing in itself. And, as we get close to making our point, it may seem that we are a long way from Stevens; in fact, it may seem that we are a long way *ahead* of Stevens. But in some ways, we are only just catching up with him. Before we go on to show how it is that the poem becomes a “self-sufficient presence”, or in Stevens’ words, “not ideas about the thing but the thing itself,” there are some other ideas central to both Heidegger’s project and Stevens’ poetics that we must consider.

¹⁶⁴ Edward Casey, *The Fate of Place: A Philosophical History* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), p. 262.

¹⁶⁵ *PLT*, p. 73.

We have said that poetic naming, that is, “naming in silence”, requires that the poet not transgress or violate _____ but ‘allow’ it ‘to be’, in both senses of the word *Gelassenheit*. And we have said that the way the poet avoids transgressing is by harkening to its call. But the question we have yet to deal with is how is it that _____ calls? What does _____ call? And how do poets recognise this call?

The answer is, the calling is silence. Silence is what the poet hears and makes present by providing it a dwelling place in language. Thus, “naming in silence” is naming this silence. For Heidegger, what defines a poet is his or her ability to hear this silence and to speak it. For most people the voice of silence cannot be heard, not because they do not have the potential for hearing it, but because the way that they live drowns out this silence. Caught up in the hustle and bustle of everyday life, they do not pause to listen. They live a noisy existence in (what Heidegger calls) ‘inauthenticity’, concerning themselves with idle talk and unimportant pursuits, and worrying about how they ‘fit in’ with others. Living inauthentically, they have forgotten the most important thing that allows them to hear the silence. That is, they have forgotten the question of their own existence and their own potentiality for non-being. Put simply, they have forgotten *death*. Poets, however, are those who live ‘authentically’ by living toward death. Of course, they cannot live every moment of every day remembering death; they cannot sustain this question of their own potentiality for non-existence over long periods; however, poets do from time to time dare to ask this existential question, thereby opening themselves up to the possibility of their own non-existence, a possibility that creates anxiety. Poets are those mortals who “dwell in the

nearness of death,”¹⁶⁷ who remember their own mortality, and who tremble in anxiety in the face of the possibility of their own non-being.

Thus, there is an uncertainty and instability in living ‘authentically’, that is, in living toward death. Says Heidegger, it is an “altogether unsettling experience” this “hovering” in potentiality “where there is nothing to hold onto.”¹⁶⁸ Any sense of groundedness gives way exposing one to the nothing, and consequently, leaving one feeling anxious and ill at ease. This anxiety that is experienced in the face of the nothing might be described as “a kind of ontological queasiness that creeps up” on a person whenever he or she comes “close to understanding the inherent instability” of existence.¹⁶⁹

Although living authentically is unsettling, uncertain, and anxiety-ridden, Heidegger claims that there is freedom in ‘authenticity’. Released from stagnating certainties and false assurances, the one who lives in authenticity is free ‘to be’ (*Gelassenheit*), or in Stevens’ words free “to be in the difficulty of what it is to be”. In living authentically everything is possible, uncertain, indefinite, incomplete. For the individual who lives toward death, “her future is not already mapped out, tending towards an end: ‘The incessant becoming generates the uncertainty of earthly life, where everything is uncertain.’”¹⁷⁰ And to live in the uncertainty of being-toward-death is to experience life as a constant state of ‘becoming’, where nothing is fixed or finished. Writes Caputo, living authentically

consists in keeping alive that indefiniteness, that possible-who-knows-when, maybe-soon, maybe-now, that sense of walking on thin ice, without assurance, keeping the play in play, keeping the exposure to the abyss in play, without

¹⁶⁷ Heidegger as quoted by Caputo in *Radical Hermeneutics*, p. 201.

¹⁶⁸ Heidegger, *Basic Works*, p. 101.

¹⁶⁹ Jonathan Rée, *Heidegger* (New York: Routledge, 1999), p. 27.

¹⁷⁰ Michael Weston citing Kierkegaard in *Kierkegaard and Modern Continental Philosophy: An Introduction* (London: Routledge, 1994), p. 31.

arresting and tranquilizing it. Being-toward-death means staying open to the possible just insofar as it is a possible; it means staying in motion.¹⁷¹

Living toward death keeps everything in motion: “The way to keep the play in play is to keep death in play, to keep mortality, to keep the movement toward death in motion (‘to cultivate death as possibility’).”¹⁷² In living toward death, the ground gives way exposing the individual to the flux and flow where there is nothing to hold onto. All is in motion; all is possibility. One’s feet do not touch the ground because there is no ‘ground’. It is like Stevens’ ‘freed man’, “being without description” in a landscape “without a doctrine”—both liberating and terrifying at the same time.

Gelassenheit, for Heidegger, “goes hand in hand with anxiety.”¹⁷³ In *Gelassenheit* one is freed from any sense of being grounded, a freedom that is awe-inspiring—as awe consists of a combination of elation and terror. Furthermore, *Gelassenheit* as we recall has a dual effect. It brings freedom both to _____ and to the one who suppresses the desire to possess _____. Thus, there is a two-way releasing in *Gelassenheit*; as the poet ‘lets be’ and ‘permits’ the presencing of _____, so too is he ‘let be’ or ‘released’. In *Gelassenheit*, then, there is a relationship between mortals and _____. But the question is, what is the nature of this relationship?

Heidegger claims that there is an originary relationship between beings and _____ and that this relationship is exposed whenever beings forego the desire to hold onto _____ and live authentically in existential uncertainty. When human beings release their grip on _____ and “hover in anxiety” the question of their own existence is loosened. This is to say that in freeing _____, they themselves

¹⁷¹ Caputo, *Radical Hermeneutics*, p. 199.

¹⁷² Ibid, p. 201.

are freed. But how is this so? How is it that beings are released when they release ____? And why should human beings concern themselves with the letting be of ____ in the first place? For example, why should Meister Eckhart be concerned with letting ____ be ____? How is it that he even intuits the need to let ____ be ____?

Heidegger tells us that human beings are concerned with the 'letting be' or 'releasement' of ____ precisely because they are concerned (albeit unwittingly) with the 'letting be' or 'releasement' of themselves. Human beings, then, care about ____ because they care about their own being. Thus beings concern themselves with the 'releasement' of ____ because it means the releasement of beings themselves *to* themselves. That is to say, beings themselves turn out to be what is 'released' in the 'releasement' of _____. Furthermore, human beings become most concerned with their being when they are faced with the potentiality of their own non-existence—when they are faced with the possibility of their own death. Therefore care or concern (*Sorge*) for ____ is heightened when mortals, in living authentically, come face to face with their own mortality. Human beings, says Heidegger, belong to ____, and because they belong to ____ they have concern for it. ____ does not stand wholly outside of or apart from beings, because if it did then human beings would not have any relationship to it. It is only because humans are related to ____, because they belong to it in some way, that they know to listen for ____'s bidding.

Yet, in spite of the fact that human beings stand in relation to ____, ____ remains a mystery; it remains hidden. So what is this relationship then? How is it

¹⁷³ Caputo, *The Mystical Element*, p. 247.

possible for beings to have a relationship with that which is hidden, that which calls in silence?

According to Heidegger, beings exist *as* a hermeneutic relationship to _____.¹⁷⁴ Like Hermes, the messenger of the gods, they act as the receivers of _____'s message. But they do not only receive; they also 'set forth' the message in language. As we have already said, everyone has the potential for receiving this message, for hearing this call, which is the call of silence, but only those who are listening, only those 'poets' who live in authenticity are open to receiving it and letting it 'be' in language.

Now, all this is very interesting, we might think, but what does it have to do with poetics and with the poem as a self-sufficient presence?

Briefly stated, *the poet lets poetry happen*. Insofar as the poet 'lets be' and 'permits' _____ to be present in poetry, she does not have ownership of the work. Rather, in harkening to the call of _____, she allows the self-disclosure of _____. This is not to say that the poet is passive, operating merely as some kind of scribe who has no role in the happening of the poem. Nor is it to say that poetry happens without struggle, without effort. The 'setting forth' of the message requires enormous effort on the part of the poet. Nevertheless, she does not own this work that she 'sets forth'; nor should she desire to be in possession of it. After all, her task is to free _____ not to capture or possess _____. For the poet frees _____, by opening up that space which 'allows' it 'to be'; and in allowing it to be she respects its independence.

As we have just said, the 'letting happen' of poetry is not accomplished without struggle on the part of the poet. But we must be clear what we mean here

¹⁷⁴ Says Caputo, "Man is to be understood as a hermeneutic relationship to the message that is sent his way," in *Radical Hermeneutics*, p. 104.

by struggle. First, we recall that according to Heidegger the poet must be living authentically, that is, living with the anxiety of the potential for non-being in order to be able to hear the silence that calls. This in itself constitutes a struggle, the struggle to submit oneself willingly to the abyss, to allow oneself to be held out into the open of existential uncertainty. This is the first thing that the poet must struggle with. The second, related, struggle involves the poet's efforts to let go and let be the emerging poem. Thus, the struggle for the poet is the struggle to overcome her desire to grasp, take hold of, or to force the emergence of the poem. The effort required on the part of the poet, then, is not the effort to beat the poem into submission or to form poetry through violent means. It is the poet's wrestling with herself to force herself to let go of her desire to master the emerging poem. Therefore the enormous effort required on the side of the poet is the effort to submit to, rather than lord over, the happening of poetry.

Poetry, says Heidegger, *happens*, and in the happening of poetry a new thing is born, a new thing that is not dependent upon anything else. And this new thing, the poem, is not *about* something; it is not even about the relationship between beings and _____. It emerges out of this relationship, but it is not *about* it. The poem is *about* nothing; it *means* nothing. Commenting on "The Origin of the Work of Art", Marc Froment-Meurice says,

the first thing Heidegger establishes concerning the work is that it *means nothing*. It means nothing else, and in this sense it is not an allegory, a symbol, or a sign that would refer to an external signified.¹⁷⁵

The poem is not an idea about a thing, but a thing in itself; for the poem "brings into existence something new that needs to be understood only on its own terms:"

¹⁷⁵ Froment-Meurice, p. 152.

