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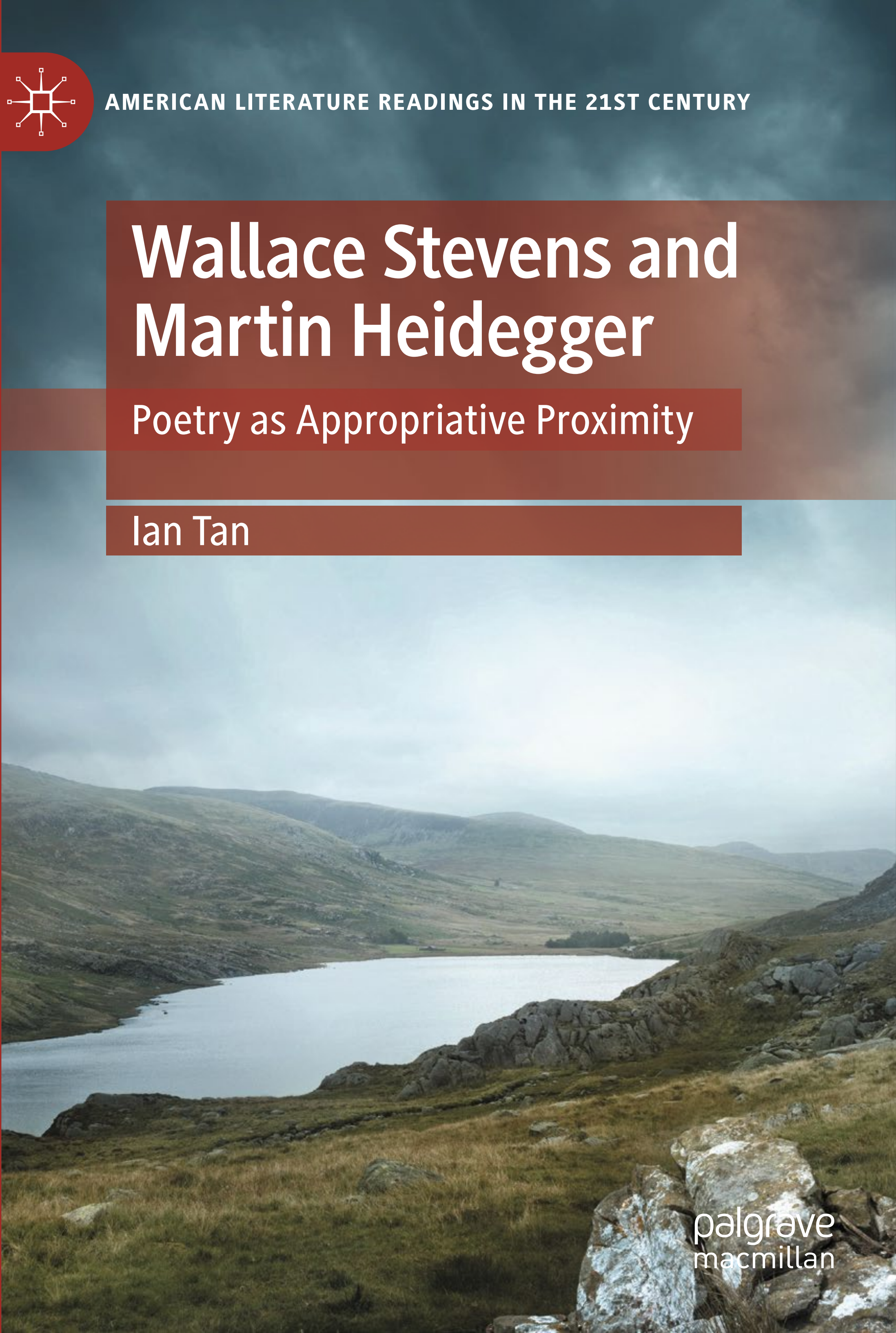
Wallace Stevens and Martin Heidegger

Poetry as Appropriative Proximity

Ian Tan



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Abbreviations

Works by Martin Heidegger

BT	*Being and Time*. Trans. John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson. Oxford: Blackwell, 1962.
CP	*Contributions to Philosophy (From Enowning*). Trans. Parvis Emad and Kenneth Maly. Indiana: Indiana UP, 1999.
CPC	*Country Path Conversations*. Trans. Bret W. Davis. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2010.
E	*The Event*. Trans. Richard Rojcewicz. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2013.
EB	*Existence and Being*. Trans. R.F.C. Hull and Alan Crick. London: Vision Press, 1968.
EGT	*Early Greek Thinking*. Trans. David Farrell Krell and Frank A. Capuzzi. New York: Harper and Row, 1975.
EHP	*Elucidations of Hölderlin's Poetry*. Trans. Keith Hoeller. New York: Humanity Books, 2000.
HHTI	*Hölderlin's Hymn "The Ister"*. Trans. William McNeill and Julia Davis. Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana UP, 1996.
ID	*Identity and Difference*. Trans. Joan Stambaugh. New York: Harper and Row, 1969.
M	*Mindfulness*. Trans. Parvis Emad and Thomas Kalary. London: Continuum, 2006.
N1	*Nietzsche: Volume One: The Will to Power as Art*. Trans. David Farrell Krell. New York: Harper and Row, 1979.

N2	*Nietzsche: Volume Two: The Eternal Recurrence of the Same.* Trans. David Farrell Krell. New York: Harper and Row, 1984.
N4	*Nietzsche: Volume Four: Nihilism.* Trans. Frank A. Capuzzi. Ed. David Farrell Krell. New York: Harper and Row, 1982.
NHS	*Nature, History, State.* Trans. Gregory Fried and Richard Polt. London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2015.
OBT	*Off the Beaten Track.* Trans. Julian Young and Kenneth Haynes. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2002.
OWL	*On the Way to Language.* Trans. Peter D. Hertz. New York: Harper and Row, 1971.
P	*Pathmarks.* Trans. Frank A. Capuzzi, William McNeill and John Sallis. Ed. William McNeill. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1998.
PLT	*Poetry, Language, Thought.* Trans. Albert Hofstadter. New York: Harper and Row, 1971.
PRL	*The Phenomenology of Religious Life.* Trans. Matthias Fritsch and Jennifer Anna Gosetti-Ferencei. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2004.
SGU	The Self-Assertion of the German University. *The Heidegger Controversy: A Critical Reader.* Trans. William S. Lewis. Ed. Richard Wolin. New York: Columbia University Press, 1991. Pg. 29–39.
WIT	*What is a Thing?* Trans. W.B. Barton, Jr. and Vera Deutsch. South Bend: Regnery/Gateway, Inc., 1967.

Works by Wallace Stevens

CPP	*Collected Poetry and Prose.* Eds. Frank Kermode and Joan Richardson. New York: The Library of America, 1997.
L	*Letters of Wallace Stevens.* Ed. Holly Stevens. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1966.

CHAPTER 1

Introduction: Language as "Quasi"-Transcendental Presence—Phenomenology and Poetry

PHENOMENOLOGY AND POETRY

This book theorises a thinking of situatedness which frames the philosophical significance of poetry as a force which sustains us in relation to an openness of meaning that can be rendered through phenomenological analysis. This coming-into-presence of meaning, which for Derrida is inseparable from the awareness of the trace that erases philosophical notions of originality and teleological finality, helps us situate the place of Wallace Stevens' understanding of poetry as an event that comes "after one has abandoned a belief in god" (*CPP* 901), but which also aims to engender belief in itself as an alternative to religious piety. This poetry cannot but be self-consciously aware of belatedness, and responds to the implicit accusation of being an inadequate compensatory system of thought by locating its significatory strength in linguistic transcendence. For Stevens, this transcendence cannot recoup an empty mode of belief in an otherworldly realm, but instead embeds perception more keenly towards the phenomenal world which we are all *already* situated in. If the link between phenomenology and literature is foregrounded through the essential concept of "world" (Kozin & Staehler 365), then this book is an extended consideration of how Stevens' poetry can be understood phenomenologically as an attempt to generate imaginative engagements with reality as an ontological realm of meaning. This homology is expressed by

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Pol Vandevelde as such: “Literature is a product of the imagination and thus not true, but it articulates ways of behaving, manners of speaking, types of being in the world that directly pertain to our understanding of the world, of objects in the world, and of people with whom we interact” (15).

To be sure, the link between phenomenology and poetry has been explored before: Matthew Carbery’s book-length study *Phenomenology and the Late Twentieth-Century American Long Poem* marshals phenomenological language in order to examine the play between the urge towards form and the openness of linguistic experimentation he finds in the long poems of writers such as George Oppen and Susan Howe. Jeremy Page’s look at the intersection between Heideggerian phenomenology and the poems of Frank O’Hara explores poetic language as a form of cognitive affordance which reflects “our mode of being as engaged meaning-makers within the world” (46). Recent criticism of Stevens has also turned to phenomenology to elucidate his ongoing concern with the self’s construction of reality as imaginative act; this sentiment is neatly presented by Maurice Natanson, who argues that “the poetry of Wallace Stevens is surely philosophical; it should be suggested, however, that it is philosophical—without self-consciousness or deliberation—in a phenomenological way[1]” (8). My approach aims to distinguish between the Husserlian and Heideggerian method of phenomenology by exploring the shift from the transcendental ego towards language as transcendental horizon of meaning. To the extent that Husserl aims to uncover the primordial nature of the lifeworld which grounds mathematical and scientific enquiry and theorising, he provides a compelling philosophical outline of the larger structures of experience which poetic language reveals. However, this methodological faithfulness towards description rather than explanation is betrayed by Edmund Husserl’s instantiation of the transcendental point of view which for Martin Heidegger, reifies and repeats metaphysical philosophising as ontotheology. To seek the philosophical import of poetic language as phenomenological is to examine how poetry ceaselessly puts us in relation to that which exceeds and explodes the Cartesian dualism which Husserl implicitly endorses. In other words, poetry reveals Being as an eruption and interruption of presence. This presence not only allows the world to arise as transcendent realm without congealing into an object of representation but also locates phenomenal perception within the world of finitude. This account of phenomenology seems to me the most pertinent in analysing the dialectical encounter between imagination and reality in Stevens' poetry—for Stevens, reality is inseparable from heightened moments of poetic disclosure wherein "the relationship between individual and world is articulated in acts of perception" (Voros 126) not primarily because Stevens is a post-Romantic poet attempting spiritual reconciliation (Eyers 838), but because language discloses ontological truths about reality. For Stevens, the task of the poet is therefore not to explain reality, but to accommodate earthly vision to its presence. Poetry is philosophical to the extent that it engenders a thinking of the eventing of presence. As Juan Manuel Garrido puts it:

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[1] In her assessment of phenomenological criticism to Stevens, Ariane Mildenberg summarises other philosophical readings of Stevens which have phenomenological moorings. These philosophers include Simon Critchley (who I will engage with at length in later chapters), Mark C. Taylor and Judith Butler. See Ariane Mildenberg, “‘A Total double-thing’: a re-evaluation of phenomenology in Wallace Stevens” *Textual Practice* 29.1 (2015) pg. 137–8.

> Thought co-appears, which is to say that it constitutes itself as thought by situating itself in relation to what it is not. Thought, like everything else that exists, begins where it ends. For example, where comprehension of the real is not a given, where it no longer has any secrets to reveal to the self through reflection or recollection, where, quite simply, it remains exposed to the task of thinking. (56)

I first aim to outline Husserl's thinking about the primordiality of experience as rooted in the intersubjectivity of the lifeworld. The inadequacies of Husserl's account will next lead me to an exploration of Merleau-Ponty's account of aesthetic experience as phenomenological embodiment. This will take the significance of the lifeworld beyond its Husserlian limits, strengthening my argument about language as intensively immersive and artistic expression as a mode of existential engagement with Being. Thinking about Being (of the world) as presence exceeding representation will allow me to consider the work of Jean-Luc Nancy and Alain Badiou as theorists who engage with the link between poetry and the weight of presence as transcendence. These analyses will anchor my Heideggerian approach to Stevens, as I demonstrate how the reorientation of phenomenological thinking towards what Stevens will ultimately call "mere Being" which envelops the mind delineates the structure of *Ereignis*, or the appropriation of the event.