The truth that discloses itself in the work can never be proved or derived from what went before. What went before is refuted in its exclusive reality by the work.¹⁷⁶

Thus, Heidegger rejects the traditional notions of poetry (and art generally) as a reflection of something outside or external to the work. Explains Clark, “The true work of art does not simply take things or objects already in existence and then re-present them, as in the tired old view of art as a sort of ‘reflection’ of reality or society.”¹⁷⁷ Rather, poetry for Heidegger is a self-sufficient presence that *occurs* when beings let it happen.

Now, what happens in the happening of poetry, and what can we say, if anything, about this new thing that had no previous existence? Heidegger says that in the happening of poetry, truth happens. The happening of poetry is, in fact, the happening of truth. Moreover, the very nature of poetry for Heidegger is truth “setting itself to work.”¹⁷⁸

Truth, as the clearing and concealing of what is, happens in being composed, as a poet composes a poem. *All art*, as the letting happen of the advent of the truth of what is, is, as such, *essentially poetry*. The nature of art, on which both the art work and the artist depend, is the setting-itself-into-work of truth.¹⁷⁹

This truth that happens in the very act of composition both reveals and conceals at the same time. It shows the secret while allowing the secret to remain secret.

Again, we consider the role of the poet in this happening of poetry, which is equally the happening of truth, and how the poet must struggle to submit himself both to the anxiety of the potential for non-being and to the emergence of the poem. Says Heidegger,

¹⁷⁶ Timothy Clark citing Heidegger, in *Martin Heidegger*, p. 101.

¹⁷⁷ Ibid, p. 103.

¹⁷⁸ Heidegger, *PLT*, p.36.

¹⁷⁹ Ibid, p. 72.

Truth establishes itself as a strife within a being that is to be brought forth only in such a way that the conflict opens up in this being, that is, this being is itself brought into the rift-design.... Truth establishes itself in a being in such a way, indeed, that this being itself occupies the Open of truth. This occupying, however, can happen only if what is to be brought forth, the rift, entrusts itself to the self-secluding factor that juts up in the Open. The rift must set itself back into the heavy weight of stone, the dumb hardness of wood, the dark glow of colors. As the earth takes the rift back into itself, the rift is first set forth into the Open and thus placed, that is, set, within that which towers up into the Open as self-closing and sheltering.¹⁸⁰

Thus, the happening of truth is directly related to the strife experienced by the poet who struggles to let be, and in struggling to *let be*, allows for (*Gelassenheit*) the emergence of truth. This is to say that the happening of truth is dependent on the struggle and strife of beings to face up to the possibility of their own non-existence.

Since we have progressed throughout this chapter by way of posing questions and then answering them, it seems natural at this point to ask the question, What is truth?, or at least, What does Heidegger mean here by truth? But for the present moment we will suspend any investigation of the word 'truth' and instead, in the next chapter, return to Stevens who has until this point been kept very much in the background of our discussion of the poetics of *Gelassenheit* and the idea of the poem as a thing in itself. So putting aside for now thoughts on the 'happening of truth', we turn to look at Stevens alongside of Heidegger and consider how the ideas in this chapter might be related to his poetics.

¹⁸⁰ Ibid, pp.63-64.

Chapter Six: Poets in a “Destitute Time”

“...and what are poets for in a destitute time?”

Hölderlin, as cited by Heidegger

“What, then, is the nature of poetry in a time of disbelief?”

Stevens, “Two or Three Ideas” (OP 263)

“Being is a poem and even THE initial poem.”

Marc Froment-Meurice¹⁸¹

From a historical standpoint it is worth pointing out that there is no indication that Stevens had first hand knowledge of Heidegger’s work, though he was certainly aware of his growing reputation on the Continent, mentioning Heidegger in a letter to a friend and erroneously referring to him as a “Swiss philosopher” (L 758).¹⁸² Although we can find no direct connection between Stevens and Heidegger it is possible to discern indirect connections, first through their common literary forefathers, especially Nietzsche and Hölderlin, and second through their shared experience of living in the first half of the twentieth century, an age characterised by increasing ‘secularisation’ and the anxiety that accompanied the move away from organised religion and grounding theologies. For our purposes here we will consider Stevens and Heidegger together by looking at two essays, Heidegger’s “What Are Poets For?” and Stevens’ “Two or Three Ideas”, essays that reflect the influence of Hölderlin (and perhaps Nietzsche, to a lesser extent) and the anxiety of the “age of disbelief”.

¹⁸¹ Froment-Meurice, p. 177.

¹⁸² In a letter to Paule Vidal, Stevens writes: “Heidegger, the Swiss philosopher, has written a little work dealing with the poetry of the German poet, Hölderlin.” Stevens asked Vidal, who was planning a trip to the Continent, to bring him back a copy of the book. It is unclear whether or not he ever received it.

Heidegger begins his essay with a question from Hölderlin: "...and what are poets for in a destitute time?"¹⁸³ He takes as his starting point this destitution of the times, which, he says, began with the "appearance and sacrificial death of Christ", marking "the beginning of the end of the day of the gods."¹⁸⁴ The age is destitute because it has witnessed the withdrawal of God and the gods. It is, says Heidegger echoing Hölderlin, an age when the One God and the many gods have fled causing "the divine radiance" to "become extinguished". "Ever since the 'united three'—Herakles, Dinoyosos, and Christ—have left the world, the evening of the world's night is spreading like darkness."¹⁸⁵ In this age of the "world's night", the God and the gods have defaulted; they have failed to appear, and because "of this default, there fails to appear for the world the ground that grounds it."¹⁸⁶ Thus, the God and the gods have fled and in their absence the ground that they offered has disappeared exposing humankind to the abyss.

Stevens echoes this proclamation of the disappearance of the gods in "Two or Three Ideas". Like Heidegger and Hölderlin, he speaks of the gods in the plural, "both ancient and modern, both foreign and domestic" (OP 259), believing that "The death of one god is the death of all" (CP 381). Those noble gods that once were emblazoned with "divine radiance" have been all but forgotten, claims Stevens, and their gradual disappearance from the collective memory of humanity is something to be taken seriously: "To speak of the origin and end of gods is not a light matter. It is to speak of the origin and end of eras of human belief" (OP 259). Although the disappearance of the gods may not be a light matter, Stevens

¹⁸³ Ibid, p. 91.

¹⁸⁴ Ibid.

¹⁸⁵ Ibid.

¹⁸⁶ Ibid, p. 92.

does not seem to lament their dissolution; in fact, he is noticeably dispassionate in reporting their passing:

To see the gods dispelled in mid-air and dissolve like clouds is one of the great human experiences. It is not as if they had gone over the horizon to disappear for a time; nor as if they had been overcome by other gods of greater power and profounder knowledge. It is simply that they came to nothing. (OP 260)

He continues:

Since we have always shared all things with them and have always had a part of their strength and, certainly, all of their knowledge, we shared likewise this experience of annihilation. It was their annihilation, not ours, and yet it left us feeling that in a measure we, too, had been annihilated. It left us feeling dispossessed and alone in a solitude, like children without parents, in a home that seemed deserted, in which the amical rooms and halls had taken on a look of hardness and emptiness.

The experience of humanity's feeling of mutual annihilation is placed firmly in the past here. The time for grieving, for feeling lost and dispossessed is over.

What was most extraordinary is that [the gods] left no mementoes behind, no thrones, no mystic rings, no texts either of the soil or of the soul. It was as if they had never inhabited the earth. There was no crying out for their return.

Neither Stevens nor Heidegger laments the passing of the ancient gods or the death of that One God in whom they were brought up to believe. Nor does either of them perceive the gap left in their absence as something to be abhorred. It is an uncertain time, even an anxious time, but both men recognise that it is precisely the uncertainty and anxiety that allows for possibility. For, although it may be an age of darkness and of destitution without these gods that once brought comfort and security, it is also a time of waiting, of expectation, and of advent. It is also a time of hope but a hope that is indeterminate. For it cannot be said what is hoped for. It *must* not be said what is hoped for. There is hope but not a named hope, not a hope *for* something. There is only hope and expectation but not a hope *of* this or that or an expectation of anything in particular. Hoping *for* something cuts

off possibility; it makes it impossible to hear the voice of silence that calls to the would-be poet.

In “What Are Poets For?” Heidegger says that it is for such a time as this that poets are needed. For it is up to the poet to face the abyss left in the wake of the disappearance of the gods, to look into it, to turn toward it, to reach into it and not shy away from it.

In the age of the world’s night, the abyss of the world must be experienced and endured. But for this it is necessary that there be those who reach into the abyss.¹⁸⁷

It is a necessary part of the poet’s nature that, before he can be truly a poet in such an age, the time’s destitution must have made the whole being and vocation of the poet a poetic question for him. Hence ‘poets in a destitute time’ must especially gather in poetry the nature of poetry.¹⁸⁸

In this age of the world’s night, the gods have failed and fled, and it is up to the poet to turn toward the abyss, to accept the anxiety and uncertainty of living without a ground. It is the poet’s vocation to reach into the nothing of the abyss and not succumb to the temptation to turn back in nostalgia to the gods whose time has come and gone. Timothy Clark comments, “Any sense of the sacred can no longer look to old gods to be sustained. It is the duty of the poet not to evade this disenchantment.”¹⁸⁹ The world’s night is to be endured, and the gap that has been exposed in the absence of the gods must be allowed to remain open. The poet must not attempt to cover up this space with false idols. “To genuinely hold open the space of the sacred we must think through and endure its current emptiness and destitution, and not be hasty to fill it unthinkingly with gods which could only be idols, bogus alternatives.”¹⁹⁰

¹⁸⁷ Ibid, p. 92.

¹⁸⁸ Ibid, p. 94.

¹⁸⁹ Clark, *Martin Heidegger*, p. 110-111.

¹⁹⁰ Ibid, p.111.

In his poem “Germania”, Hölderlin asserts the need to hold open this space, to endure the abyss, without looking backwards to the safety and security of the gods of a bygone era. He rejects any invocation “to the muses or to the classical gods, in homage or for inspiration”¹⁹¹ and opens the poem with what might be described as a negative invocation:

Not them, the blessed, who once appeared,
Those images of gods in the ancient land,
Them, it is true, I may not now invoke...¹⁹²

Clark comments on these brief lines:

Yet, this renunciation of invoking is not a simple rejection or dismissal of the gods. It arises from a sense of painful necessity: who can invoke the dead? It does not mean there is no desire for such an invocation. The poem opens itself in the space of an invocation that is longed for but must now be renounced (‘I’m afraid, for deadly / And scarcely permitted it is to awaken the dead’). So in effect, the non-invocation is formally still a kind of invocation: that is, it remains something whereby the poem opens itself to the space of ‘the gods’, but it does so in a way that bears out how that phrase now stands for a lack only, a cipher marking an empty space that might one day be filled but which for the present can only be kept open, safeguarded from obliteration.... We are torn, writes Heidegger, between ‘the open welcome of readiness’ and ‘the absence of fulfillment.’ What is invoked in not being invoked can have no name in this ‘godless’ time. It is simply ‘the invoked’ or ‘the awaited’ (*das Erharrte*).¹⁹³

Hölderlin invokes with a non-invocation. He does not name what is invoked. What is invoked is nothing, nothing that can be named. His invocation is not an invoking of something; it is, rather, a kind of revocation, that is, a revoking or invalidating of those gods that he knows belong to a bygone era—those tired, worn-out, hackneyed gods that at times he still catches himself yearning after. Of the (non)invocation of Hölderlin’s “Germania”, Timothy Clark says,

If this were in the conventional language of statements, then Hölderlin would merely be declaring the classical gods to be non-existent. In fact, it is an action whose effect is to open and hold open a space—that of the absence of

¹⁹¹ Ibid, p. 110.

¹⁹² from Hölderlin’s “Germania” as cited by Timothy Clark in *Martin Heidegger*, p. 110.

¹⁹³ Clark, *Martin Heidegger*, p.110.

the gods—in which the poem will unfold. As Heidegger writes in ‘The Letter on Humanism’ that ‘If the human being is to find his way once again into the nearness of being, he must learn to exist in the nameless.’

This reference to humanism brings us back to Stevens’ “Two or Three Ideas”, which appears to take a ‘humanistic’ turn after his dispassionate account of the dissolution of the gods. Stevens’ language here is quite different from that of both Heidegger and Hölderlin; nevertheless, he is not so far apart from either of them. We pick up Stevens in mid-stream:

when the gods have come to an end, when we think of them as the aesthetic projections of a time that has passed, men turn to a fundamental glory of their own and from that create a style of bearing themselves in reality. (OP 262)

In this passage, and indeed throughout most of this essay, Stevens comes across as having great confidence in the ability of men [sic] to recreate for themselves new gods in the wake of the annihilation of the ancient gods, those “aesthetic projections of a time that has passed”. Again, we hear the confidence in the human:

In an age of disbelief, or, what is the same thing, in a time that is largely humanistic, in one sense of another, it is for the poet to supply the satisfactions of belief, in his measure and in his style. (OP 260)

Stevens’ ideas regarding the role of the poet appear to be very different from those set forth in “What Are Poets For?” Just what does Stevens mean by asserting that “in an age of disbelief” it is up to the poet “to supply the satisfactions of belief”? Is this not in direct contrast to what Heidegger is saying? Would not such created ‘satisfactions’ be mere idols, gods created in the image of man to soothe the anxiety of the modern age? How different Stevens’ words sound from those of Heidegger / Hölderlin:

‘...and what are poets for in a destitute time?’

Hölderlin shyly puts the answer into the mouth of his poet-friend Heinse, whom he address in the elegy:

‘But they are, you say, like the wine-god’s holy priests,
Who fared from land to land in holy night.’

Poets are mortals who, singing earnestly of the wine-god, sense the trace of the fugitive gods, stay on the gods’ tracks, and so trace for their kindred mortals the way toward the turning. The ether, however, in which alone the gods are gods, is their godhead. The element of this ether, that within which even the godhead itself is still present, is the holy. The element of the ether for the coming of the fugitive gods, the holy, is the track of the fugitive gods. But who has the power to sense, to trace such a track? Traces are often inconspicuous, and are always the legacy of a directive that is barely divined. To be a poet in a destitute time means: to attend, singing, to the trace of the fugitive gods. This is why the poet in the time of the world’s night utters the holy. This is why, in Hölderlin’s language, the world’s night is the holy night.

It is a necessary part of the poet’s nature that, *before he can be truly a poet in such an age, the time’s destitution must have made the whole being and vocation of the poet a poetic question for him. Hence ‘poets in a destitute time’ must especially gather in poetry the nature of poetry.* Where that happens we may assume poets to exist who are on the way to the destiny of the world’s age. We others must learn to listen to what these poets say—assuming that, in regard to the time that conceals Being because it shelters it, we do not deceive ourselves through reckoning time merely in terms of that which is by dissecting that which is.¹⁹⁴

What are we to make of this? Heidegger’s own poetic musings on poetry and the nature of the poet make it difficult to say anything about this passage without feeling as though we are being intrusive. Nevertheless, we will risk engaging with this most ethereal of Heidegger’s passages and endeavour to tread lightly.

Heidegger’s use of the word ‘godhead’ is reminiscent of Meister Eckhart’s ‘Godhead’ which may be understood as ‘the nothing’. In the passage above, the “godhead” is the “ether” “in which alone the gods are gods” and it is to this ether, this abysmal nothing that the poet turns in a destitute time. In fact, the poet is not truly able to turn himself toward this nothing until “the time’s destitution” has “made the whole being and vocation of the poet a poetic question for him.” That is to say, the poet must be confronted by, or rather willingly expose himself to, the

groundlessness, the nothingness, for the question (of Being) to be just that, a question. Furthermore, the poet is true to his calling when he dwells within this question, this question that is exposed by the destitution of the times. The poet, by dwelling in the question in the face of the abyss, “utters the holy”.

But how does this relate to Stevens who says that in “an age of disbelief” “it is for the poet to supply the satisfactions of belief”?

To begin with, both Stevens and Heidegger agree that this “age of the world’s night” / “age of disbelief” is a time for poets. When the gods have failed and fled it is up to poets ‘to make’, *poesis*, in the wake of their departure. But, we might ask, does Stevens meet Heidegger’s criteria for a true poet, that is, one who submits himself to the destitution of the time so that his “whole being and vocation” becomes “a poetic question for him”? And what are we to make of Heidegger’s statement that “poets in a destitute time” must “gather in poetry the nature of poetry”? What does it mean to “gather in poetry the nature of poetry”?

We will address this last question first.

According to Heidegger, Hölderlin’s is a “poetry of poetry” and his distinctiveness is “his whole poetic mission”, this mission being “to make poems solely out of the essence of poetry”.¹⁹⁴ Of this Timothy Clark explains,

He means by this not some vague notion of poetry which is about itself, becoming a sort of criticism, but poetry engaged explicitly with the very kind of disclosive power described in ‘The Origin of the Work of Art’, in other words with its power of revealing deep history (*Geschichte*), those most basic and unthought modes of being which are normally too close, or too obvious, for us to see. For instance, one of the most immediately powerful and unusually celebratory of Hölderlin’s poems is ‘Homecoming’ (1802). Here the poem concerns the occasion of the poet’s return home, to his native land, travelling across a lake to a small southern German town shadowed by the Alps. ‘All seems familiar, even the hurried greetings / Seem those of friends,

¹⁹³ Heidegger, *PLT*, p.93-94. Emphases added.

¹⁹⁴ Clark citing Heidegger in *Martin Heidegger*, p. 107. For an indepth discussion of Holderlin and “the essence of poetry”, see chapter four of David Halliburton’s *Poetic Thinking: An Approach to Heidegger* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1981).

every face seems a kindred one'. Everything, in the homecoming, is familiar but estranged by being seen anew, newly realized in its specific nature in a way imperceptible to a daily inhabitant who has never left and to whom all is unproblematically ordinary. To bring the familiar nearer by perceiving at a new distance, to cherish what we recognize by acknowledging the resistance of its otherness, this is the force of the poetic which Heidegger celebrates in this, one of Hölderlin's happiest texts.¹⁹⁶

Clark goes on to say, "Hölderlin turns poetic language back upon its own founding power—his mission is to disclose and affirm this power of sacred disclosure, to poetize poetizing, or to bring the power of language itself to word." Still we are unclear. What does it mean to turn "poetic language back upon its own founding power"? What is this so-called founding power of language? And what does Clark mean by saying in the above passage that Hölderlin acknowledges "the resistance of its otherness"? We venture an answer: it would seem that the founding power of language that Hölderlin poetizes is _____, that which, as we said, resists all names and can only be 'shown' in the silence of poetry. If Hölderlin can be said to "gather in poetry the nature of poetry" it is because his poems show the secret of _____ while keeping the secret, that is, they allow the alterity of _____ to presence while at the same time allowing it to remain other. The paradox here is that that which founds language resists language. Indeed, _____ founds language by its very resistance of language.

So what of Stevens? Can it be said of him that he "gathers in poetry the nature of poetry"? Does he allow the otherness of _____ to remain other? And does he resist the temptation to create idols in the absence of the gods like Hölderlin, continuing to wait with expectation for he knows not what? Certainly he is a very different poet from Hölderlin. Nevertheless, it is possible, even responsible, perhaps, to read Stevens as a true poet, according to Heidegger's definition, who

¹⁹⁶ Ibid, pp. 105-106.

does indeed turn toward the abyss and not away from it, who allows “the time’s destitution” to make his “whole being and vocation” “a poetic question for him.”

First, it must be said, however, that it was some time before Stevens allowed the question to remain open-ended, before he resisted the desire for closure, as he does in his later, longer poems. Some of his earlier poems, such as “Cuisine Bourgeoise” and “Of Modern Poetry” pay homage to the climate of the times, that is, the destitution of the age, but they seem to suggest a humanistic (and, perhaps, typically ‘modern’) response to what is perceived as a problem to be fixed. We take, for example, “Cuisine Bourgeoise”:

These days of disinheritance, we feast
On human heads. True, birds rebuild
Old nests and there is blue in the woods.
The church bells clap one night in the week.
But that’s all done. It is what used to be,
As they used to lie in the grass, in the heat,
Men on green beds and women half of sun.
The words are written, though not yet said.