THE POETRY OF THE LIFEWORLD: HUSSERL'S TRANSCENDENTAL POSITION

The embedded nature of consciousness in its lifeworld forms the basis of Husserl's criticism of the positivistic nature of scientific inquiry which imposes a secondary epistemological framework upon perception. Husserl's early project can be defined in terms of a "bracketing" of what he calls the "natural attitude" of unreflective consciousness—by attending to phenomena purely *as* phenomena, Husserl uncovers the primordial structures of perception which underlie our access to the world. Through the phenomenological method of the *epochē*, consciousness thus attends to the processual dynamism of its temporal existence without the burden of scientific or philosophical theorising. Husserl's pivotal insight can be summarised by the term *intentionality*—all conscious acts are intentionally and meaningfully directed towards phenomenological data or a state of affairs. Husserl does not seek to deny the value of scientific theorising; rather, he looks to uncover the base attitude of consciousness which underlies the epistemological drive to know the world. Although this philosophical standpoint seems to imply that Husserl instantiates a subjectivism which attends only to its solipsistic experience of phenomena, Husserl constantly emphasises the irreducible fact of the world, and the point that consciousness is always in relation to it. As Husserl states in *Cartesian Meditations*:

> More than anything else the being of the world is obvious. It is so very obvious that no one would think of asserting it expressly in a proposition. After all, we have our continuous experience in which this world incessantly stands before our eyes, as existing without question. (17)

For Husserl then, phenomenological analysis attends to the ways in which consciousness experiences the world from within it—it is experiential in nature, rather than descriptive. The philosophical enterprise of rationalism fails to take into account the phenomenological presence of the world in its quest for eternal truths which remain extratemporal and abstracted from concrete experience. At the other end of the spectrum, empiricism presents a false picture of the perceiver who somehow builds knowledge from sense impressions, for it neglects to consider the hermeneutical practices that the human being is enculturated into by virtue of being part of the world. In this sense, the primary philosophical enterprise is not as much to seek an absolute ground for knowledge as it is to explore the immanent structures of conscious experience. In a similar fashion, the philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein argues that philosophy runs aground when it tries to give an account of the nature of belief and certainty. For Wittgenstein, the grounds which sustain knowledge must be embedded in a particular form of practice which forms a "world-picture" (24). This world-picture is something which we have acquired and consolidated not through philosophical reasoning but through experience and participation in various language games which mould our deep existential practices. In other words, to know is to practise; there are no grounds for belief because belief is an immanent expression of our immersion in a form of life.

In his later work, Husserl posits the split between the sciences and the lifeworld recovered through phenomenology as generating a crisis. In *The Crisis of European Sciences and Transcendental Phenomenology*, Husserl baldly states that "merely fact-minded sciences make merely fact-minded people" (6). The primacy of fact over affective experience precipitates the dissolution of meaning to be found in signifying practices embedded in the lifeworld. It is with the aim of revivifying the ontological primacy of the lifeworld that Husserl criticises the ideal state of complete objectivity which science strives towards without consideration of lived significance: "In our vital need … this science has nothing to say to us. It excludes in principle precisely the questions which man, given over in our unhappy times to the most portentous upheavals, finds most burning: questions of the meaning or meaninglessness of the whole of human existence" (6). In contrast, phenomenological investigation into the lifeworld reveals the deep structures of meaning which have been constructed by human beings defined through intersubjective relations. As in the earlier work, Husserl not only stresses the primordiality of this lifeworld, but also emphasises how scientific theories would be impossible without it:

> Experience [yields] a self-evidence taking place purely in the life-world and as such is the source of self-evidence for what is objectively established in the sciences, the latter never themselves being experiences of the objective. The objective is precisely never experienceable as itself. (*Crisis* 129)

> The knowledge of the objective-scientific world is "grounded" in the self-evidence of the life-world. The latter is pre-given to the scientific worker, or the working community, as ground … If we cease being immersed in our scientific thinking, we become aware that we scientists are, after all, human beings and as such are among the components of the life-world which always exists for us, ever pregiven. (*Crisis* 130)

For Husserl, the lifeworld as such is continuously constituted through our emotions and actions; these in turn accrue ontological weight through our social relationships with other human beings who are equally immersed in this open realm. As he points out, "constantly functioning in wakeful life, [human beings] also function together, in the manifold ways of considering, together, objects pregiven to us in common, thinking together, valuing, planning, acting together" (109). In other words, phenomenology is a radically open philosophical enterprise, for it attends to the multiply imbricated acts which bestow meaning upon the world. In this way, poetry which deepens our perception of linguistic utterance not primarily as a tool for communication but as signifiers sustaining and gathering human communities is deeply phenomenological in essence. If, as I will demonstrate later in this Introduction, Nancy departs from Husserl in his consideration of the paradoxical site of presence which both comes into being and absents itself from meaning, he nevertheless remains true to the phenomenological project of uncovering the necessary plurality of Being figured in terms of sociality and community.

However, Husserl's framework runs into difficulty due to his adoption of the transcendental ego. For much of post-Husserlian phenomenology, Husserl is guilty of betraying the innovative force of the *epochē* by intimating that descriptive openness towards the lifeworld needs to be theoretically synthesised by an ego which stands apart from the world the phenomenological ego is immersed in. Husserlian phenomenology is thus Kantian metaphysics by another name. Husserl is explicit about the need for this metalevel of cognition to bring theoretical awareness to the ego which would otherwise be unreflectively absorbed in its environment; ultimately, transcendental phenomenology explicates "the unity of a mental configuration, as a meaning-construct [*Sinngebilde*]—as the construct of a universal, ultimately functioning subjectivity" (*Crisis* 113). If phenomenology uncovers the immersive structures of intentional meaning which consciousness invests in its world, it proceeds to pull back from its best insights by abstracting from the world. The need for a further *epochē* is described by Husserl as such:

> In truth, of course, I am a transcendental ego, but I am not conscious of this; being in a particular attitude, the natural attitude, I am completely given over to the object-poles, completely bound by interests and tasks which are exclusively directed toward them. I can, however, carry out the transcendental reorientation—in which transcendental universality opens

> itself up—and then I understand the one sided, closed, natural attitude as a particular transcendental attitude … In this reorientation our tasks are exclusively transcendental; all natural data and accomplishments acquire a transcendental meaning. (*Crisis* 205)

The Husserlian project thus unwittingly repeats the scientific stance of objectivity by claiming to rise above consciousness, at the price of denying transcendence towards the world. This may be a difficulty inherent to philosophical language in itself, for thinking about consciousness is already a second-order conceptualisation of it. In other words, Husserl starts by describing consciousness and its world, only to end up trying to account for why this engagement is possible. In opening up the significance of poetry to phenomenology, I argue that it is necessary to view language as not having to provide a metaphysical account of the world. Language must recover our sense of the world by putting us in relation to it. In this way, poetry is exposure to Being, rather than representative of Being. I thus move beyond Husserl[2] to consider the central role of aesthetic experience as transcendental *towards* the world as ecstatic encounter.

The Style(s) of Encounter: Merleau-Ponty's Aesthetics of Situation

The importance of Maurice Merleau-Ponty's aesthetic philosophy to the phenomenology of form expresses a renewed understanding of how the latter is dynamic in nature, capable of being reformulated and renegotiated. John Lurz traces the roots of Catherine Malabou's thinking of the plasticity of literary form back to Merleau-Ponty, arguing that "the thickness shared between the body and the world is what gives shape—*gives form*—to the openness on which perception as such relies by 'closing in' around the vision itself. The form imparted by this closing is, paradoxically, *an open one* since it is formed by the common perceptibility shared between body and world" (152). As I understand Lurz, form is both closed and open because it expresses an encounter between consciousness and the world; it expresses the complete immersion of the self in its environment. As such, form does not so much represent as present the limit-conditions through which artistic vision comes to pass. In other words, a work of art embodies a unique view of the world. That this has implications for how we understand the relationship between aesthetics and hermeneutical understanding is underscored by Sean Pryor in his survey of literary modernism. Pryor concludes by stating that "the aesthetic and political energy of much modernist poetry unmakes the contingent constellations we inherit and live by: it seeks to remake the histories those constellations record, the social relations they chart, and the words they configure" ("Inhuman" 567). To this end, Pryor reads two poems by Stevens to demonstrate how his poetry deconstructs the boundaries separating masculinity from femininity, and human from inhuman. It is with the awareness that aesthetic experience is thoroughly phenomenological in that it allows the refreshing of perception that Merleau-Ponty's philosophy becomes an important reformulation of the Husserlian project. For Merleau-Ponty, poetic language does not reify pre-established categories of thought or establish any claim to a transcendent standpoint. Instead, language is stylistic because it "refers to a generalized structure of being-in-the-world, a fundamental component of all phases of existence" (Singer 234). Just as for Merleau-Ponty, the body is immanently immersed in the world of experience (and in fact, is our *only* point of access to it), language presents a total structure of meaning which cuts across corporality and spirituality.

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[2] For a dissenting study from mine which seeks to argue how "among twentieth-century thinkers, the one closest in spirit to Stevens may well be Husserl" (99), see William E. McMahon's book *The Higher Humanism of Wallace Stevens* (1990). I simply cannot agree with McMahon's strange assessment that Stevens "asserts that reason is the greatest single power in the coming of Major Man" (144), given Stevens' consistent meditation of the poetic potential of the irrational as outlined in his 1936 lecture "The Irrational Element in Poetry" (*CPP* 781–96).

In his essay "Indirect Language and the Voices of Silence", Merleau-Ponty targets the view that language can be acquired and utilised independently of the Husserlian lifeworld. Adopting the Saussurean model of linguistic signifiers which implies that signs cannot be understood apart from a system of meaning built upon internal difference, Merleau-Ponty stresses that language impresses upon the subject as a total framework of meaning. As he elaborates:

> Since the sign has meaning only in so far as it is profiled against other signs, its meaning is entirely involved in language. Speech always comes to play against a background of speech; it is always only a fold in the immense fabric of language. To understand it, we do not have to consult some inner lexicon which gives us the pure thoughts covered up by the words or forms we are perceiving; we only have to lend ourselves to its life. (79)

Language cannot be divorced from its potentially infinite contexts of use; the phenomenological task is thus not to synthesise an ideal lexicon but to immerse ourselves in the vitalism of life as it is experienced and manifested in words. For Merleau-Ponty, literature and painting accrue significant phenomenological weight because they foreground the presence of style, which is a particular way in which being-in-the-world is made palpably present. In this way, painting brings to the fore the *act* of seeing, which precisely expresses an artistic appropriation of Being. The colours used in painting (and, by extension, the words used in poetry) crystallise a condition of meaning which makes presence erupt and interrupt; as Merleau-Ponty writes, "the painting says something. It is a new system of equivalences which demands precisely this particular upheaval, and it is in the name of a *truer* relation between things that their ordinary ties are broken" (93). Phenomenology and artistic expression are thus intertwined, as both underscore the fact that we are embodied beings who find ourselves in primordial attunement towards the world. The Cartesian division between mind and body is simply untenable, for it is embodied vision which first clears the space through which thinking can occur. Art enables us to transcend the Husserlian "natural attitude" towards "the event of vision … that is the origin of all sense" (Burch 360), but also situates our perception in the world of finitude and temporality. As Nancy and Heidegger will emphasise, the sense of Being is transcendence without being metaphysical; it inheres in existence without justifying itself as final ground of meaning. By similarly conceiving of Stevens' poetry as enacting modes of affective disposition towards a non-metaphysical totality of environment, I position the aesthetic significance of the poetry in terms of a happening of language that "acts" inasmuch as its performance "does not occur in a scene or context, but rather creates and encompasses its scene and context" (Brown 46).

As we will see with Heidegger, Merleau-Ponty argues that art performs a disclosive function by allowing a world to step forth into presence. In this way, language is transcendental because it opens up the human being's relationship to her or her environment, rather than providing an account of origins and ends. In other words, we undergo an experience in language instead of searching for a metalanguage or metanarrative through which to justify the phenomenological impact of the work of art. Merleau-Ponty thus writes:

> The writer transports us without transition or preparations from the world of established meanings to something else … Language is literary, that is, productive, only on condition that we stop asking justifications of it at each instant and follow it where it goes, letting the words and all the means of expression of the book be enveloped by that halo of significance that they owe to their singular arrangement. (114–5)

For Merleau-Ponty, we are always already *in the midst* of beings; there can be no total vision which encompasses reality. A work of art is thus always contingent by definition—it expresses a particular engagement with Being. In paradoxical fashion, the work steps forth into presence and withdraws into absence; it fills up and vacates sense. This means that poetry cannot provide a metaphysical account of the world because the sheer weight of presence manifested through it is without ground or ontological cause. For Stevens, poetry must necessarily express change because the world does not come into being prior to the specificity of poetic vision. In order to think through the implications of this mode of presence which overflows but cannot be congealed into an ontic being, I turn to the work of Jean-Luc Nancy and Alain Badiou, each of whom makes more explicit the Heideggerian movement of the presencing and absencing of Being, which poetry puts us in relation with. In the linking of presence to the happening of an event, both Nancy and Badiou allow me to sketch out Heidegger's emphasis of *Ereignis* as the event of appropriation, thereby consolidating the phenomenological weight of poetry I locate in Stevens.