It is like the season when, after summer,
It is summer and it is not, it is autumn
And it is not, it is day and it is not,
As if last night’s lamps continued to burn,
As if yesterday’s people continued to watch
The sky, half porcelain, preferring that
To shaking out heavy bodies in the glares
Of this present, this science, this unrecognized,

This outpost, this douce, this dumb, this dead, in which
We feast on human heads, brought in on leaves,
Crowned with the first, cold buds. On these we live,
No longer on the ancient cake of seed,
The almond and deep fruit. This bitter meat
Sustains us... Who, then, are they, seated here?
Is the table a mirror in which they sit and look?
Are they men eating reflections of themselves? (OP 227-228)

The tone of this poem regarding the disappearance of the gods is markedly different from the essay “Two or Three Ideas”. Where the essay suggests a calm acceptance of the modern condition, this poem has a pervasive feeling of

impatience and discontentment. The sustaining “bitter meat” is derived from a cannibalistic eating of the poet’s own poetic constructions that stem from a reasoning mind, meat that is believed to be devoid of the richness and goodness of “the ancient cake of seed.” The people, “yesterday’s people”, continue to keep vigil for the gods that once brought more satisfying sustenance, and there is a mild contempt directed at those who prefer to continue to watch the sky for the gods’ return rather than “shaking out heavy bodies in the glares”.

Few of Stevens’ critics have troubled to comment on “Cuisine Bourgeoise” published in the collection *Ideas of Order*, concentrating instead on another poem from the same collection, “Of Modern Poetry”. The poem begins:

The poem of the mind in the act of finding
What will suffice. It has not always had
To find: the scene was set; it repeated what
Was in the script.

Then the theatre was changed
To something else. Its past was a souvenir.

In this poem as in “Cuisine Bourgeoise”, Stevens takes as his subject the changing climate of the times. It was 1935 when *Ideas of Order* was published and the poems in this collection stand out against those of the preceding volume, *Harmonium*, published more than a decade before. In his chapter “*Ideas of Order: Compos(t)ing the romantic*”, Angus Cleghorn remarks on the volume of 1935,

Responding to the social, intellectual, and political upheaval of the thirties, Stevens reevaluated the role of the poet in society. This meant questioning the assumptions behind the spontaneous poetry in *Harmonium*. The secular philosophy in ‘Sunday Morning’ and ‘The Snow Man’ creates earthy hedons that continue to be possible throughout Stevens’ poetry.... However, the poetry of the thirties is specifically directed toward social responsibilities as they are ordered by ideas in language.... Because ‘life is the essential part of literature,’ Stevens looked at the way his life as a poet had been formed by the traditions of poetry and the customs of living.... The romantic traditions and customs that Stevens inherits are the fulcrum upon which this volume tilts.

Stevens' efforts at change depend upon discarding the past for a 'freshening of life'.¹⁹⁷

There is in *Ideas of Order* much evidence of this effort to throw off the inherited romanticism that Stevens sees as hampering his ability to be a prophet of the times. In the poem preceding "Of Modern Poetry", "Man and Bottle", Stevens proclaims, "The mind is the great poem of winter, the man, / Who, to find what will suffice, / Destroys romantic tenements / Of rose and ice..." (CP 238). Throughout these poems, he directly acknowledges that things are no longer as they were, that "the theatre" has "changed" and that poetry must change with it.¹⁹⁸ We could argue that the poems are not altogether unlike Hölderlin's negative invocation in so far as they acknowledge that to be able to say something new the poet can no longer draw upon the old. We recall Hölderlin's words: "Not them, the blessed, who once appeared, / Those images of gods in the ancient land, / Them, it is true, I may not now invoke...."

In "Of Modern Poetry", after Stevens has insisted on the need to welcome change, he meditates on the necessity for poetry to be a living thing, constantly changing in a world of perpetual change:

It has to be living, 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. It has
To construct a new stage. It has to be on that stage
And, like an insatiable actor, slowly and
With meditation, speak words that in the ear,

¹⁹⁷ Angus J. Cleghorn, *Wallace Stevens' Poetics: The Neglected Rhetoric* (New York: Palgrave, 2000), pp.27-28.

¹⁹⁸ Joseph N. Riddel remarks, "'Of Modern Poetry'...would appear not to be what many critics presume, an explicit commentary on modern poetry, but a celebration of poetry which realizes and satisfies the rage for order. The idea of a 'modern' poetry is an idea of poetry in our time only in the sense that our time is self-consciously discontinuous with a traditional past. Rejecting the old script, seeking for what will suffice, Stevens' meditation is dedicated to the beleaguered modern who must turn away from the providential to the hazards and beauties of the commonplace, as entertained by a common self...." In Joseph N. Riddel, *The Clairvoyant Eye: The Poetry and Poetics of Wallace Stevens* (Baton Rouge, Louisiana: Louisiana State University Press, 1965), p. 158.

In the delicatest ear of the mind, repeat,
 Exactly, that which it wants to hear, at the sound
 Of which, an invisible audience listens,
 Not to the play, but to itself, expressed
 In an emotion as of two people, as of two
 Emotions becoming one. The actor is
 A metaphysician in the dark, twanging
 An instrument, twanging a wiry string that gives
 Sounds passing through sudden rightnesses, wholly
 Containing the mind, below which it cannot descend,
 Beyond which it has no will to rise.

It must

Be the finding of a satisfaction, and may
 Be of a man skating, a woman dancing, a woman
 Combing. The poem of the act of the mind. (CP 239-240)

The lines, “it has to find what will suffice. It has / To construct a new stage”, are not indicative of what Heidegger would call a true poet; there is too much intentionality here, too much emphasis on *finding* and *constructing* rather than on *discovering*. As the poet struggles to *find* what will suffice he misses the more subtle, quiet surprises discovered by the one who waits, open to what comes his way. We could say that there lacks a spirit of ‘letting be’, a spirit of *Gelassenheit* in these poems from *Ideas of Order*.

It is to the later, longer poems that we look for a more mature Stevens, less concerned with *finding* what will *suffice* and more open to *discovering* the *possibilities* inherent in living without a grounding metaphysic. Poems such as *Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction* (1942) and *The Auroras of Autumn* (1948) suggest that the poet is more at ease with himself and with living within that question that hangs ever in the balance: “What am I to believe?” (CP 404) By these later years, Stevens’ “whole being and vocation” have indeed become “a poetic question for him,” enabling him, like Hölderlin, to “gather in poetry the nature of poetry.”

Once again, we turn to the opening of *Notes* with its rhetorical question: “And for what, except for you, do I feel love?” The “you” of the first stanza, as we have already pointed out in a previous chapter, is undefined, unnamed. Stevens is careful here to allow this subject of his affections to remain unnamed precisely because it is that which resists all naming, that which has no name, and he wishes to respect its namelessness—to let it be.

And for what, except for you, do I feel love?
Do I press the extremest book of the wisest man
Close to me, hidden in me day and night?
In the uncertain light of single, certain truth,
Equal in living changeness to the light
In which I meet you, in which we sit at rest,
For a moment in the central of our being,
The vivid transience that you bring is peace.

Nowhere in this stanza do we hear the urgency and anxiety of “Of Modern Poetry”. Stevens demonstrates that he is no longer in a hurry to “find what will suffice”; for he has discovered the joy that results in *not* finding and in not needing to find. It is, he has finally learned, enough to live within the uncertainty brought about by certain change. Everywhere in the poem there is evidence of a lack, of an absence, whether it be the lack of a referent as in the first stanza or the acknowledged absence of singular truth, singular truth being “poisonous / ...so fatal to / The truth itself...” (CP 381). The whole poem, it can be said, depends upon a lack, a lack exposed by the death of “Phoebus”, “a name for something that never could be named”.

The death of one god is the death of all.
Let purple Phoebus lie in umber harvest,
Let Phoebus slumber and die in autumn umber,

Phoebus is dead, ephebe. But Phoebus was
A name for something that never could be named.

Michael Davidson in his chapter "Wallace Stevens and Contemporary Poetics" comments at length on this poem, noting its postmodern qualities.

As a text, "Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction" (so the reading might go) proposes no strategies of closure, no consistent pattern of rhetorical figures, no mythological centers of sustaining narratives. In fact, as the opening cantos indicate, the very *lack* of such formal cultural signs inaugurates the poem: 'Phoebus is dead, ephebe. But Phoebus was / A name for something that never could be named.' The poet is thus able to step beyond the closed, spatial text of high Modernism into a more speculative, temporarily generative text whose end is not literary history but existential disclosure. As a philosophical project, the authentically Postmodern poem dis-covers (*aletheia*) or uncovers the temporal nature of Being, not by reference to some cultural cyclicity of the order of Yeats or Pound, but through its momentary, wandering interrogation. This 'endlessly elaborating poem,' as Stevens calls it, is able to work out the fullest implications of its subject by constantly exposing it to change.¹⁹⁸

Again, the entire poem is driven by lack—lack of strategies of closure, lack of narrative form, lack of consistent rhetorical figures.... Also, this poem which Davidson believes to be "authentically Postmodern" "dis-covers" (he draws upon Heidegger's term *aletheia* here to clarify) or "uncovers the temporal nature" of _____. That is, it operates by unnamings or refusing to name in any final sense that which has no name. Rather than asserting the need to 'find an order' or to nail down 'the first idea', the poem offers a "wandering interrogation", an interrogation that never comes to rest.

...As its title implies, the poem does not propose completion or closure. It is tentative, accumulative, speculative. The preposition in its title stresses the series' projective stance. Where in an earlier period Stevens might have made notes 'on' the theme of a supreme fiction, this poem may only point 'toward'.

In his tentative, speculative approach *toward* 'a supreme fiction', the poet allows for the gap to remain open. He holds open the space for the emergence of the poem, and by holding open this space, he not only allows for the emergence of the poem, but for the emergence of truth. Says Davidson,

Both subject and method are concisely embodied in the opening lines of Canto VII of the opening section:

It feels good as it is without the giant,
A thinker of the first idea. Perhaps
The truth depends on a walk around a lake,

A composing as the body tires, a stop
To see hepatica, a stop to watch
A definition growing certain and

A wait within that certainty (CP 386)

This passage described what Heidegger might call the 'forestructure' (*Vorhabe*) of Stevens' metaphysics. The truth may no longer be grounded in a first cause, a 'thinker of the first idea.' In the desultory way of the poem itself, the truth 'depends on a walk around a lake.' Stevens resists analogy; the truth is not 'like' a walk but depends upon the natural circumstance—the weather, water, hepatica to be viewed—as well as those acts of pausing, observing, and meandering by which the natural is absorbed. The definition of a supreme fiction never becomes certain; it grows toward certainty.¹⁹⁹

With these lines we are brought back to the nature of truth, a subject we abandoned at the end of the last chapter. For Stevens, like Heidegger, *truth happens*; indeed it is a happening that *occurs* in poetry.

¹⁹⁸ Michael Davidson, "Wallace Stevens and Contemporary Poetics" in *Wallace Stevens: The Poetics of Modernism*, ed. Albert Gelpi (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), p. 146. Emphasis added.

¹⁹⁹ Ibid, p. 147. Davidson also addresses the gradual change in Stevens' style: "If poetry is a destructive as well as instructive force, it is all the more so in Stevens' later work, where the pursuit of a supreme fiction is merged with an increasingly interrogative and discursive style. Whereas in the lyrics and exercises of *Harmonium* the poet wrote brilliant, often witty variations on philosophical matters, from the mid-1930s on his method was to dramatize the mind in its speculative acts. As Roy Harvey Pearce points out, the change in Stevens' later style is not a radical departure but represents a logical evolution from the problems advanced in his early lyrics. In perspectivist exercises like 'Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird' or 'Sea Surface Full of Clouds,' the thing itself—whether a jar, a landscape, or a flock of pigeons—constellates senses of order for the perceiver. Each poem illustrates the poet discovering, as does the avuncular figure in 'Le Monocle de Mon Oncle,' 'that fluttering things have so distinct a shade.' (CP 18). It was perhaps inevitable that this discovery should incur the consequences of its own relativism. No longer could Stevens continue to illustrate the 'maker's rage to order words of the sea' out of a barren reality. He had to 'be / In the difficulty of what it is to be' (CP 381)," p. 145. And regarding the long poems, he says: "Unlike their Romantic precursors ('Dejection, An Ode', 'Alastor,' 'Tintern Abbey'), Stevens' long poems do not appeal to some ultimate value (Joy, Truth, Beauty) to resolve the contrarities introduced, even though they may utilize such abstractions as polemical centers for meditation. This form of long, exploratory poem has become one of the primary models for contemporary poets in their attempt to move beyond the single, self-sufficient lyric to the 'poem of a life,'" p. 146.

At this point it seems appropriate to interrupt our discussion of *Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction* and return to our previous discussion of truth and ask what does Heidegger mean when he makes such statements as: “In the work of art the truth of an entity has set itself to work,”²⁰¹ and “In the work, the happening of truth is at work”²⁰² and also, “The work’s becoming a work is a way in which truth becomes and happens”²⁰³?

Heidegger clears the way for a discussion of the term by first addressing the difficulty in using such a commonplace word as ‘truth’:

How slight and stunted our knowledge of the nature of truth is, is shown by the laxity we permit ourselves in using this basic word. By truth is usually meant this or that particular truth. That means: something true. A cognition articulated in a proposition can be of this sort. However, we call not only a proposition true, but also a thing, true gold in contrast with sham gold. True here means genuine, real gold. What does the expression ‘real’ mean here? To us it is what is in truth. The true is what corresponds to the real, and the real is what is in truth. The circle has closed again.²⁰⁴

Heidegger wants to escape the closed circle of this idea of truth and open truth up to possibility. By adopting the Greek word *aletheia* (‘showing’ or ‘unconcealment’), he proposes another way of thinking about truth. By *aletheia*, Heidegger means ‘unconcealment’, specifically “the *unconcealment* by which all beings show themselves to be.”²⁰⁵ Thus, truth has to do with ‘self-showing’ or the way beings show themselves to be. Truth is defined as the way beings self-display.

Truth is not produced but shown; neither is truth a production, something produced, but rather a happening, an active showing-forth of the truth of an entity.

²⁰¹ Heidegger, *PLT*, p. 36.

²⁰² Ibid, p. 58.

²⁰³ Ibid, p. 60.

²⁰⁴ Ibid, p. 50.

²⁰⁵ David Farrell Krell in *Basic Writings: Martin Heidegger*, p. 18.

So...“the truth is there is no truth”, or at least not in the traditional sense.²⁰⁶ Truth is not about whether or not something is ‘real’ or ‘genuine’ as determined by some external measure; rather, truth is in the way a thing self-presents. Thinking of truth as the unconcealment of beings operates within the spirit of *Gelassenheit* insofar as beings themselves are allowed or permitted to self-display. *They are ‘let be’ to show-forth in their style.* Therefore, “what is brought into the light is not the subjectivity or personal world of the artist” nor is it “a representation of some real or ideal entity, but the truth of the being of the entity.”²⁰⁷ In Heidegger’s thinking of truth, beings are treated with a “certain reverence and respect for the mystery” of their being; they are allowed to show-forth in the work of art in such a way as to retain their mystery, their otherness.²⁰⁸ This means that in the unconcealment of beings there remains something concealed. This mystery that is allowed to remain a mystery is crucial for Heidegger as he understands the relationship between *aletheia* and *Gelassenheit*. He claims, “we never know a mystery by unveiling or analyzing it to death, but only in such a way that we preserve the mystery *as* mystery.”²⁰⁹ Therefore, in the happening of poetry, truth happens. And in the happening of truth beings show-forth the mystery of their being. Truth is this showing-forth of the mystery or otherness of beings.

To illustrate what he means by art allowing the mystery of the other to self-display, Heidegger provides the example of the temple-work in “The Origin of the Work of Art”. The temple-work might be said to “gather in poetry the nature of poetry”.

²⁰⁶ Caputo, *Radical Hermeneutics*, p. 185.

²⁰⁷ Frank Lentricchia, *After the New Criticism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980), pp. 89-90.

²⁰⁸ Ibid.

²⁰⁹ Heidegger as quoted in Clark’s *Martin Heidegger*, p. 119.

A building, a Greek temple, portrays nothing. It simply stands there in the middle of the rock-cleft valley. The building encloses the figure of the god, and in this concealment lets it stand out into the holy precinct through the open portico. By means of the temple, the god is present in the temple. This presence of the god is in itself the extension and delimitation of the precinct as a holy precinct. The temple and its precinct, however, do not fade away into the indefinite. It is the temple-work that first fits together and at the same time gathers around itself the unity of those paths and relations in which birth and death, disaster and blessing, victory and disgrace, endurance and decline acquire the shape of destiny for human being....

Standing there, the building rests on the rocky ground. This resting of the work draws up out of the rock the mystery of the rock's clumsy yet spontaneous support. Standing there, the building holds its ground against the storm raging above it and so first makes the storm itself manifest in its violence. The luster and gleam of the stone, though itself apparently glowing only by the grace of the sun, yet first brings to light the light of the day, the breadth of the sky, the darkness of the night. The temple's firm towering makes visible the invisible space of air. The steadfastness of the work contrasts with the surge of the surf, and its own repose brings out the raging of the sea. Tree and grass, eagle and bull, snake and cricket first enter their distinctive shapes and thus come to appear as what they are. The Greeks called this emerging and rising in itself and in all thing *phusis*. It clears and illuminates, also, that on which and in which man bases his dwelling....

This temple-work, in its standing there, first gives to things their look and to men their outlook on themselves. This view remains open as long as the work is a work, as long as the god has not fled from it. It is the same with the sculpture of the god, votive offering of the victor in the athletic games. It is not a portrait whose purpose is to make it easier to realize how the god looks; rather, it is a work that lets the god himself be present and thus *is* the god himself.²⁰⁹

By its very presence, the temple-work *lets be* and *permits* the god to dwell. It clears the way and opens the space for the god to emerge. Moreover, the temple provides the limits that allow for the god to appear, that permit it to show-forth. For as long as the temple-work remains open to this self-showing of the god it will continue to give "to things their look and to men their outlook on themselves." But should the temple-work cut off the possibility for this showing-forth, should it no longer respect this self-showing by denying the mystery, the

²⁰⁹ Heidegger, *PLT*, pp. 41-43.

otherness of the god, it will no longer be of use to the community it serves. The god will no longer appear; it will flee and the community will experience bereavement in the wake of its disappearance.

We want to pay particular attention to the last line quoted from the passage above: "it is a work that lets the god himself be present and thus *is* the god himself." Stevens says similarly: "There is no difference between god and his temple" (OP 191). What could Heidegger (and Stevens) mean by this? How is the temple-work, which allows for the god's self-display, one with the god himself? By stating that the statue of the god in the temple is not a portrait or representation of the god but a work that lets the god itself come to appearance and therefore is the god itself, Heidegger recognises the ontological status of the work. It is not a mere model, a representation of the god, but the god itself, the god who calls on the artist to permit its self-display. The god, then, manifests itself in the work, bringing the 'truth' of its being into appearance.

To understand how this work which permits this self-showing of the god is one with the god himself, we need to think about the traditional notions of form and content. More precisely, we need to think how to overcome traditional notions of form and content. The idea that these can be separated in the artwork is precisely what Heidegger is working against in "The Origin of the Work of Art". He declares: "Form and content are the most hackneyed concepts under which anything and everything may be subsumed."²¹¹ We recall from the last chapter that Heidegger and Stevens both postulate the poem as a thing in itself. The

²¹¹ Heidegger as quoted by George Pattison in *Art, Modernity and Faith: Restoring the Image* (London: Macmillan, 1991), p. 139. Says Pattison, "Heidegger also remarks that the Christian tradition of thinking of God as Creator reinforces the prevalent role of this matter / form distinction in Western thought. For it all too easily leads to us seeing the whole of creation, the whole of the material world, as being no more than a means by which God aims to accomplish his spiritual end. The whole creation is the matter on which the divine craftsman impresses the

poem is, we argued, not *about* something; it does not represent something. Its content does not stand apart from or outside its form; nor does the work point to some meaning external to itself. It is, rather, a self-sufficient presence, an argument that stands in direct opposition to the duality of form and content.