Of Mere Presence Which Comes to Mind: Nancy and Badiou's Thinking of the Event

Jean-Luc Nancy extends phenomenological thought through an examination of the presence of sense, which for him is an overflowing of meaning that comes into being through the openness of the world. For Nancy, sense cannot be adequately captured in metaphysical thinking, for it paradoxically exceeds representation by evacuating itself from adequation to itself. In this way, Nancy draws near to Heidegger in their consideration of presence as the Being of the world which cannot have a preestablished grounding prior to the event of opening. Nancy's thought orientates itself around the indissoluble link between subjectivity and sociality, starting from the fact that we come into being by being abandoned into being—we are always already sustained by otherness and accountability towards those who use language:

> We do not know it, we cannot really know it, but abandoned being has already begun to constitute an inevitable condition for our thought, perhaps its only condition. From now on, the ontology that summons us will be an ontology in which abandonment remains the sole predicament of being, in which it even remains—in the scholastic sense of the word—transcendental. (*Birth* 36)

For Nancy, the transcendental cannot be separated from the empiricism of sense as it manifests in the world. Indeed, Nancy develops Heidegger's notion of freedom as the resolute standing in the open(ing) of Being in order to underscore its importance as the eruption of sense: "We *are born free* not in the sense that a law of nature or of the city guarantees for us in advance the enjoyment of freedom, but in the sense that every birth is a releasing of being, abandoned to a singularity or to a trajectory of singularities … Freedom is the foundation that is discovered in the fact that being *is* essentially abandoned—or that it *exists*" (*Freedom* 92). For both Nancy and Stevens, the modernity of consciousness is precisely characterised by an awareness of interruption and dissolution. Nancy locates this break (which is the condition for sense to emerge in the first place) in the fracturing of myth. Insofar as mythical thought aims to encapsulate our collective understanding of the world in terms of origins and (to paraphrase Frank Kermode) a sense of endings, Nancy rejects the metaphysical thrust behind this enterprise: "It is a total waste of time to try to rediscover, behind the logos that has governed our twenty-five centuries, something like a 'mythical' dimension or sense" (*Sense* 6). The "meaning" of sense cannot be a general category of thought; it inheres in the openness which it first allows *to be*. Phenomenological thought has to attune us to the arrival of sense, which is always a birth into presence of the world. Sense presents itself by absenting itself. The world is thus without metaphysical grounding—this implies that that we no longer have to provide an account of Being. For Nancy, Being is *the* event of presence, the awesome fact that we have a world and are in communion with one another: "*World* means at least *being-to* or *being-toward* [*être-à*]; it means rapport, relation, address, sending, donation, presentation *to*—if only of entities or existents *to* each other … Thus, *world* is not merely the correlative of *sense*, it is structured as *sense*, and reciprocally, *sense* is structured as *world*" (*Sense* 8).

Sense is the origination of meaning, and poetry is phenomenological because it designates the appropriation of sense. Nancy is in agreement with Heidegger that poetry can never be representational of Being. As the former writes, "Poetry knows nothing of the representation or evocation of the inexpressible … It consists of none other than the task of measuring [language's] area, of taking a complete reading of it, of locating and inscribing its bounds" (*Birth* 308). As with Merleau-Ponty, Nancy highlights that poetry is an intensification of the experience we undergo with language; it brings out the potentialities and limitations of language by pressing against its boundaries. Nancy's employment of a geographical metaphor not only solidifies the link between poetry and the opening of a world but also hearkens back to Heidegger's notion of poetry establishing truth through world disclosure. The sense of the world opened up by poetry cannot be a transcendent one by way of a Platonic reminiscence of the Ideal essence we have lost; it brings us back to the fragility of existence that we are abandoned into and are collectively respons(e)-ible for:

> To poetry the earth is given—an inheritance to be surveyed—and there is nothing but this to be noted: that the earth is given, that you are there, that I am here (elsewhere, always, inexorably), and the words exceed the earth and the places it assigns us, that worlds exceed and exhaust these places, and yet at the same time, these very words falter before them. (*Birth* 308)

In summary, the world is all there is—Being is nothing more (and nothing less) than immanent sense. The energy of poetry as the appropriative event is what Nancy, Heidegger and Stevens intimate, for words are a manifestation of the phenomenality of presence. By drawing upon Nancy's thought, I hope to show Stevens' lifelong investment in poetry as being capable of awakening belief in the mysterious force of reality after the passing of the theistic concept of the world. As I will outline in later chapters, these parallels have deeper implications for the question of post-secular theology and the examination of belief made implicitly by Stevens' presentation of a Supreme Fiction and explicitly by Nancy's texts on the deconstruction of Christianity.

Alain Badiou's post-Heideggerian thinking about poetry and the advent of the incalculable Event provides me with another important avenue through which to underscore the structures of poetic appropriation. This is in part due to Badiou's own reading of poetry through Stevens, and his larger claim that poetic language constitutes an important truth procedure. This procedure paradoxically subtracts the subject from the overdetermined regime of ontology in order for a new constellation to emerge—for Badiou, the advent of such emergence is the Event. Badiou makes the link between Heidegger and the ontological emancipatory potential of poetry as such: "After Heidegger, this [event-al] condition will rather have been liberated. We will see in particular that any event-al nomination, in its *declaratory* sequence, when it is necessary to declare that a fidelity begins, implies a poetic incision in language" (quoted in Bosteels 263). For Badiou, poetry functions as nomination rather than signification because it brings Being into being through naming the conditions for this presencing to emerge and surprise us. As Badiou argues, Heidegger accords philosophical weight to the poem by delinking poetic language from ontological concepts in order to bring it into truth. In this way, Badiou argues for the revolutionary force behind Heidegger's rethinking of the concept of truth, for truth cannot be conceived of after Heidegger as a complete correspondence between language and reality. Instead, Being comes to stand in the light of the clearing that truth throws open—the Event discloses by throwing us outside of ourselves towards something new:

> For the naming of an event, in the sense in which I talk about it—namely, the undecidable supplementation that must be named in order to occur to a faithful being, thus to a truth—this nomination is *always* poetic: to name a supplement, a chance, an incalculable event, we must delve into the void of sense, into the lack of established significations, at the risk of language. (43)

As with Nancy, the event which poetry makes possible must be subtracted from established sense in order to *give birth* to presence which traverses reality. In other words, poetry exceeds metaphysical representation by allowing us to think of the presence which arises from absence. This dynamic, which is irreducible to dialectical sublation, parallels the Heideggerian notion of Being which steps forth into unconcealment at the same time it withdraws into hiddenness. Badiou's reading of Stevens' poem "Description Without Place" seeks to overturn the Platonic denigration of poetry as an imperfect copy of reality by arguing that in "poetical intensity … being and existence are identical" (80). Poetic language is therefore the most intense appropriation of reality, for it allows beings in the world to step forth into presence. For Heidegger, Badiou, Nancy and Merleau-Ponty, language is never a detached representation of reality;

instead, language grounds us in relation to the emergence of presence. In reading Stevens' poetry, I argue that Stevens sees poetry in a similar vein—it opens up perception by putting us in proximity to an ever-deepening sense of the world, and performs a vital role in reconciling imaginative projection with the limits of this sense. Eyers' criticism of Badiou's reading of Stevens is thus right in claiming that Stevens is jettisoning "the task of verisimilitude or mimesis" (848)—any poetry which seeks to enliven our relationship with the world must necessarily present sense as it overflows representational frameworks. Where Eyers misreads Stevens is to see this rejection as failure or "ascetic withdrawal" (847), for Stevens illustrates the divide between language and reality only to emphasise how the textuality of the poetic word allows reality to come into being differently. In other words, poetry must insist on this difference because it is fundamentally eruptive.

Badiou's position may be usefully compared to Wolfgang Iser's distinction between explanatory fictions (which include anthropological and cultural narratives) and exploratory fictions (of which the literary speech act is). For Iser, explanatory fictions aim to provide metanarratives which seek to integrate data into the overarching ambit of the stories they tell, while literary fictions purposefully decompose and recompose semiotic systems in order to present new ways of seeing-as. Iser elaborates that new configurations which emerge from literature present "an unpredictable new order [that] thrives on the transformation[s] to which the [pre-existing] components … have been subjected" (174). These alchemic fictions thereby generate new possibilities which "adumbrate an order that can only arise out of the interplay [between narratives and semiotic signs], although they cannot be logically or even causally derived from the fictions themselves" (176). In other words, literature self-consciously emphasises its difference from reality and, in so doing, intimates what a new state of Being could possibly read like. What Badiou and Iser also stress is a theory of engagement with literature that emphasises the mutual coming-into-being of literary truth and the subject who is born into the event of truth. I ultimately turn to Heidegger's understanding of *Ereignis* as the lens through which I read Stevens because the dynamic of co-appropriation outlined by Heidegger not only places the human being in a unique standing in the midst of Being but also underscores a model of hermeneutical understanding which Stevens both enacts in the poetry and "frames" the reader's response by.

The Appropriative "Force" of *Ereignis* and Poetry: Heidegger's Transcendental Horizon

For Heidegger, the evental structures of *Ereignis* imply both immersion in the world and ecstatic relation to that which opens up the world as epochal. Phenomenology does not so much represent a transcendental ground of Being as it reveals the fact that the way Being discloses itself as the Event opens up our sense of historicity and temporality. Heidegger does not therefore undertake the "destruction" of metaphysics in a purely negative fashion, as Karen Feldman points out, Heidegger marries phenomenological inquiry with a historicising of the forgetting of Being in order to "uncover in stepwise fashion the obscured event of disclosure/concealment that forms [the] quasi-essence [of the metaphysics of Being]" (133). In this way, the relationship between the human being and Being cannot be regarded as settled and decided *in advance* to the way in which Being is interpreted and understood. *Ereignis* thus implies as much a "quasi"-transcendental philosophical perspective as an interpretive encounter with language, for what precipitates in this event is our understanding of the difference between propositional language and poetic language. Magrini and Schwieler address the difference as such: "Propositional language in all cases is representational and speaks *about* the things (entities) it addresses in a way that sets up a relation of opposition to a thinking or presenting subject, whereas *poietic* language is already speaking from out of an immersion in Being" (26). The "essence" of poetry is nothing less than projection and disclosure, for language brings entities into appearance, sustaining the things in the world in relation to the human beings who dwell meaningfully within this essence. Poetry is then a radical (re) opening of the world; our encounter with language throws everything we understand under an uncanny light. As Gianni Vattimo argues, "poetry concerns the genesis of a world in the sense … of giving birth to language and to a new total and systematic reorganization of beings" (*Art's Claim to Truth* 67).

If *Ereignis* designates a rethinking of Being which cannot be precipitated from within metaphysics, it also destroys the philosophical understanding of the human being as a rational subject in full control of language. Instead, the human being is *Da-sein*, or a being who is in interpretive convers(at)ion with the world opened up by poetry. In this way, "Dasein becomes capable of dwelling only insofar as it is able to step back from the illusion of mastery of the conscious subject (decentring) and sustain a relation and openness (recentring) to Being as *physis* as dynamic and powerful emerging-appearing" (Capobianco 127). The human being gives up his or her pretensions to mastery and (re)discovers an interpretive freedom to be found in the nearing and absenting of Being. It is this lingering and abiding within a unity which Heidegger finds valuable in the artwork, for it appropriates the human perceiver into the space of its meaning. Heidegger's point about poetry is that we cannot think, or indeed *be*, outside of language; poetry is phenomenological because it manifests Being as abyss [*Ab-grund*], not metaphysical ground. *Ereignis* happens as a poetic transaction with Being because appropriation does not imply objective representation that seeks to en-frame [*Ge-stell*] Being in pre-established metaphysical categories. In this way, thinking is appropriative as it hearkens to that which opens up its possibility and, in so doing, grounds the thinking being in an attentive openness towards what language opens up and gives to thinking. For Heidegger, *Ereignis* is thus *both* appropriation and en-owning; language is an inceptive saying which brings to the fore meanings which sustain the historical and phenomenological dimensions of significations. This encounter between the human being and poetry exceeds both passivity and activity: as Gregory Fried writes, "in order for Being to emerge into unconcealment, and for *Da-sein* to let things be, *Da-sein* cannot remain passive; it must confront the given interpretation of the world" (85). However, this "activity" cannot arise prior to what language "gives" to thinking—as Fried elaborates, "the resolutely active, reinterpretive encounter of Dasein with the world as it has been given by a history of Dasein [is not something] Dasein can … leap out of and control" (85).

This book will take its orientation from the phenomenological significance of poetry in order to read Stevens' poetic output as dramatisations of Heideggerian appropriations of Being. By outlining the place of *Ereignis* within Heidegger's thought (and how the thinking of the historicity of Being from *out* of Being itself presents an important moment in the development of his philosophy), I demonstrate how Stevens' poetry often stresses the inseparability between the poetic subject (or the subject who comes into being through poetry), language, and the world. Insofar as the history of criticism on Stevens has circulated around the polarities of "reality" and the "imagination", I aim to refocus this critical emphasis around a Heideggerian reading, which endorses neither an aestheticised abstraction of reality as an imaginative object, nor a retreat of perception from the otherness of the external world. Instead, the language of appropriation (or

Ereignis) provides me with a lens to delineate an intense attempt to reconcile, or en-own, the perceiver to the world as a way of giving birth to a mode of belief which can be described as "existential"—for Stevens, to *be* is to be open to the world. Poetry en-owns us to reality in a Heideggerian fashion when it reminds us that "in our world 'meaning' manifests itself to the [perceiver] only when he engages in the living process in which such a meaning has been brought to the fore historically" (Pöggeler 111). There is no "reality" prior to the way in which poetry opens up an abiding within it.

In my reading, Stevens uses poetry not in order to represent reality, but to hold the world and objects in the world in graceful tension with the observer. Poetry orientates phenomenological insight through the emergence of reality which first becomes palpably present in language. At the same time, poetry is appropriative because it situates both the poetic subject and the reader within the evental happening of the poem, implying that there "is no thinking 'before' this owning" (De Gennaro 32), which is ultimately a co-appropriation of the human being and Being. To borrow from Wordsworth, what Stevens shows us from his early poetry to his late works is how the world is already too much with us, the word "too" demonstrating the overflow of presence. As with all the post-Husserlian phenomenologists I have outlined in this Introduction, Stevens is adamant that poetry need not provide an account of our origins or ends; its sheer possibility is shaped by the erasure of transcendental meaning. Reading Heidegger alongside Stevens will also allow us to see how the subject can think poetically (in other words, to think of the world as and in poetry). As Jennifer Gosetti-Ferencei points out, "poetic thinking is both the thinking of a self 'entangled' in the realm of beings … and rendered poetically responsive to Being's elusiveness" (143). Poetry is the ungroundable event which opens and sustains ontological thinking. In a word, Stevens puts his faith in the notion that "the speakability of the world is quite literally *renewed* with every poetic experience" (Abbott 510), these movements of appropriation being that which accords poeticising and philosophising their existential *gravitas*.

The Shape of the Argument

This book will thus attempt to survey the breadth of Stevens' poetry in a chronological fashion in order to trace the philosophical coherence behind his investments in the imagination's continual and renewed transactions with reality. Chapter 2 will be a more extended consideration of how Heidegger and Stevens may be put into conversation with each other, thereby making the case for a detailed reading of Stevens' *oeuvre* as intimations of Being's presence as it comes into poetry. I make the case that Stevens understands the role of poetry as seeking to "heal the gap between the subjective and objective worlds" (Steinman 65), thereby locating the responsive consciousness within a world which is affectively understood as an open horizon of meaning. For Stevens, the language of poetry, as *the* approach to Being, is deeply rooted in ontology; Heidegger's arguments about the difference between ontic beings and Being resonates with some of the objectives of Stevens, and can provide us with a compelling framework that puts poetry and phenomenology into conversation.

Chapter 3 will lay out the philosophical case for reading the later Heidegger into Stevens' poetry. By emphasising the much-noted "turn" [*Kehre*] in Heidegger's thinking in the years after *Being and Time*, I attempt to foreground the importance of *Ereignis* to his understanding of the redemptive role of poetry in reorientating the history of philosophy and metaphysical thinking. Insofar as Heidegger laments the Western tradition for a "forgetting of Being" that has ironically determined the course of thought, he reaches for a non-metaphysical, highly performative notion of *Ereignis* as co-appropriation and en-owning in order to herald a "new" thinking of Being which puts poetic language at its very centre. By analysing the place of *Ereignis* within his thought, I show how appropriation puts forth a very different concept of the human observer and his or her environment. This chapter's recourse to philosophical analysis will enable the unpacking of the particular dynamism of Stevens' language as non-metaphysical encounter and epiphany.

Chapter 4 will focus on Stevens' first poetry collection *Harmonium* (first edition 1923; subsequent edition 1931). In responding to what criticism has labelled the hermetic aestheticism of Stevens' language in the collection, I demonstrate how the poems lend philosophical weight to what Stevens calls the "poetry of the earth", centring on what Robert Buttel describes as the "emotional nuances and … diverse feelings that grow out of Stevens' awareness of the fullness of an earthly life circumscribed by negation and final blankness" (148). In doing so, I frame my argument through Heidegger's analysis of Being as presence and the No-thing. For Heidegger, presence opens up our fundamental attunement towards the world, and it is this opening which Stevens pursues in both the intellectual and sensorial registers of his language. The poems in

Harmonium then assert their difference from mainstream Modernism in ways which can be tied to phenomenological attitudes and existential stances.

Chapter 5 takes up the vexed relationship between poetry and politics in the turbulent 1930s. It will be here that I stress the divergence between poet and philosopher. By first critiquing Heidegger’s misguided understanding of Being as political totality in the decade, I show how unthinking absorption and participation in the *mythos* of an ahistorical *Volk* surfaces the worst impulses of the mapping of philosophy onto political vision. This failing will allow me to sketch Stevens’ own vision of political commitment in the decade, which by many accounts stands apart from other poets such as William Carlos Williams, Carl Sandburg and Louis Zukofsky. By analysing Stevens’ statements on politics as both reflected and refracted in the poems of the decade, I show how Stevens espouses an essentially pragmatic approach to politics that keeps the vitality of the imagination intact when it is put in dialectical relation with society. In doing so, I show how the contours of the Supreme Fiction (which Stevens fully develops in the 1940s) is adumbrated by the poetic lessons Stevens learns when his own poetry enters the arena of mass consumption and debate.

Chapter 6 will concentrate on Stevens’ most famous poem “Notes Towards a Supreme Fiction”. I will map Stevens’ long poem onto Heidegger’s writings of the 1940s in order to suggest a homology between the return to a “first beginning” in the poetry and the opening beyond metaphysics which provides the vital alternative to technological domination. As I read Stevens and Heidegger, the language of poetry and philosophy are inevitably mediated by previous discourses and tropes. To the extent that both seek an opening and a beginning that have the potential to reorientate the conceptuality of “truth”, a post-metaphysical vitality of the imagination can be sought in this de-sedimentation. I also take up the possibility of reading the Supreme Fiction in a post-theological way through Nancy’s argument of religiosity as a fundamental break from ontology. The (negative) workings of opening will not only tie together these three figures but also renovate the theological and philosophical implications behind Stevens’ abstractions.

My last chapter reads the diminishments of Stevens’ late poetry in terms of a *productive* failure to access the ground of reality. In opposition to readers of Stevens who see the final senescence of the poetic imagination as it turns to plain, unadorned statement, I see the precipitation of a tension between language and Being which has been philosophically important for Stevens throughout his entire poetic career. By putting Stevensian tropes in the late poetry in touch with his predominant concerns from *Harmonium*, I show how Stevens' linguistic self-consciousness both allows and forbids the poetic presentation of reality. Far from being a falling-off, I demonstrate how these poems bring out the movement of *Ereignis* in its most heightened way. In this way, the "total grandeur of a total edifice" (*CPP* 434) is finally fruitfully revealed as poetic structure.

CHAPTER 2

“Not Ours Although We Understood”: The Language of Stevens and Heidegger

WALLACE STEVENS AS A “PHILOSOPHICAL POET”

The ontological significance of poetry for Wallace Stevens solicits philosophical interpretation which not only heightens an awareness of how each discourse of poetry and philosophy speaks to a unique view of being but also calls into question the relationship between poeticising and thinking. Writing in 1963 (barely a decade after Stevens’ death), Northrop Frye comments on the all-encompassing poetics of Stevens as such:

> Wallace Stevens was a poet for whom the theory and practice of poetry were inseparable. His poetic vision is informed by a metaphysic; his metaphysic is informed by a theory of knowledge; his theory of knowledge is informed by a poetic vision. (63)

Frye’s linking of poetic language, metaphysical speculation and epistemological concerns positions Stevens as a poet of abstraction whose aesthetic concerns embrace the most fundamental parameters of thought. Stevens himself gives credence to this in a letter to Thomas McGreevy written in May 1948, where he states that “the mind with metaphysical affinities has a dash when it deals with reality that the purely realistic mind never has

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because the purely realistic mind never experiences any passion for reality" (*L* 597). Elsewhere, Stevens writes that "there is nothing I desire more intensely than to make a contribution to the theory of poetry" (*L* 585). Yet, given Stevens' putative disavowal of the link between the philosopher and the poet, nowhere more astringently captured than in *Adagia* where he posits that "the poet must not adapt his experience to that of the philosopher" (*CPP* 909), we will be hard-pressed to find direct philosophical statements which arrive unmediated by poetic expression, and how an understanding of philosophical theory can add anything significant to the densities of "the poem of life" (*CPP* 365) which seem to undermine systemic constructs and theoretical paradigms. However, following Derrida's logic of the supplement which paradoxically understands discourse adding to the lack of presence while claiming to constitute its centrality, Stevens has been construed to be "the most philosophical of modernist poets in English" (Eeckhout, "Stevens and Philosophy" 103). If it was possible in 1965 for Joseph N. Riddel already to trace the divergent trajectories of Stevensian criticism whilst noting that there has not *yet* been a critical "industry" ("Contours of Stevens Criticism" 243) revolving around Stevens' work, then the rise of literary theory in the decades following, coupled with renewed scholarly interest in the philosophy of literature, only served to elevate the relevance of Stevens' work at the cost of co-opting his poetry into irreconcilable ideological frameworks:

> Wallace Stevens' modern relevance is itself something of a battleground. Since the 1940s, Stevens' poetry … has been appropriated by almost every new movement in literary criticism and theory, with each new critical school seizing on Stevens as the poet who more than any other proves tractable to the theory and practice of that particular school.[1] (Jenkins *Rage for Order* 53)

Adding to the conflict of reading perspectives is also the impression of a body of work which rarely appears monolithically singular; indeed, what philosophical vision can be imputed to the poet who *both* extols the pristine epiphany of seeing "the sun when seen in its [first] idea" (*CPP* 329) and consigns its idea along with "the wrapper on the can of pears"

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[1] To provide a sampling of how Stevens has been read in the light of literary theory, see M. Keith Booker's (1990) reading of Stevens from a Lacanian perspective, Frederic Jameson's (1988) employment of a cultural materialist perspective on Stevens' depiction of landscapes, and Paul Douglass' (1988) comparing of Stevens with the philosophical vitalism of Henri Bergson.

(*CPP* 185) to the dump of stale images suggesting the futility of poetic exertion, or who seemingly endorses the position that "Life consists/Of propositions about life" (*CPP* 310) while lamenting that the "vocabulary of summer/No longer says anything" (*CPP* 431)? More to the point, how might a Heideggerian reading of Stevens contribute to the litany of criticism in a significant way without adding one more extraneous voice, given the fact that the only explicit references which Stevens makes to Heidegger in his letters mistake him for a "Swiss philosopher" (*L* 758) who "lives in Fribourg" (*L* 839)?

Language as the Site of Appropriation: The Case for Stevens and Heidegger

I will argue that to put Stevens and Heidegger into conversation with each other is to examine how both treat poetic writing as opening up a crucial link between temporality, existentiality and a poetic sense of experience. If we are to take on board Stevens' contention that "to give a sense of the freshness and vividness of life is a valid purpose for poetry" (*CPP* 900), then the felt particulars of human experience need to be registered and given the philosophical weight of existential temporality. Two classic studies of Stevens emphasise the convergence between the poetry and existentialist thought: James Baird's structuralist reading of the poet explains that "if we wish to speak of [Stevens'] affinities with any school, it is … [with] *the philosophy of existence*" (268), and Frank Kermode's notable but largely speculative comparison between Stevens and Heidegger marshals the existential attitude towards death as temporal finitude in order to emphasise the importance of "dwelling" to both philosopher and poet. To view Stevens' poetry through Heidegger is also to concretise the poet's incessant inquiry into the relationship "between phenomenal consciousness and … external reality that provides the ground for it" (Sahner 65). More than that, it is ultimately to see both philosopher and poet engaged in probing the ways in which the affective language of poetry seizes and unsettles us by placing us in open response to our environment—an "obscure threshold of sense" (Nancy *Sense* 83) which replaces the interiority of representation with the mutual appropriation of the human being and philosophical Being.