Both Heidegger and Stevens offer ways of overcoming this duality. For Heidegger it is the notion of *Grundstimmung* or 'fundamental tone' and for Stevens it is 'style'. Common to both Heidegger's *Grundstimmung* and Stevens' 'style' is the idea that they are not chosen by the poet. The poet has no choice in selecting his tone, according to Heidegger, or in choosing his style, according to Stevens. They come *to* the poet.

In "Two or Three Ideas" the poet explains,

Style is not something applied. It is something inherent, something that permeates. It is of the nature of that in which it is found, whether the poem, the manner of a god, the bearing of a man. It is not a dress. It may be said to be a voice that is inevitable (OP 263).

The style of a thing for Stevens, is the thing itself. The way something appears, *how* it shows itself *is* the thing itself.

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 seemings all things are....

Such seemings are the actual ones: the way
Things look each day, each morning, or the style

Peculiar to the queen, this queen or that... (CP 339-340).

Thus, things *are* in their seeming, in the way that they self-display. We cannot talk about form and content, which really means 'form vs. content'. Stevens' idea that a thing (or being) *is* its style negates this duality.

particular form he desires to give it. And if that is how things are with the Creator and his world, what more can we expect from a human artist?", pp. 139-140.

Now turning to Heidegger's notion of *Grundstimmung*, Timothy Clark explains,

The poet is essentially passive in relation to the tone. It comes *to* the poet, as in classical theories of inspiration, as an apprehension of the world.... In that revelation the poet responds to something that comes from the outside. On the other hand (and this seems at first a contradiction), neither is the tone something merely there already in the world and which the poet must subsequently translate into words. It resonates from out of the poet's listening to the language and it needs the act of the poet to sound out and be apprehensible. Where does this leave us then? Does the revelation come first or the words? The answer is that there is only a contradiction here on the surface, for linear thinking. The revelation of the world in the resonance of the ground tone and its coming to language for the poet are simultaneous or equi-primordial. It all takes place too holistically—too non-foundationally—to be disentangled in terms of any one element being the 'cause' and the other an 'effect'.²¹²

Clark makes the connection between the *Grundstimmung*, the tone that comes *to* the poet, and inspiration and revelation, though as always he is quick to deny the religious nature of this idea: "Heidegger's notion of the *Grundstimmung* helps us read these episodes of 'inspiration' without the evasions of a religious terminology...."²¹³ Although it is not entirely clear here, it seems that the revelations that come to the poet through the *Grundstimmung*, are reliant upon the poet's capacity for listening to what we might call 'the spirit' or 'style' of the age. The *Grundstimmung*, as the fundamental tone of the age, is not something chosen by the poet but rather something that pervades, or as Stevens says, "something that permeates".

With this in mind we turn again to Heidegger's (and Hölderlin's) question, "...and what are poets for in a destitute time?" True poets living in a destitute time allow for the time's destitution 'to be' in language. They do not attempt to cover over or cover up the *Grundstimmung*, the fundamental tone of the age; rather they open up a space for it to dwell. For Heidegger, Hölderlin's poetry

does just this: it allows for the showing-forth of the ‘truth’ of the *Grundstimmung* of the age. Clark asks, “What emerges as the fundamental tone of Hölderlin’s ‘Germania’?”

It is ‘the oppression which holds itself in readiness in sacred mourning’—a summary statement, in effect, of the tone of the opening. This phrase becomes almost a refrain in Heidegger’s reading. The distinction of Hölderlin for Heidegger is the penetration of the *Grundstimmung* of his poetry of poetry, its making explicit of the disenchantment of European humanity....

This fundamental tone is not then something which Hölderlin makes up: it is attuned to a disenchantment which is already there, all pervasively but unthought, and it makes it resonate unignorably in language.²¹⁴

Every epoch has its gods; the Greeks had their gods, we have ours—though they appear as an absence. The spirit of this age is one of destitution and disenchantment; the God and the gods have fled and it is the poet’s vocation to allow for this destitution, this absence, to be.

Central to both Stevens’ ‘style’ and Heidegger’s *Grundstimmung* is the necessity for listening and for letting be. Though Stevens claims that style is “a voice that is inevitable”, there must be a harkening to this voice that beckons to the poet. As this voice comes to the poet who strains to hear, it is set forth in the work of art, allowing its ‘truth’ to shine-forth. It comes ‘to be’ in its style as the poet ‘lets be’. ‘Letting be’ is precisely what Stevens learns to do in his later years. Releasing his active desire for finding “the poem of the mind that will suffice”, he comes to adopt an “active passivity”. He accepts “desire as a capacity for reception rather than an agitated seeking of desirable objects.”²¹⁵ In his own words, he comes to know “desire without an object” (CP 358) and eventually

²¹² Clark, *Martin Heidegger*, p. 114.

²¹³ Ibid, p. 112.

²¹⁴ Ibid, p. 113.

²¹⁵ Frank Lentricchia, *Modernist Quartet* (Cambridge: University of Cambridge Press, 1994), p. 173.

accepts that “The cancellings, / The negations are never final” (CP 414). In short, Stevens develops ‘a poetics of *Gelassenheit*’.

Though the departure of the gods initially causes a sense of urgency in Stevens, an urgency for “finding what will suffice” in their absence, he gradually comes to accept the destitution of the age, becoming a true poet, “gathering in poetry the nature of poetry”. In fact, in time there is every indication that he comes to embrace this absence, even love it: “And for what, except for you, do I feel love?”

There is one further point that we wish to make when considering Stevens alongside of Heidegger. In the preceding pages we have demonstrated the affinity between the two men; however, there is one important distinction suggested by their poetics. We recall that Heidegger asserts the need for the ‘true poet’ to live in authenticity, that is, for the poet to expose herself to the potentiality for her own non-existence, an exposing that brings about feelings of awe and wonder. Only by living authentically can she be open to the voice of silence and allow for the self-showing of _____. According to Heidegger, the mundane ‘everydayness’ of life does not open up the space necessary for this showing-forth. ‘Everydayness’ is, for him, the inauthentic.²¹⁶ Stevens’ poetics, on the other hand, does not work from this kind of dualism; it does not elevate moments of the beautiful above the ordinary everydayness of our lives. In fact, as we have already seen in the first chapter, Stevens makes much of embracing the mundane and he rejects the idea that ‘mid summer moments’ are in some way more

valuable than all the rest of our days. For Stevens, unlike Heidegger, the 'true poet' is one who discovers poetry in everydayness. Stevens firmly believed that "the whole world is material for poetry" (OP 189) and that the "poet feels *abundantly* the poetry of everything" (OP 190). If Stevens is a 'true poet' it is precisely because he does not make a distinction between 'authenticity' and 'inauthenticity'; for him, all moments—be they beautiful, anxiety-ridden, ugly, or seemingly inconsequential—are gifts and are to be accepted by the poet as such.

²¹⁶ Frank Lentricchia notes that "in the time-honored nineteenth-century fashion of the German idealists, [Heidegger] fights dualism with the weapons of a dualistic and aestheticized terminology that

Conclusion: The World as Meditation

“And for what, except for you, do I feel love?” All his life, Stevens was in love with an absence. He had a life-long relationship with a lack, a relationship that led to the writing of his best poetry. Among his greatest poems inspired by this lack is “The World as Meditation” written some three years prior to the poet’s death and an appropriate work with which to conclude our study of Stevens. In “The World as Meditation” the poet is like Homer’s Penelope who actively awaits the return of her lover, Ulysses. But unlike in the Homeric epic, in Stevens’ poem Ulysses does not return; he is perpetually absent. In Stevens’ poem Ulysses *is* an absence.

There is an expectancy, an anticipation in Penelope’s waiting as she prepares for her lover’s return by composing “a self with which to welcome him.” She does not attempt to force the arrival of Ulysses; she merely prepares herself for the possibility of his coming. Likewise, the poet waits for his lover in a “passive receptivity”. The poem opens with the (uncertain) approach of Ulysses:

Is it Ulysses that approaches from the east,
The interminable adventurer? The trees are mended.
That winter is washed away. Someone is moving

On the horizon and lifting himself up above it.
A form of fire approaches the cretonnes of Penelope,
Whose mere savage presence awakens the world in which she dwells.

She has composed, so long, a self with which to welcome him,
Companion to his self for her, which she imagined,
Two in a deep-founded sheltering, friend and dear friend.

The trees had been mended, as an essential exercise
In an inhuman meditation, larger than her own.

would divide human experience into the beautiful and the mundane,” in *After the New Criticism*, p. 81.

No winds like dogs watched over her at night.

She wanted nothing he could not bring her by coming alone.
She wanted no fetchings. His arms would be her necklace
And her belt, the final fortune of their desire.

But was it Ulysses? Or was it only the warmth of the sun
On her pillow? The thought kept beating in her like her heart.
The two kept beating together. It was only day.

It was Ulysses and it was not. Yet they had met,
Friend and dear friend and a planet's encouragement.
The barbarous strength within her would never fail.

She would talk a little to herself as she combed her hair,
Repeating his name with its patient syllables,
Never forgetting him that kept coming constantly so near. (CP 520-521)

Like the sun, Ulysses approaches from the east, lifting himself above the horizon.
But is it Ulysses? The change in surroundings suggests so: the trees are mended,
that winter is washed away. There are signs of spring's renewal everywhere. His
approach like the morning sun "awakens the world". Anticipating his arrival,
Penelope sheds all of her desires except for one, her desire for their union. She
wants "no fetchings", nothing "he could not bring her by coming alone." But in
spite of her desire, there is no consummation. "Yet", she insists, "they had met, /
Friend and dear friend...."²¹⁷ This 'friend' "that kept coming constantly so near"
never makes a final arrival. The "*final* fortune of their desire" is just out of reach.
Yet Penelope experiences the *effects* of Ulysses' approach in the accelerated
beating of her heart, in the "barbarous strength" which she knew would never fail,
in the world awash in imagination.

²¹⁷ Charles Murphy notes, "the phrase 'friend and dear friend' is repeated with tenderness and warmth as the poem nears its conclusion." He says it "immediately reminds the religious reader of St Teresa of Avila's famous definition of contemplative prayer":

Contemplative prayer in my opinion is nothing else than a close sharing between friends; it means taking time frequently to be alone with him who we know loves us.