Throughout his writing, Stevens senses a close link between philosophy and poetry—in a late poem dedicated to the philosopher George Santayana, the poet writes that "the design of all his words takes form/And frame from thinking and is realized" (*CPP* 434). Stevens' most explicit statement of the way in which the import of the poetic word grounds itself in deep thinking come from his essay "A Collect of Philosophy", in which he states outright that "the ideas of philosophy may be described as poetic concepts" (*CPP* 856). Poetry and philosophy are intellectual and spiritual endeavours to imbue the sensitive reader with "the idea of the infinity of the world" (*CPP* 851). It is the sense of the world thus approached as an inexhaustible horizon of meaning that Stevens insists poetry and philosophy must evoke. Indeed, for Stevens, "the greatest poverty is not to live/ In a physical world" (*CPP* 286) of human desires and phenomenal perceptions which provide sustenance for the sanctifying imagination. However, Stevens is wary of succumbing to a facile romanticism which traps the poetic subject in insipid constructions of the Ideal which ultimately denude the imagination of its perceptual vitality. Rather than soar on the viewless wings of poesy, Stevens orientates his poetic gaze towards "the vulgate of experience" (*CPP* 397), trusting that the way to live imaginatively in this world is to imbue perception with an almost revelatory force. Milton J. Bates succinctly points out this distinctive feature in Stevens' poetry as such:

> But if poems can do without poets, they cannot do without the phenomenal world. Appearances, no matter how quirky or ephemeral, are their lifeblood. Though poems are ultimately about Poetry, they are also—and more immediately—about familiar things such as the sun, clouds, earth and sky. (167)

Bates' emphasis on how Stevens' language is grounded on the poeticising of the world would seem to suggest that Stevens is primarily a poet interested in the openness of perception. Eeckhout concurs with this assessment, writing that "Stevens, early and late, was fascinated by the freedom (both opportunity and danger) that the human mind is left with in the act of perceiving, as well as the strictures that operate upon (both limiting and enabling) this freedom" (*Wallace Stevens* 144). Stevens himself highlights that the deepest affinities between poetry and philosophy are to be sought in the thinking of reality as a problem for perception

Stevens' intuition about the crisis of post-Cartesian philosophy as it struggles to bridge the widening gap between the structures of the disembodied mind and the complexities of the external world speaks to his scepticism that the truth of reality can be entirely comprehended by epistemological frameworks which entrench an intellectual distance between the subject and object. For Stevens, to write poetry is to discover aspects of reality which intensify in the glow of the imagination. Indeed, I argue that Stevens seeks a mode of poetic perception which puts the perceiver in "a kind of ecstatic union" (Malkin 113) with the world. On this view, the truth of the world is far from something which we objectively impute to it; instead, poetry's function is to refresh the collective organon of in*sight* which will allow us to discover truth. To the extent that Stevens' poems are about the inseparability of mind and world as they become enmeshed in reciprocal processes of "becoming" which deny any fixed epistemological vantage point with which to survey Being (Tompsett 31), the thematic of perception in Stevens modulates into an awareness of the Heideggerian "no-thing" that ironically provides the ultimate phenomenological ground for consciousness. In this way, Stevens arguably reaches beyond William Carlos Williams' concentration upon a "thing-ly" aesthetic in order to open up a philosophical search that takes place on the ontological plane.

It is in Heidegger's arguments about phenomenological seeing that we see how philosophical thought may be consonant with Stevens' practice of poetry. For Heidegger, "phenomenology is our way of access to what is to be the theme of ontology" (*BT* 60). Far from reifying objects which cumulatively present a world exhausted by scientific contemplation, phenomenology uncovers the human being's fundamental access to and relationship to Being by revealing the ontological significance of the world:

> Because phenomena, as understood phenomenologically, are never anything but what goes to make up Being, while Being is in every case the Being of some entity, we must first bring forward the entities themselves if it is our aim that Being should be laid bare. (*BT* 61)

For Stevens and Heidegger, the act of perception is freighted with philosophical weight, for it can never be a simple description of the world as an object of dispassionate observation. Rather, perception is a statement of *how* the perceiver finds himself or herself in an attitude of comportment towards the world. For both, truth is not a function of correspondence between theory and a state of affairs it attempts to encapsulate, but a deep revelation about the infinite horizon of the world. Ironically, it is only when the perceiver discards pre-established notions of "truth" that reality presses in on him in all its sensual freshness. As Stevens writes in the poem "On the Road Home":

> It was when I said,
> "There is no such thing as the truth,"
> That the grapes seemed fatter. (*CPP* 186)

I will thus argue that it is Heidegger's philosophical arguments about the way the human being is always sustaining himself in a relationship towards Being which provide a compelling theoretical framework through which we can understand how Stevens positions the poetic self. This conjunction allows us to unpack the primacy both Stevens and Heidegger accord to poetic language and the poet, for it is the poet who places us in life-sustaining communion with the world and, in so doing, opens up new ways of approaching subjectivity as being endlessly alive to its imaginative appropriation of reality.

To further this point, if Stevens can be read as a philosophical poet, this is because he displays an acute understanding of how poetic language can attune fundamental modes of sensibility and comportment towards the unfolding of Being which reorientate our dispositions towards our intellectual and spiritual capacities as subjects facing the world and shaping our attitudes about it. Writing with a melancholic conviction that "the destructive force of the nothing" (Miller 220) has left humanity bereft of life-sustaining modes of transcendent belief, Stevens seeks no less than to fashion the idea of a "supreme poetry" which will enunciate lasting faith in the human being's capacity not only to use language to "[find] himself more truly" (*CPP* 51) in the desiccated bareness of things but also to claim final satisfaction in an ennobling fiction: "And to turn to look and say there is no more/Than this, in this alone I may believe,/Whatever it may be" (*CPP* 232). This existential and metaphysical sense of crisis is shared by Heidegger also, who turns to the pressing need of poetry to ground humanity in a renewed understanding of Being in an age wherein the human being has surrendered his or her thinking nature over to technological mastery of beings. Indeed, writing of Hölderlin's poeticising of the river Ister, Heidegger argues that poetry crucially grounds humanity in the difficult task of appropriating what is nearest to them:

> The river "*is*" the locality that pervades the abode of human beings upon the earth, determines them to where they belong and where they are homely [*heimisch*]. The river thus brings human beings into their own and maintains them in what is their own. Whatever is their own is that to which human beings belong and must belong to if they are to fulfil whatever is destined to them, and whatever is fitting, as their specific way of being. (*HHTI* 21)

Far from being a tool through which we objectify reality by imposing upon it ossified concepts derived from a tradition which has become questionable in itself, both Stevens and Heidegger view poetic language as sustaining us in relationship with the openness of Being, through moments in which the self realises that it is only "a small part of the pantomime" (*CPP* 75) which cannot be fully encompassed by any one theoretical construct. As Heidegger puts it in an essay on Stefan George's poetry, "the word itself is the relation, by holding everything forth into being, and there upholding it. If the word did not have this bearing, the whole of things, the 'world', would sink into obscurity" (*OWL* 73). Stevens' own reflection on the poet of capable imagination seems to be homologous to Heidegger's arguments about how poetry "name[s] the … ground of what is real, and first brings [Being] to its essence by pointing out the very reality of it" (*EHP* 115). After the abandonment of any easy belief in metaphysical certitude which opens up the abyss of nihilism, the poet and the philosopher seek to renew faith in an alternative relationship to the world by grounding the human being in a careful attunement to Being as it comes into presence in language.

The "Poet of Reality" and Image of Stevens in Criticism

However, rather than espousing a Romantic faith in the spiritual power of language to sublimate the difference between inward subjectivity and external reality, Stevens' poetry ironically embodies ambivalent attitudes towards the attempt to represent reality as it is. Indeed, it is no exaggeration to observe that for Stevens, the central problem for poetic consciousness is the sense of reality. Stevens himself seems to embody somewhat inconsistent stances towards the divide between poetic imagination and the world outside the self—on the one hand, the imagination becomes lifeless and inert if it indulges in escapism; on the other, it exerts a counterpressure in the face of overwhelming trauma. If language places the poet in immanent contact with the "immense dew of Florida" which precipitates "hymn and hymn/From the beholder" (*CPP* 77), its ineluctable limit is surely elaborated in the late poem "Of Mere Being" (*CPP* 476–7), which resolutely distances itself from the Romantic symbol of poetic inspiration in order to foreground an unbridgeable distance that ineluctably resists conceptual mastery:

> The palm at the end of the mind,
> Beyond the last thought, rises
> In the bronze décor,
> A gold-feathered bird
> Sings in the palm, without human meaning,
> Without human feeling, a foreign song.

It is in this paradoxical movement between reality entering into communion with language and reality abstracting itself from concepts that defines the task of poetry for Stevens. Donald Sheehan appropriately describes how Stevens seems to oscillate between an insistence that the metaphorical evocation of Being allows "the union of the perceiver and the perceived" based on a theory of facets of reality being linked by universal resemblance, and the awareness that the external world as the song of mere Being "is immediate yet in essence mysterious since the objects constituting it have no reference beyond themselves nor any relation to the perceiver" (33).

Given this split between language as enhancement and language as evasion, criticism has tended to emphasise either the Stevens who continually seeks to bridge the divide separating self and world through fresh linguistic engagements (thereby sustaining Stevens' poetic sensibilities) or the Stevens who gradually comes to understand reality as a non-signifying void which defeats all poeticising. For instance, David M. LaGuardia reads Stevens' poetic output as a unified attempt to "abandon the advocates of a waste land and [to] reconstruct in a mode of triumph a vibrant relation to [the] world" (13). Similarly, Riddel's book *The Clairvoyant Eye* traces the development of Stevens' imagery as consistent manifestations of the "attempt to regain a lost unity, a past in which the mind and the world could be synchronized" (Ziarek *Inflected* 106). From the other perspective, J. Hillis Miller's chapter on Stevens in his book *Poets of Reality* influentially argues that Stevens escapes "metaphysical dualism" (274) only to demonstrate how "nothingness is the source and end of everything, and underlies everything as its present reality" (277). Following in the same vein as Miller, Simon Critchley writes that the late poems of Stevens "stubbornly show how the mind cannot seize hold of the ultimate nature of the reality that faces it. Reality retreats before the imagination which shapes and orders it. Poetry is therefore the experience of failure" (6). Summarising these two trends in Stevens scholarship in 2017, Alan Filreis identifies two images of Stevens which readers engage with: the Stevens who is "always obsessive about the state of poetics, and insisting on consciousness of the compositional mode as itself a pressure inducing the poem to be composed", and a Stevens who recognises that "language is not the final thing; the thing itself *is*" (144; emphasis mine).

Poetry and "Dwelling": Stevens and Heidegger's topology of Being

Given this divide in the poetry and criticism, I argue that Heidegger's meditations about poetic language enabling the human being to dwell within the event of the truth of Being as unconcealment provide a powerful model with which to engage Stevens' poetic project of evoking the unfolding of the imagination as it encounters that which is *both* linguistically revealed and hidden from it. For Heidegger, the decisive moment in the history of metaphysics understood as a "forgetting of the question of Being" occurs when the pre-Socratic notion of Being as "presencing" (which arises from and withdraws into concealment) gets interpreted by Plato as *idea*, thereby making possible "the analogy between grasping beings and seeing" (*N4* 167). Because beings *in their being* (or mode of presencing) has been predetermined by adequate mental perception, Platonic philosophy sets the stage for later developments in metaphysics which entrench the cogency of representation, wherein the observer secures his position over and against beings by objectification and machination:

> [T]he representing I is far more *essentially* and necessarily co-represented in every "I represent," namely as something toward which, back to which, and *before* which every represented thing is placed. (*N4* 107)

By securing his place in the midst of beings and setting himself up as the standard bearer of imposed values, the human being debars himself or herself from a more thoughtful approach to the clearing event of Being as that which allows beings to presence in any meaningful way. In other words, metaphysical representation obscures the fact that we do not foist our subjective interpretations on the world without consideration of our own contingencies and futural possibilities. Instead, beings disclose our place in the world from which we speak. Nothing is more alien to Stevens' thought than the proposition that the imagination has an unchanging valence in the face of reality. In fact, Stevens opens his essay "The Noble Rider and the Sound of Words" with a critical examination of the Platonic image of the soul being a charioteer, dismissing the figure as "antiquated and rustic" (*CPP* 643) because it does not speak to our current sensibilities. Given this understanding, Stevens insists that our transactions with beings can never be determined outside of the poetic event:

> [I]t is one of the peculiarities of the imagination that it is always at the end of an era. What happens is that it is always attaching itself to a new reality, and adhering to it. It is not that there is a new imagination but that there is a new reality. (*CPP* 656)

In the topography of Stevens' poetry, place cannot be divorced from language's appropriations of it: as indicated in the poem "Description Without Place", "such seemings [as signified in language] are the actual ones: the way/Things look each day, each morning" (*CPP* 297). Far from being an object of representational thought and projection, reality manifests itself to the perceiving self at its most intense, indeed as a revelatory "cry of its occasion" (*CPP* 404) which gathers up poetic expression at the very moment of its articulation. Given this ever-deepening sense of what lies outside of the self, nowhere more pointedly presented than as the "ambiguous undulations [of] … extended wings" (*CPP* 56) of birds at the close of the poem "Sunday Morning" which arrive shorn of Christian symbolism, the perceiver cannot remain passive, for he or she must seek to find language adequate for evoking the poetic experience. Language does not so much objectify a poetic encounter with Being as it enlarges and clarifies our imaginative vocabularies with which to appropriate its significance; as Ackerman points out, "poetry can never be simply a transparent means of discovery; it is part of what is discovered" (84), for language clears the space through which "a new knowledge of reality" (*CPP* 452) can be apprehended. As I interpret Stevens, the poetic event is falsified the moment the self renders Being as an *object* of representation which can be captured and assimilated to the theoretical edifice which is imposed by the subjectivity of the would-be perceiver.

Stevens' critique of the subject-object dichotomy would seem to fit with Heidegger's overall dismantling of the sedimented history of Western metaphysics, which debars human beings from a fundamental attitude of openness towards the unfolding of Being through beings by congealing them into calculable entities to be seized upon without any more thoughtfulness as to how our orientation towards the world is premised upon the way Being appropriates us by bringing us into our own. In this way, human beings secure their tenuous hold upon beings by assigning subjective values upon them which confer illusory presence and stability at the cost of our authentic attunement towards the unacknowledged horizon of Being from which these values emerge and dissolve. Poetic language thus becomes important for Heidegger because it breaks the stranglehold of representational thinking which only succeeds at focusing the human being's attention on ontic beings at the cost of a more fundamental openness to the ways in which humanity has been granted a particular historical understanding of these beings. As Heidegger puts it, it is never the human being who speaks, but language, for it is language which allows human beings to ground themselves with hermeneutical possibilities and contingent historical narratives. Indeed, given his insistence that the questing mind "can never be satisfied" (*CPP* 224) with dogmatic understanding, instead taking "the imperfect" as secular "paradise" (*CPP* 179), Stevens' language constantly turns towards scenarios and situations which not only do not gesture towards hermetic closure but also enact the immanent ways in which the subject comports towards the opening of Being.

STEVENS *CONTRA* NIETZSCHE AND THE POSTMODERN SENTIMENT

If the self does not face the world as a subject disinterestedly contemplating an objective reality which can be entirely captured in language, then some part of the world will always remain turned away from the self, resembling "a busy cry concerning someone else" (*CPP* 460). Although criticism has tended to locate Stevens' preoccupation with nothingness and the foreignness of Being in the later poetry, I argue that death and negation already form the undercurrent to the gaudy exterior and verbal exuberance of the poems in *Harmonium*—nowhere emerging more clearly than in the poems "The Emperor of Ice-Cream", "The Snow Man" and "Sunday Morning". If Michel Benamou is right in pointing out that in *Harmonium*, "the darkness remains precariously under control" (*Wallace Stevens and the Symbolist Imagination* 61), it becomes more pronounced in the later long poems "The Auroras of Autumn" and "An Ordinary Evening in New Haven", culminating in the exhaustion of the poems in *The Rock*. It is this near-obsession with nothingness with allows Stevens to be compared with Friedrich Nietzsche, despite the case that Stevens repudiates any direct affinity between him and the German thinker, as evidenced in a letter to Henry Church:

> I am very much interested in your preoccupation with Nietzsche. In his mind one does not see the world more clearly; both of us must often have felt how a strong mind distorts the world. Nietzsche's mind was a perfect example of that sort of thing. Perhaps his effect was merely the effect of the epatant. The incessant job is to get into focus, not out of focus. Nietzsche is as perfect a means of getting out of focus as a little bit too much to drink. (*L* 431–2)

Notwithstanding this sentiment, critics such as Charles Altieri (2013), Benamou (1965), David Jarraway (1993), B. J. Leggett (1992) and Leon Surette (2008) all claim that Stevens' poetry sustains Nietzsche's postmodernist turn away from absolute truth towards the dynamism of art which creates "fictions" through which we can enhance our perceptions of reality. Jarraway's book *Wallace Stevens and the Question of Belief* presents an intricate argument re-orientating the question of belief in Stevens' poetry away from a transcendental horizon. Stevens thus presents the reader with "his critique of theocentric belief" (6) through the performative "deregulation of textuality" (16) which points towards repetitions and remarkings which undermine the stability of meaning: "the implications as far as belief is concerned are that it has no center or that if it has one, its center is completely indecipherable" (285). Marshalling a whole array of deconstructive vocabulary, Jarraway reads Stevens' major poems in order to emphasise how Stevens eschews unified humanistic truths in favour of decentred fictions which ensure that belief always remains open towards otherness and the contingencies of its own articulations. As much as Jarraway is right in seeing the stripping away of encrusted belief systems to be an important part of Stevens' poetic enterprise, I contend that this nihilating impulse should be read in a Heideggerian way, as an integral part of the unconcealment of Being. As Stevens recognises, it is "difficult to sing in face/Of the object" (*CPP* 325) not because of any Nietzschean gaiety of the will-to-power, but because Being is intricately linked to its own negation—its coming-into-being *is* its precariousness. In fact, the later poetry constantly enacts the stance of the observer merely confronting the "rigid emptiness" (*CPP* 445) of Being as it is, without any embellishment from "the fiction of the leaves" (*CPP* 446) which might function as aesthetic palliative. However, it is precisely this gaze into this non-metaphysical ground of reality which, as Heidegger argues, allows Being to manifest as it is, and not as an ontic being. Faced with the presence of the Nothing which painfully reminds us of our own mortality and thus urgent comportment towards beings as a whole, Stevens' poetry attempts a "cure of ourselves" (*CPP* 446) by undermining subjectivism in favour of an alternative attunement to the ground of beings, which is Being as opening and unconcealment.

Indeed, if Stevens writes in the poem "Credences of Summer" that "the truth" is manifested in "the visible rock" (*CPP* 324), this displays a Heideggerian understanding of truth not as correspondence, but as *a-lethe-ia*, the word encompassing *both* openness and concealment, in the double movement of Being as it presences into appearance and withdraws back into nothingness. As Heidegger elaborates in his text "The Anaximander Fragment":

> What is presently present in unconcealment lingers in unconcealment as in an open expanse. Whatever lingers (or whiles) in the expanse proceeds to it from concealment and arrives in unconcealment. But what is present *is* arriving or lingering insofar as it is also already departing from unconcealment toward concealment. What is present lingers awhile. It endures in approach and withdrawal. Lingering is the transition from coming into going … Lingering in transition, it lingers still in approach and lingers already in departure. (*EGT* 37)

Being therefore grounds beings in presencing, which cannot be thought of apart from absence; beings manifest the truth of Being, while also hiding it in nothingness and as absolute difference from beings. In *Difference and Repetition*, Gilles Deleuze comments upon the "ontological difference" as such: "This difference is not 'between' in the ordinary sense of the word … It is constitutive of Being and of the manner in which Being constitutes being, in the double movement of ‘clearing’ and ‘veiling’. Being is truly the differenciator of difference” (81). In this way, the rock of summer in the poem, in a similar manner to the artwork in Heidegger’s text “The Origin of the Work of Art”, becomes the site through which the event of truth as unconcealment manifests by setting forth and “fixing” an open region whereby Being is “fully made, fully apparent, fully found” (*CPP* 325), and also withdrawing into the sheer hardness of its own being “which is not part of the listener’s own sense” (*CPP* 326), a realm of absence language can hardly symbolise. The “failure” of the imagination to encompass the ultimate nature of reality which Critchley and others see in the later poetry is thus a dramatisation of how language runs up against its representational limits in evoking the event of Being, which, as Heidegger writes, steps forth into unconcealment while also veiling itself in hiddenness. I thus argue that, far from representing Being as an object of calculation and domination, Stevens’ language succeeds in putting both speaker and reader in *proximity* with Being as it comes into presence through poetry. This relation henceforth cannot be conceived on the basis of what Richard Rorty terms as “the mirror of nature”, where “the retinal image is *itself* the model for the ‘intellect which become all things’” (45). As Rorty expands on Heidegger:

> If we have a Heideggerian conception of philosophy, we will see the attempt to make the nature of the knowing subject a source of necessary truths as one more self-deceptive attempt to substitute a “technical” and determinate question for that openness to strangeness which initially tempted us to begin thinking. (9)

In other words, rather than interpreting this as a deficiency of the imaginative temperament, I argue that Stevens is aware that the imagination must maintain itself in the face of nothingness in order to be open to what steps forth from it; if, as Gerald Bruns writes, “it is thus possible to think of poetry as an experience of the *resistance* of language to the designs that we place upon it”, this awareness leads to an*other* conception of how the human being dwells poetically in language. In the place of language as representation, a vocabulary of en-ownment is thus needed, wherein the human being appropriates his possibilities of being and being-in-the-world only through responding to the event of clearing in poetry through which beings arrive into unconcealment. In this way, we can appropriate the "nothing that *is*" (*CPP* 8, emphasis mine) by understanding the intricate link between Being and the nothing as the non-metaphysical "clearing" which gathers together thinking and the human being's ecstatic relationship to entities. As Paul A. Bové writes on the link between Stevens and Heidegger: "[Stevens] frees poetry's possibilities by breaking away from the traditional 'poetry' at-home in the inherited language and structures of a metaphysical 'tradition'" (187).

Being's Monological Tyranny: Some Limitations to the Heideggerian Approach

However, a Heideggerian approach to the openness of Being which is accessed through language does have certain limitations. Despite Heidegger's emphasis on the putative unconcealment of Being which grants a world and the possibility of meaning, Derrida argues that this granting is paradoxically premised upon the language of exclusion. As he writes in *Of Spirit: Heidegger and the Question*, Heidegger implies that the animal cannot have a world like *Da-sein* does because it lacks our language, and thus, phenomenological access to beings. In this way, Heidegger instantiates anthropological assumptions about the human being as distinguished from the animal at the *very moment* he argues that *Da-sein* is distinguished from traditional philosophical conceptions of the human being. As Derrida goes on to argue, this implicit strategy of demarcation culminates in the "elevated *spiritual* legitimacy" (39) of a certain mode of *Da-sein*, which finds expression in National Socialism. As Derrida's analysis of Heidegger's 1933 speech as Rector of the University of Freiburg emphasizes, the issue of spirit (which occupies an ambiguously apolitical place in the earlier *Being and Time*) is illegitimately given political pomp as the "affirmation of [German] spirit" (33). This then leads to a crucial *aporia* which marks an unresolvable tension between language and historical materiality: by seemingly pursuing a "primordial" definition of spirit which "rises above" the discourses of anthropology and religion, Heidegger in turn spiritualises the manifestation of spirit as nationalistic movement and moment.[2] Inasmuch as language unveils a world in which we define our sense of being, language also excludes, being conditioned by inequality and marks of power. Recognising the limitations of Heideggerian discourse in this way is to understand how language is never a monolithically defined phenomenon which the human being unproblematically uses. Reading Stevens' language in its materiality is thus to "take into consideration the achievement of his philosophical poetry as an entire activity, one produced under specific conditions in the twentieth century" (Watten 94). In an unconventional reading of Stevens' poetry as it relates to facts of his personal life, Frank Lentricchia argues how Stevens' private anxieties about writing poetry as a feminine activity not only sits uneasily with his public image as a successful insurance executive but also deeply influences his portrayal of male and female personas in the poems. In other words, Lentricchia implies that far from being a transparent window into Being, the language of the poem ironically displays psychological tensions and a fragmented understanding of reality. In this way, Heidegger's near-mystical trust in the power of language to open up a world for *Da-sein* remains curiously blind to how it can also exclude certain other modes of openness.

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[2] Already in his early analyses of Heidegger, Derrida is quick to point out the problem of history in Heidegger's thought. In a 1964–1965 lecture course given on *Being and Time*, Derrida notes that despite Heidegger's emphasis that *Da-sein*'s historicity is primordially

A second limitation arises when we consider the political implications of the belonging to Being. Along with other critics of Heidegger's affiliation with Nazism, Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe points to how Heidegger interprets poetry as instantiating a *mythos* which succeeds in grounding the political beliefs of the German people in the state. If the human being is appropriated to a certain historical manifestation of Being, Heidegger's language troublingly implies that he has no other response to political reality than that of belonging within the ideology of the state. In opposition to this, Stevens seems to suggest that the poetic imagination can function as a form of valuable resistance in the face of the pressures of the political. Poetry serves to distance us from reality, not to assist us in indulging in a

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temporal and not "originarily determined as subjectivity", the trajectory of this history is deeply European in essence: "in the course of its history, that means here—as we are dealing here with *essential structures of Dasein in general* … that remarkable form of history of humanity that is the *European form*, or for example that remarkable form of European, ideological, political, economic, aesthetic, history, and so on" (*Heidegger* 258). See also Derrida's treatment of Heidegger's post-war equivocations on the political tropes his thought potentially took (a move, Derrida constantly emphasises, allows Heidegger to claim the profound a-historicity of his philosophical terms at the very moment those terms intervene in history) in the essay "Heidegger's Hand (*Geschlecht* II)".

wilful escapism, but to provide us with complex ways we can negotiate between the integrity of our selfhoods and our collective responsibilities to the larger community. Treating language as enabling these ways of response ultimately helps Stevens to enunciate a more authentic political subject than that of Heidegger's *Da-sein*. Reading the work of art politically is then not to treat it as simplistically espousing an invitation to participate in Being as it unfolds in the state. As Theodor Adorno writes in *Aesthetic Theory*, "what appears in art is no longer the ideal, no longer harmony; the locus of its power of resolution is now exclusively in the contradictory or dissonant" (84). Indeed, it is a major part of the vitality of Stevens' poems that they present the "endlessly provisional concept of self" (Renza 4) which must remain ironically opposed to any easy absorption in a fixed way of thinking about society and its ideals. What remains valuable in a Heideggerian reading of Stevens in the face of these limitations is an account of how the attentiveness to language in poetry, despite its various ideological pitfalls, succeeds in articulating the ways in which we find ourselves already speaking about Being and sustaining our sense of selves through this speaking.