Murphy, p.33.

Frank Lentricchia comments, “Penelope’s meditative process is ‘so long’ because its object is absent—and though in the end, in Homer’s story, Ulysses is brought home, in Stevens’s version he is kept away; in Stevens’s version there is no plot, no culmination of touch.”²¹⁸ The love affair thrives precisely because desire is never fully satiated. The lover approaches, he comes near, but he does not ‘arrive’. It was Ulysses and it was not. In the sustained absence of her lover, Penelope’s love grows ever stronger and his “name” is always on her lips. Ulysses, like “Phoebus” of *Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction*, is a name for something that has no name; its namelessness inspires endless naming.

And for what, except for this absence, this lack, does Stevens feel love? Lentricchia rightly comments, “The poet has been in love, illicitly, for a very long time. He can’t remember when he wasn’t.”²¹⁹ Like Penelope who “has composed, so long, a self with which to welcome” her lover, Stevens has spent a lifetime composing poetry in relationship with this absence. We note in the third stanza how carefully Stevens suggests this absent lover; he allows it to ‘appear’ as an absence:

*She has composed, so long, a self with which to welcome him,
Companion to his self for her, which she imagined,
Two in a deep-founded sheltering, friend and dear friend.*

She has composed a self that is a companion to his self *for her*. The friend and dear friend sheltering together are not, as we might first assume, Penelope and Ulysses but Penelope and the companion she has spent so long composing in her lover’s absence. Penelope enjoys the comfort of this companion that she has created while waiting expectantly.

²¹⁸ Lentricchia, *Modernist Quartet*, p. 175.

²¹⁹ *Ibid*, p. 178.

In the mystical meeting of friend and dear friend, of Penelope and the companion she has created in relationship with this lack, the world is renewed, refreshed, but only momentarily:

The trees had been mended, as an essential exercise
In an inhuman meditation, larger than her own.
No winds like dogs watched over her at night.

Already by the fourth stanza the experience has begun to pass. In the first stanza the trees *are* mended but here the trees *had been mended*. It becomes subject to reflection as Penelope wonders, “But was it Ulysses?” The experience seems to have been more than what she herself is capable: “an inhuman meditation, larger than her own.” But Stevens insists, “No winds like dogs watched over her at night”, that is, there were no external spirits (*pneuma*), nothing from outside watching over her bringing her this inhuman meditation. In this way, the poem is reminiscent of “Tea at the Palaz of Hoon”:

Not less because in purple I descended
The western day through what you called
The loneliest air, not less was I myself.

What was the ointment sprinkled on my beard?
What were the hymns that buzzed beside my ears?
What was the sea whose tide swept through me there?

Out of my mind the golden ointment rained,
And my ears made the blowing hymns they heard.
I was myself the compass of that sea:

I was the world in which I walked, and what I saw
Or heard or felt came not but from myself;
And there I found myself more truly and more strange. (CP 65)

Like Hoon, Penelope’s creations are her own; they are the gifts that are forged out of her never-ending rendezvous with a perpetually absent lover. And yet they are “not less” because they come not but from herself.

In the penultimate stanza Penelope believes that “It was Ulysses and it was not. Yet they had met, / Friend and dear friend and a planet’s encouragement.” For Stevens such mystical meetings are reliant upon the planet’s encouragement. That is to say, they are possible only in a world of endless change, in a world that never stands still, where desire cannot be fully satiated.

Over the years, by revelling in the changing climates of a planet in perpetual motion, Stevens composed a self with which to welcome poetry.

After-Thoughts

Finally, in the last year of her age,
Having attained a present blessedness,
She said poetry and apotheosis are one.

--from "A Pastoral Nun" (CP 378)

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APPENDICES

Appendix A.

Chronology*

1879	Wallace Stevens born 2 October in Reading, Pennsylvania.
1897	Enrolls in Harvard as a special student
1900-01	Moves to New York to be a journalist. Works as a reporter for the <i>New York Tribune</i> and as an assistant editor for <i>World's Work</i> .
1903	Attends New York Law School; graduates 10 June.
1904	Admitted to New York State bar. Meets Elsie Viola Moll in Reading.
1905-07	Works briefly for three New York law firms in succession.
1908	Joins the legal staff of the American Bonding Company. Writes "A Book of Verses," a collection of poems for Elsie.
1909	Marries Elsie Moll on 21 September. Writes "The Little June Book," a collection of poems for Elsie.
1911	Father dies 14 July.
1912	Mother dies 16 July.
1914	First mature poems published, in <i>Trend</i> (September) and in <i>Poetry</i> (November).
1916	Joins the legal staff of the Hartford Accident and Indemnity Company. Moves permanently to Hartford, Connecticut.
1923	<i>Harmonium</i> published by Alfred A. Knopf.
1924	Daughter, Holly Bright Stevens, born 10 August.
1934	Promoted to vice-president of Hartford Accident and Indemnity.
1935	<i>Ideas of Order</i> published by Alcestis Press in a limited edition.

- 1936 *Ideas of Order* published by Knopf. *Owl's Clover* published by Alcestis Press.
- 1937 *The Man with the Blue Guitar* published by Knopf.
- 1942 *Parts of a World* published by Knopf. *Notes toward a Supreme Fiction* published by Cummington Press in a limited edition.
- 1945 Elected to the National Institute of Arts and Letters. *Esthétique du Mal* published by Cummington Press in a limited edition.
- 1947 *Transport to Summer* published by Knopf. Grandson Peter Reed Hanchak born 26 April.
- 1949 Awarded Bollingen Prize in Poetry.
- 1950 *The Auroras of Autumn* published by Knopf.
- 1951 Receives 1950 National Book Award for Poetry. Receives Gold Medal of the Poetry Society of America. *The Necessary Angel: Essays on Reality and the Imagination* published by Knopf.
- 1953 *Selected Poems* published by Faber and Faber in England.
- 1954 Receives 1954 National Book Award for *The Collected Poems*. Exploratory operation on 26 April results in diagnosis of incurable stomach cancer. Receives Pulitzer Prize for Poetry. Dies 2 August in Hartford.
- 1957 *Opus Posthumous* published by Knopf.
- 1963 Elsie Stevens dies 19 February.
- 1967 *Letters of Wallace Stevens*, edited by Holly Stevens, published by Knopf.
- 1992 Holly Bright Stevens dies 4 March.

*Adapted from Janet McCann's Chronology of Stevens in *Wallace Stevens Revisited: The Celestial Possible* (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1995)

Appendix B.

Wallace Stevens's Alleged Deathbed Conversion

The following is taken from a letter from Father Arthur Hanley to Professor Janet McCann (Texas A& M University), dated July 24, 1977, with line breaks, punctuation, spelling, etc. exactly as in the typescript.

Dear Janet:

The First time he [Wallace Stevens] came to the hospital, he expressed a certain emptiness in his life. His stay then was two weeks.

Two weeks later, he was in, and he asked the sister to send for me. We sat and talked a long time. During his visit this time, I saw him 9 or 10 times. He was fascinated by the life of Pope Pius X. He spoke about a poem for this pope whose family name was Sartori--- (Meaning tailor). At least 3 times, he talked about getting into the fold-- meaning the Catholic Church. The doctrine of hell was an objection which we later got thru that alright.

He often remarked about the peace and tranquility that he experienced in going into a Catholic Church and spending some time. He spoke about St. Patrick's Cathedral in N.Y. I can't give you the date of his baptism. I think it might be recorded at the hospital. He said he had never been baptized. He was baptized absolutely.

Wallace and his wife had not been on speaking terms for several years. So we thought it better not to tell her. She might cause a scene in the hospital.

Archbishop at the time told me not to make his (Wallace's) conversion public, but the sister and the nurses on the floor were all aware of it and were praying for him.

At the time--I did get a copy of his poems and also a record that he did of some of his poems.

We talked about some of the poems. I quoted some of the lines of one of them and he was pleased. He said if he got well, we would talk a lot more and if not--he would see me in heaven.

That's about all I can give you now.

[Signed] God's Blessing
Father Hanley

Appendix C.

Selected Poems

The following poems are referred to at length in the thesis and are quoted here for the reader's convenience.

Sunday Morning

1

Complacencies of the peignoir, and late
Coffee and oranges in a sunny chair,
And the green freedom of a cockatoo
Upon a rug mingle to dissipate
The holy hush of ancient sacrifice.
She dreams a little, and she feels the dark
Encroachment of that old catastrophe,
As a calm darkens among water-lights.
The pungent oranges and bright, green wings
Seem things in some procession of the dead,
Winding across wide water, without sound.
The day is like wide water, without sound.
Stilled for the passing of her dreaming feet
Over the seas, to silent Palestine,
Dominion of the blood and sepulchre.

2

Why should she give her bounty to the dead?
What is divinity if it can come
Only in silent shadows and in dreams?
Shall she not find in comforts of the sun,
In pungent fruit and bright green wings, or else
In any balm or beauty of the earth,
Things to be cherished like the thought of heaven?
Divinity must live within herself:
Passions of rain, or moods in falling snow;
Grievings in loneliness, or unsubdued
Elations when the forest blooms; gusty
Emotions on wet roads on autumn nights;
All pleasures and all pains, remembering
The bough of summer and the winter branch.
These are the measure destined for her soul.

3

Jove in the clouds had his inhuman birth.
No mother suckled him, no sweet land gave
Large-mannered motions to his mythy mind.
He moved among us, as a muttering king,
Magnificent, would move among his hinds,
Until our blood, commingling, virginal,
With heaven, brought such requital to desire
The very hinds discerned it, in a star.
Shall our blood fail? Or shall it come to be
The blood of paradise? And shall the earth

Seem all of paradise that we shall know?
The sky will be much friendlier then than now,
A part of labor and a part of pain,
And next in glory to enduring love,
Not this dividing and indifferent blue.