Stevens and Phenomenology: The Move Past the Husserlian Reduction

This comparison of Stevens and Heidegger[3] has certainly been approached before. In his study of Stevens and Eliot, Surette claims that "the earliest allegation of affinities between Stevens and Heidegger that [he] has found" (167) dates to Marjorie Buhr's article claiming that Stevens was interested in the philosopher. Although as we have seen, there is no evidence based on Stevens' letters which supports more than a casual curiosity in the life and philosophical theories of Heidegger, studies linking Heidegger with Stevens focus on the limitations of reading Stevens phenomenologically. Thomas Hines' book-length analysis of the affinities of Stevens with Husserl and Heidegger stands out in the criticism as one of the most extended and explicit treatments of the poet with the transcendental phenomenology of the former and the existential phenomenology of the latter. Hines is quick to delimit the scope of his study in order to dispel suggestions that "either Husserl and Heidegger influenced or was influenced by Stevens" (23). Instead, his aim will be to elucidate "elective affinities of thought wherein both the philosophers and the poet were concerned with similar problems that are usually considered the province of philosophy" (23). However, this move necessitates a further delimitation by Hines, who defines the philosophical focus of Stevens to be "the problems of epistemology" and in "the acts of the mind as it confronts and is related to the world around it" (25). Critchley also takes epistemology to be his starting point in relating Stevens to philosophy, arguing that "the central question of philosophy" can be defined as "the relation between the subject and the objects that appear to the subject" ("The Philosophical Significance" 269).

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[3] This book's comparison of poet and philosopher (despite there not being much by way of explicit documentation that proves Stevens had actually read Heidegger) may be usefully contrasted with Oppen's explicit reference and employment of a Heideggerian sensibility to his poetic craft. As Peter Nicholls details, there is considerable evidence provided by Oppen in interviews that he is "making [a] Heideggerian gesture of "pointing" ("Interview with George and Mary Oppen", cited in Nicholls 74). For Nicholls and myself, Heidegger provides both poets with similar ways to think about how "poetry is the privileged means by which we might recover our sense of being" (69), ways which become important to Stevens' attempts to wrest the twin poles of poetic perception and worldhood from philosophical dualism. However, whereas Nicholls does not critically examine Oppen's use of the Heideggerian concept of "substance" as an exemplum of the modern domination of metaphysical subjectivity, I emphasise that a Stevensian poetics continually interrogates the stance of the perceiver as he or she is shaped and reshaped by imaginative encounters that demand revisioning of the world as metaphysical substantiality, something which is arguably "mute-ly there" for Oppen.

Inasmuch as the terms "subject" and "object" recast Stevens' frequent usage of the words "imagination" and "reality", both Hines and Critchley focus their analyses on how the speaking voice in the poetry phenomenologically constructs his understanding of the world as it appears to consciousness. Hines therefore maps the methodology of Husserl's phenomenological reduction onto the poetry of Stevens, which involves "a new perception of reality [that] appears [suggesting] an authentic interaction between the mind and the world" (47). The ability of consciousness to attend to pure essences during the phenomenological reduction has affinities with Stevens' insistence in his "Notes Towards a Supreme Fiction" that poetry enables us to abstract away from the clutter of sedimented representation in order to reach the first idea which remains both pristine and primordial; however, as Leonard and Wharton point out, Stevens "desires not just to see self and world in proper relation but to capture this relation in his poetry, to make it a part of himself, *transforming* it imaginatively by making it an 'instrument' of poetic vision" (335–6).

Just as how Heidegger distances himself from Husserlian phenomenology by arguing that the phenomenological attitude discloses the human being in prereflective engagement with his world which cannot stand against him as an object of representation, Stevens’ speaker’s understanding of the world is inextricably linked with language as it enables comportment towards it as it opens itself. However, having sensed the Cartesian split between subject and object which Husserl reifies in his method, Hines illegitimately proceeds to preserve this framework in his analysis of Heidegger. He thus claims that “what the mind begins to seek is the fulfilment of Being” (123), despite the fact that, for Heidegger, Being cannot be conceived as an absence that could potentially be filled up by the volition of the subject. Indeed, the horizon of Being exceeds “the sense of expressing or representing in language” (150) which Hines reduces the poetic function to.

A short reading of two poems by Stevens will demonstrate how the dynamism of the language can be usefully mapped onto the relationship between the human being and Being as mutual appropriation. In the poem “Earthly Anecdote” (which opens *Harmonium*), the poem’s momentum is sustained through the dynamic interplay between the “clattering” of the cattle and how they “swerved” due to the presence of the firecat (*CPP* 3). The scattered movement of the cattle (“went clattering”) is imperfectly brought under some sort of control (“a swift, circular line”) by the firecat. Stevens ushers the reader into the poem (and, by extension, into the world of *Harmonium*) through the dimensions of poetic performance: our reading of the poem is analogously an attempt to order the aural impressions which constantly play off one another. The profusion of plosive sounds adumbrated in the syllabic density of “clattering” in the first stanza almost forms a musical undercurrent which allows the muscularity of the verb “swerved” to stand out more clearly. However, a crucial ambiguity comes into play with Stevens’ use of the verb in terms of the causality of motion in the poem. More specifically, does “swerve” indicate an activity or passivity on the part of the cattle? The problem of causality becomes more pronounced in the crucial fourth stanza, wherein the motion of the bucks seems to be transferred to the firecat itself in a moment which breaks down the boundaries between observer and observed, and order and chaos: “The firecat went leaping,/To the right, to the left,/And/Bristled in the way”. I argue that the poem allegorises a different mode of perception from that of the disinterested spectator—just as the separation between bucks and firecat becomes increasingly ambiguous as the poem progresses, the latter's attempts to "domesticate" and "order" the cattle are tellingly subordinated to a dialectic of movement which involves the "objective observer" with the phenomena he or she tries to conceptualise intellectually.[4] If Stevens signals his overall intentions in *Harmonium* with this poem, it is arguably to demonstrate a unique image of the world, one which foregrounds the "relentless shifts in the continuity of existence [as] happenings in a human reality without ordained design" (Baird 143).

Indeed, if Stevens revels in the strangeness of poetic idiom in his first collection, this aptly indicates his investment in literary language as a "frame" which gathers up and opens out perception. The poem "Anecdote of the Jar" (*CPP* 60–1) seems to bear out Adalaide Kirby Morris' claim that, for Stevens, "perception … is inevitably conception" (167). The "roundness" of titular jar which the speaker places in front of him can no longer be framed in a Kantian way as an object existing in a particular locale. This point is appropriately made by Stevens' subtle modulation of the quoted adjective into the verb "surround" at the end of the first stanza. With this shift, the jar does not so much become "a sobered-up modern object introduced for the purposes of art-making and artistic consideration" (Buelens & Eeckhout 51) as it is a conduit for a world to "rise" and "sprawl" around it. This epiphanic shift once again allows the observer to come into a strange-yet-authentic relationship with the world which is now "no longer wild". So far is the jar from being an ordinary object that it presences by taking "dominion everywhere"; however, the near-invisibility of the jar as emphasised in the last stanza of the poem ("The jar was grey and bare") indicates how Stevens highlights its difference from the Keatsian urn that insists on its inscrutability even as it prompts reflections on the art object's relationship to time and mortality. In a word, Stevens' jar-poem evinces a moment of encounter between consciousness and a non-metaphysical sense of place. If Stevens means for these poems to be read as anecdotes which signify beyond their immediate contexts, I argue that he means for them to be emblematic of how art and language provide the clearing through which the human being responds to beings and can appropriate them to the extent he or she is placed in relation with Being. At its most basic, the beings in the poems escape objective reduction. Michael Davidson succinctly describes this teleological end of Stevens' poems "not as literary history but existential disclosure" (146), implicitly aligning his insight with a Heideggerian understanding of situatedness. As Heidegger makes clear in *Being and Time*, the world *Da-sein* finds himself in cannot be understood primarily as a totalisable object of contemplation. Rather, the world functions as an existential horizon of possibility in which the human being is *always already* situated in the modes of facticity and ecstatic projection towards the future. Seen in this light, poetic language attunes us with respect to *ways of being* in the world which form the basis for our collective understanding of it:

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[4] For Voros, this destabilisation of perspective is indicative of how "Stevens put to work some of the ideas he had obtained from his readings in the new science and quantum physics" (84), both of which suggest the particular modernity in Stevens' approach to artistic perception.

> [Language] has its roots in the existential constitution of Dasein's disclosedness. *The existential-ontological foundation of language is discourse* … *Discourse is existentially equiprimordial with state-of-mind and understanding*. The intelligibility of something has always been articulated, even before there is any appropriative interpretation of it. Discourse is the articulation of intelligibility … That which can be articulated in interpretation, and thus even more primordially in discourse, is what we have called "meaning". (*BT* 203–4)

In a related way, Bonnie Costello's essay on Stevens and painting recognises how painting "reflects [Stevens'] ambivalence about the eye's domination of consciousness [while remaining] a determinant and touchstone" (69). Given his awareness of the representational bias in language, Costello argues that "the visual thinking of painters suggested direct access to a space in which the world might find its imaginative apposite" (69). A turn towards the space and field of vision which painting opens up allows "sensuous immediacy and incarnation of meaning" (75) which bypass the strictly representational. Following some of the critical impetuses of Costello, I extend her recognition of the "latent figurativeness [in] all discourse" (84) to argue the elaborate rhetoric of *Harmonium* and the bare, stripped-down language of the poems in *The Rock* and beyond all form part of a unified vision of Stevensian poetics in which language presences indelibly as sites of showing, soliciting the reader into both the space of the poem and what the poem allows its readers to understand about individual existentiality and collective sociality.

Stevens, Language and the Proximity Afforded by Poetry

Given that Stevens is a poet for whom “the outlines of being and its expressings, the syllables/of its law” (*CPP* 365) seem to form the major part of his aesthetic, an important part of my analysis will be of how Stevens’ language provides a useful way to render his abstract speculations on the language of being concrete and tangible. Daniel Schwarz’s study of Stevens is an attempt to read the poetry through the framework of narrative. For Schwarz, “narrative is both the representation of external events and the telling of those events” (90). Given a diegetic flow which aids the reader to make sense of the linguistic shifts of register in the poems, “reading is a process of cognition that depends on actively organizing the phenomena of language both in the moment of perception and in the fuller understanding that develops as our reading continues as well as in our retrospective view of our completed reading” (Schwarz 90). For Schwarz, the reader’s imaginative (re)construction and participation in the meaning-making process hinges upon the conditionals “if” and “as”—the significance of the poems in *The Rock* will be apparent *if* you read the poetry *as* espousing Stevens’ late despair about old age and death.