4

She says, "I am content when wakened birds,
Before they fly, test the reality
Of misty fields, by their sweet questionings;
But when the birds are gone, and their warm fields
Return no more, where, then, is paradise?"
There is not any haunt of prophecy,
Nor any old chimera of the grave,
Neither the golden underground, nor isle
Melodious, where spirits gat them home,
Nor visionary south, nor cloudy palm
Remote on heaven's hill, that has endured
As April's green endures; or will endure
Like her remembrance of awakened birds,
Or her desire for June and evening, tipped
By the consummation of the swallow's wings.

5

She says, "But in contentment I still feel
The need of some imperishable bliss."
Death is the mother of beauty; hence from her,
Alone, shall come fulfillment to our dreams
And our desires. Although she strews the leaves
Of sure obliteration on our paths,
The path sick sorrow took, the many paths
Where triumph rang its brassy phrase, or love
Whispered a little out of tenderness,
She makes the willow shiver in the sun
For maidens who were wont to sit and gaze
Upon the grass, relinquished to their feet.
She causes boys to pile new plums and pears
On disregarded plate. The maidens taste
And stray impassioned in the littering leaves.

6

Is there no change of death in paradise?
Does ripe fruit never fall? Or do the boughs
Hang always heavy in that perfect sky,
Unchanging, yet so like our perishing earth,
With rivers like our own that seek for seas
They never find, the same receding shores
That never touch with inarticulate pang?
Why set pear upon those river-banks
Or spice the shores with odors of the plum?
Alas, that they should wear our colors there,
The silken weavings of our afternoons,
And pick the strings of our insipid lutes!
Death is the mother of beauty, mystical,
Within whose burning bosom we devise
Our earthly mothers waiting, sleeplessly.

7

Supple and turbulent, a ring of men
Shall chant in orgy on a summer morn

Their boisterous devotion to the sun,
Not as a god, but as a god might be,
Naked among them, like a savage source.
Their chant shall be a chant of paradise,
Out of their blood, returning to the sky;
And in their chant shall enter, voice by voice,
The windy lake wherein their lord delights,
The trees, like serafin, and echoing hills,
That choir among themselves long afterward.
They shall know well the heavenly fellowship
Of men that perish and of summer morn.
And whence they came and whither they shall go
The dew upon their feet shall manifest.

8

She hears, upon that water without sound,
A voice that cries, "The tomb in Palestine
Is not the porch of spirits lingering.
It is the grave of Jesus, where he lay."
We live in an old chaos of the sun,
Or old dependency of day and night,
Or island solitude, unsponsored, free,
Of that wide water, inescapable.
Deer walk upon our mountains, and the quail
Whistle about us their spontaneous cries;
Sweet berries ripen in the wilderness;
And, in the isolation of the sky,
At evening, casual flocks of pigeons make
Ambiguous undulations as they sink,

Downward to darkness, on extended wings.

Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction (Part I, "It Must Be Abstract")

To Henry Church

And for what, except for you, do I feel love?
Do I press the extremest book of the wisest man
Close to me, hidden in me day and night?
In the uncertain light of single, certain truth,
Equal in living changingness to the light
In which I meet you, in which we sit at rest,
For a moment in the central of our being,
The vivid transience that you bring is peace.

It Must Be Abstract

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

You must become an ignorant man again
And see the sun again with an ignorant eye
And see it clearly in the idea of it.

Never suppose an inventing mind as source
Of this idea nor for that mind compose
A voluminous master folded in his fire.

How clean the sun when seen in its idea,
Washed in the remotest cleanliness of a heaven
That has expelled us and our images...

The death of one god is the death of all.
Let purple Phoebus lie in umber harvest,
Let Phoebus slumber and die in autumn umber,

Phoebus is dead, ephebe. But Phoebus was
A name for something that never could be named.
There was a project for the sun and is.

There is a project for the sun. The sun
Must bear no name, gold flourisher, but be
In the difficulty of what it is to be.

II
It is the celestial ennui of apartments
That sends us back to the first idea, the quick
Of this invention; and yet so poisonous

Are the ravishments of truth, so fatal to
The truth itself, the first idea becomes
The hermit in a poet's metaphors,

↑
↓ Who comes and goes and comes and goes all day.
May there be an ennui of the first idea?
What else, prodigious scholar, should there be?

The monastic man is an artist. The philosopher
Appoints man's place in music, say, today.
But the priest desires. The philosopher desires.

And not to have is the beginning of desire.
To have what is not is its ancient cycle.
It is desire at the end of winter, when

It observes the effortless weather turning blue
And sees the myosotis on its bush.
Being virile, it hears the calendar hymns.

It knows that what is has is what is not
And throws it away like a thing of another time,
As morning throws off stale moonlight and shabby sleep.

III

The poem refreshes life so that we 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:
From that ever-early candor to its late plural

And the candor of them is the strong exhilaration
Of what we feel from what we think, of thought
Beating in the heart, as if blood newly came,

An elixir, an excitation, a pure power.
The poem, through candor, brings back a power again
That gives a candid kind to everything.

We say: At night an Arabian in my room,
With his damned hoobla-hoobla-hoobla-how,
Inscribes a primitive astronomy

Across the unscrawled fores the future casts
And throws his stars around the floor. By day
The wood-dove used to chant his boobla-hoo

And still the grossest iridescence of ocean
Howls hoo and rises and howls hoo and falls.
Life's nonsense pierces us with strange relation.

IV

The first idea was not our own. Adam
In Eden was the father of Descartes
And Eve made air the mirror of herself,

Of her sons and of her daughters. They found themselves
In heaven as in a glass; a second earth;
And in the earth itself they found a green—

The inhabitants of a very varnished green.
But the first idea was not to shape the clouds
In imitation. The clouds preceded us

There was a muddy centre before we breathed.
There was a myth before the myth began,
Venerable and articulate and complete.

From this the poem springs: that we live in a place

That is not our own and, much more, not ourselves
And hard it is in spite of blazoned days.

We are the mimics. Clouds are pedagogues
The air is not a mirror but bare board,
Coulisse bright-dark, tragic chiaroscuro

And comis color of the rose, in which
Abysmal instruments make sounds like pips
Of the sweeping meanings that we add to them.

V

The lion roars at the enraging desert,
Reddens the sand with his red-colored noise,
Defies red emptiness to evolve his match,

Master by foot and jaws and by the mane,
Most supple challenger. The elephant
Breaches the darkness of Ceylon with blares,

The glitter-goes on surfaces of tanks,
Shattering velvetest far-away. The bear,
The ponderous cinnamon, snarls in his mountain

At summer thunder and sleeps through winter snow.
But you, ephebe, look from your attick window,
Your mansard with a rented piano. You lie

In silence upon your bed. You clutch the corner
Of the pillow in your hand. You writhe and press
A bitter utterance from your writhing, dumb,

Yet voluble dumb violence. You look
Across the roofs as sigil and as ward
And in your centre mark them and are cowed...

These are the heroic children whom time breeds
Against the first idea—to lash the lion,
Caparison elephants, teach bears to juggle.

VI

Not to be realized because not to
Be seen, not to be loved nor hated because
Not to be realized. Weather by Franz Hals,

Brushed up by brushy winds in brushy clouds,
Wetted by blue, colder for white. Not to
Be spoken to, without a roof, without

First fruits, without the virginal of birds,
The dark-blown ceinture loosened, not relinquished.
Gay is, gay was, the gay forsythia

And yellow, yellow thins the Northern blue.
Without a name and nothing to be desired,
If only imagined but imagined well.

My house has changed a little in the sun.
The fragrance of the magnolias comes close,
False flick, false form, but falseness close to kin.

It must be visible or invisible,
Invisible or visible or both:
A seeing and unseeing in the eye.

The weather and the giant of the weather,
Say the weather, the mere weather, the mere air:
An abstraction blooded, as a man by thought.

VII

It feels good as it is without the giant,
A thinker of the first idea. Perhaps
The truth depends on a walk around a lake,

A composing as the body tires, a stop
To see hepatica, a stop to watch
A definition growing certain and

A wait within that certainty, a rest
In the swags of pine-trees bordering the lake.
Perhaps there are times of inherent excellence,

As when the cock crows on the left and all
Is well, incalculable balances,
At which a kind of Swiss perfection comes

And a familiar music of the machine
Sets up its Schwärmerei, not balances
That we achieve but balances that happen,

As a man and woman meet and love forthwith.
Perhaps there are moments of awakening,
Extreme, fortuitous, personal, in which

We more than awaken, sit on the edge of sleep,
As on an elevation, and behold
The academies like structures in a mist.

VIII

Can we compose a castle-fortress-home,
Even with the help of Viollet-le-Duc,
And set the MacCullough there as major man?

The first idea is an imagined thing.
The pensive giant prone in violet space
May be the MacCullough, an expedient,

Logos and logic, crystal hypothesis,
Incipit and a form to speak the word
And every latent double in the word,

Beau linguist. But the MacCullough is MacCullough.
It does not follow that major man is man.
If MacCullough himself lay lounging in the sea,

Drowned in its washes, reading in the sound,
About the thinker of the first idea,
He might take habit, whether from wave or phrase,

Or power of the wave, or deepened speech,
Of a leaner being, moving in on him,
Of greater aptitude and apprehension,

As if the waves at last were never broken,
As if the language suddenly, with ease,
Said things it had laboriously spoken.

IX

The romantic intoning, the declaimed clairvoyance
Are parts of apotheosis, appropriate
And of its nature, the idiom thereof.

They differ from reasons' click-clack, its applied
Enflashings. But apotheosis is not
The origin of the major man. He comes,

Compact in invincible foils, from reason,
Lighted at midnight by the studious eye,
Swaddled in revery, the object of

The hum of thoughts evaded in the mind,
Hidden from other thoughts, he that reposes
On a breast forever precious for that touch,

For whom the good of April falls tenderly,
Falls down, the cock-birds calling at the time.
My dame, sing for this person accurate songs.

He is and may be but oh! he is, he is,
This foundling of the infected past, so bright,
So moving in the manner of his hand.

Yet look not at his colored eyes. Give him
No names. Dismiss him from your images.
The hot of him is purest in the heart.

X

The major abstraction is the idea of man
And major man is its exponent, abler
In the abstract than in his singular,

More fecund as principle than particle,
Happy fecundity, flor-abundant force,
In being more than an exception, part,

Though an heroic part, of the communal.
The major abstraction is the communal,
The inanimate, difficult visage. 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 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.