The focus on the grammatical significance of “as” is crucial to Charles Altieri’s intricate study titled *Wallace Stevens and the Demands of Modernity: Toward a Phenomenology of Value* (2013). Altieri makes the case that poetry can build an alternative sense of value and significance to the positivistic sciences. In his argument, “the question of what capacities humans have to establish values becomes inseparable from the question of what powers poetry has to convert lyric utterances into modes of intensifying experience in domains of mind inseparable from our sense of the world” (7). In the wake of the modernist crisis of representation which acknowledges fragmentation and the traumatic complexity of reality, Altieri argues poetry can confer a renewed sense of value not through adding one more dogmatic discourse, but by inducting us into ways of imaginative engagements with our world. Altieri focuses his argument on Stevens’ use of “as” in the poetry as indicating what Altieri terms “aspectual thinking”. Altieri fleshes out this argument as such:

> Aspectual thinking proceeds by postulating equivalences rather than names. The authorial mind represents itself as attempting to contour itself to an environment that is constantly changing and offering opportunities for the

> intensities that can characterize successful participation—in a world of constant change and in a social space where we can identify with authorial projects. For Stevens this becomes a way of realizing how imagination as a force may reenchant the world without remystifying it. (119)

The use of "as" thus provides an imaginative lens through which we can participate in the unfolding of Being, not through reductive objectification but by making the mind *equal* to the experience. Altieri and Schwartz's linguistic approaches are valuable insofar as they highlight how language puts us in relation to that which exceeds our conceptual vocabularies because it is precisely the opening as opening. Poetry allows us to dwell in the proximity of the unfolding of the event of Being, remaining open to interpretive possibilities and modes of experience which acculturate us to the ways of being in the world opened up by language. In other words, language solicits us into a relationship with the otherness of the poem, resulting in a sensed nearness to that which both manifests and conceals itself. However, I wish to argue that it is Heidegger's analysis of the copula "is" which provides a compelling way to think about how language provides the opening for the reading experience grounded in attunement towards Being. For Heidegger, language is indicative of the ontological difference, for it *both* points towards beings which *are* in the world and reminds us that Being cannot be conceived of as some*thing* which *is*. Language can no longer be thought of as a metaphysical ground, for it is precisely the event which grounds beings and grants the possibility of metaphysics. This reinforces Heidegger's argument about our existential attunement towards Being when we use language, for every linguistic position we take with respect to beings is simultaneously a position we take towards what grounds them in their being. As Heidegger writes in his critical analysis of Nietzsche:

> We do not need a lecture on nihilism and its frequent use of the noun *das Sein* [Being] in order to perceive at once that with every remark we utter we *still* more frequently and continuously, in every usage of the word "is", say *Sein*. "Is" drifts about as the most threadbare word in language, although it sustains all saying, and not only in the sense of spoken language. The "is" speaks even in every tacit comportment towards beings. Everywhere, even where we do not speak, we still comport ourselves towards beings as such and to the sort of thing that "is," that is in a particular way, that is not yet or is no longer, or that simply is not. (*N4* 188–9)

More than "as" or "of", the language of Being as "is" places us in response to beings as a whole, grounding our attunement towards them while sustaining our transcendence towards Being as abyss [*Abgrund*]. Once again, language cannot be a mode through which we try to "objectify" Being. Being comes into language as its innermost and essential ground. It is thus this final sight of the thing as it presences *in its being* which is Stevens' ultimate directive as the passion to apprehend "the poem of pure reality, untouched/By trope or deviation" (*CPP* 402):

> It is the cry of leaves that do not transcend themselves,
> In the absence of fantasia, without meaning more
> Than they are in the final finding of the ear, in the thing
> Itself, until, at last, the cry concerns no one at all. (*CPP* 460)

For Stevens, it is ultimately "the difficulty of what it is to be" (*CPP* 330) which defines Being's relationship to language. If the unthinking use of language clutters and obstructs our phenomenological access to Being, the life-long attempt to write the "supreme fiction" which finally supplants belief in the Christian God signals Stevens' conviction that poetry can supply some measure of transcendence, not by providing yet another otherworldly myth, but by turning our attention resolutely towards moments of revelation found in the ordinary: "We keep coming back and coming back/To the real" (*CPP* 402). Matthew Mutter's analysis of the use of tautology in Stevens' poetry positions it as "an approach to perception that is entirely sensory, and within which human desire is satisfied with the immediate available" (Mutter 748). Tautology elides the semiotic difference between sign and meaning by "reduc[ing] the objects or experiences under consideration to that which is most basic about them: their physical givenness" (Mutter 755). In Mutter's reading, the "secular world [of Stevens] is single, univocal—a world in which the comparative 'as' collapses into the self-identical 'is'" (753). Mutter's reading highlights how the very basis of the poetic event is inseparable from the way in which Being presences in language. Thus, Mutter notes that "associative, poetic thought … is subsumed into an 'it' that merely happens" (755), implying the fact that tautology is possible only on the basis of the presencing of the "it", which, in my reading, is the opening of Being. In fact, Being is to be thought of as the *happening* of Being, through which beings come into presence and are sustained in a relationship which is glimpsed in language. In part, I will argue that Stevens' increasingly abstract and repetitious use of the construction "It is" betokens an attempt to lead us beyond the language of ontology towards an imitation of this eventing of Being as *Ereignis*, designated in the poem "The Motive for Metaphor" as X:

> The ruddy temper, the hammer
> Of red and blue, the hard sound—
> Steel against intimation—the sharp flash,
> The vital, arrogant, fatal, dominant X. (*CPP* 257)

As the poem suggests, the synthetic and aggregative force of metaphor can be part of an evasive strategy to lead us away from the difficult but necessary apprehension of a realm of signification absolutely divorced from "its stiff and stubborn, man-locked set" (*CPP* 423). Indeed, the poem performs nothing less than the Heideggerian distinction between the "ontological" and the "ontic": metaphor can entrench us in a predetermined search after established significations which maroon us in "an obscure world/Of things that would never be quite expressed", or it can raise the stakes of an imaginative encounter that would be equal to "the weight of primary noon". In conceptualising of *Ereignis* as the event of poetry which strings a happening of linguistic habitation as poetic language unfolds, poetry opens up a livability within the world. As I will elaborate, this relationship between word and environment ultimately frames Stevens' insistence that poetry adds to the savour of existence, and is desiccated without the densities of this experience.

I am thus in sympathy with Beverly Maeder's useful analysis of Stevens' linguistic experimentations. Devoting a significant amount of space to Stevens' usage of "to be" as reflecting his interest in the question of being, Maeder concludes that "the primary function of 'definitions' or statements of identity (using *to be*) is to affirm the appropriateness of linking together two names from different spheres and not, as realists have maintained, to assign the appropriate name to the thing" (94). As Maeder implies, "is" is not a simple statement of identification, but the vehicle of appropriation through which Being resonates in relationship. Mutter's claim of the pure immanence of Being is premised on how the human being establishes a dwelling place in language where he or she understands how Being enters into language and is sustained there by poetry. For Maeder, language is used "to build a homeplace for constructing or crafting our identity … *To be* is a versatile verb that can be an emblem for what happens when we make language itself our defining home" (100). Although Maeder does not explicitly reference Heidegger in her study, this is a succinct statement of Heidegger's argument about language which affords us the proper interpretive proximity with which to appropriate and to be en-owned by Being. If, as Stevens remarked once, poetry is a matter of place, then I argue that his poetry creates appropriate spaces in which "a fresh universe" can be created "out of nothingness" (*CPP* 439), not through our own subjective volitions, but by attending to beings as they are and how they come into presence through language.

Reading and the Opening of Being: Stevens, Heidegger and "Poetic Dwelling"

More than the Romantic conception of nature as that which stands dialectically opposed to civilisation, Stevens interprets nature in a Heideggerian way, which, for the latter, signifies the "grant[ing] [of] the open, within which immortals and mortals and all things are able to encounter each other" (*EHP* 83). If poetry's nobility is demonstrated in the way it provides a renovation of experience through which human beings can articulate their sociality and understanding of political community, then it is in terms of language which everywhere radiates the nearness of Being which is nothing more than the opening itself:

> Being is the most said, not only because the "is" and all the forms of the verb "to be" are perhaps most often expressed, but because in every verb, even when its conjugated forms do not use the word "Being," Being is nonetheless said. Every verb, and not just every verb but also every substantive and adjective, all words and articulations of words, say Being. What is most said is at the same time the most reticent in the special sense that it keeps its essence silent, perhaps is reticence itself. No matter how loudly and how often we say "is" and name "Being," such saying and that name are perhaps only seemingly proper names for what is to be named and said. For every word as such is a word "of" Being, in fact a word "*of*" Being not only insofar as it talks "about" Being or "of" Being but a word "of" Being in the sense that Being expresses itself in each word and precisely in that way keeps its essence silent. (*N4* 193)

For Stevens, the poet enunciates the opening of Being, not by representing what Being "is", but by (re)stating, in poem after poem, the renewed relation between the human person and his or her world. More than conferring validation on life as an aesthetic experience, Stevens reiterates the utmost importance of poetry as the most intense way through which the imagination is a uniquely human appropriation of reality. Likewise, for Heidegger, art requires the presence of human preservers who are able to articulate the truth of Being in language, and thus rescue the essence of humanity from thoughtless technological progress. As he writes in "Introduction to Metaphysics":

> [t]o be human means to be a sayer. Human beings are yes- and no-sayers only because they are, in the ground of their essence, sayers, *the* sayers. That is their distinction and also their predicament. It distinguishes them from stone, plant, and animal, but also from the gods. Even if we had a thousand eyes and a thousand ears, a thousand hands and many other senses and organs, if our essence did not stand within the power of language, then all beings would remain closed off to us—the beings that we ourselves are, no less than the beings that we are not. (*IM* 86)

For Stevens and Heidegger, language is *fundamentally* human through and through, for it defines our possibility to have a world by "say[ing] ourselves in syllables that rise/From the floor, rising in speech we do not speak" (*CPP* 275) precisely because we are appropriated and put into living relation with Being through language. If there has been one line of argument which I have been pursuing in this chapter, it is that our relationship to Stevens' poetry must remain open to the ways in which the text presences as linguistic being, both in what philosophy anticipates by making manifest and in what the text, in opening the event of Being, turns away from us. This mode of engagement seems particularly suitable to the way one reads a Stevens poem, where reader and poetic speaker are continually turned towards and away from beings in moments of revelation and silence. Heidegger's notion of *Ereignis* seems to me to be particularly illuminative of the enactment of this dynamic, and it is to fleshing this out in terms of Heidegger's philosophy which I will turn to in the next chapter.

CHAPTER 3

The Neighbouring of Poetry and Philosophy: Thinking from/with the Event of *Ereignis*

The Poesis of *Ereignis*

This chapter will examine the later philosophy[1] of Martin Heidegger by emphasising the significance of the event of *Ereignis*, an ontological and hermeneutical "concept" outlined by Heidegger (in a postscript to the 1949 edition of his text "Letter on 'Humanism'") as "the guiding word of [his] thinking since 1936" (*P* 241). In the context of Heidegger's "turn" [*Kehre*] towards the saying of poetic language as utterly crucial in providing the opening through which Being effects presencing in ontic beings, *Ereignis* comes to be seen by Heidegger as the non-metaphysical movement in which the sounding of language clears the space where the human being appropriates the destinal manifestation of Being *only by* being appropriated by Being. This double movement of comportment

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[1] On the issue of Heidegger's turn [*Kehre*] from the earlier philosophy to the later, Steven Crowell has suggested four stages in the development of Heidegger's thinking, with the focus on *Ereignis* occurring from 1945 onwards. Julian Young identifies Heidegger himself as suggesting a "turn" which was not completed under the transition to "*Ereignis*-thinking" in 1936–1938 (Malpas 353–4). I follow these readers of Heidegger who place emphasis on how the thinking of *Ereignis* marks a crucial shift in Heideggerian thinking, and that the *Kehre* marks an important distinction within the context of the whole philosophy. However, I depart from Crowell and Young in arguing that the event of *Ereignis*-thinking gathers Heidegger's earlier philosophy into its own, thus functioning as the *key* moment in the philosophy.

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towards beings and hearkening to the silent call of Being not only allows Heidegger to situate his critical intervention into the historical heritage of Western metaphysics (consistently defined by him as a "forgetting of the questionability of Being") by destabilising the entrenched primacy of "both representation and assertion [which become] normative for the whole of Western thinking" (*P* 178) under the reification of the subject-object binary but also allows him to re-envisage the notion of relationship and the question of its grounding. I will argue that Heidegger's preoccupation with the eventing of *Ereignis* posits a recalibration of the relations between the human being and Being such that neither term can be defined with or against the other, or indeed be said to be, *outside* of the event. The essence of the human being cannot be understood prior to the way in which he or she stands in the clearing of Being and appropriates the significance of this opening, and Being effects this clearing only by entrusting its sending to the human being who takes "the clearing … into 'care'" (*P* 249). Foregrounding the later philosophy of Heidegger will demonstrate how Heidegger is able to overcome the impasses he detects in the metaphysical tradition by demonstrating how the Being of thinking and the thinking of Being are sustained not by reaching for new conceptual vocabularies, by the event of presencing itself.

If Stevens highlights in *Adagia* that a poem should be an *experience*, then the phenomenological effect of this cannot be adequately rendered in criticism by readers who, as Vendler diagnoses, ossify Stevens' master categories of "imagination" and "reality" and straightforwardly claim each poem is about the "encounter" between them (*Words* 53). Instead, I argue that the poetic transactions between the subjective imagination and the "mere being" of reality one finds in Stevens delineate the eventing of *Ereignis*, where each term deepens and resonates in the context of the happening of appropriation, figured in "Notes Towards a Supreme Fiction" as "The freshness of transformation is // The freshness of a world. It is our own, / It is ourselves, the freshness of ourselves" (*CPP* 344). Finally, I wish to extend the insight the Heideggerian reading of *Ereignis* provides to the relationship between poetry and philosophy by addressing criticisms of Heidegger's reading of poetry as blatantly univocal and monological in enforcing a pre-established doctrine onto the poem without consideration of the otherness of literary language. If my reading of the way Heideggerian discourse performatively enacts an innovative hermeneutical relationship between reader and text is right, then poeticising and philosophising only come into their identity with and difference from each other *in the act* of interpretation, which is now to be seen as a relating. By focusing my analysis on how the work of *Ereignis* happens in Heidegger's texts rather than what *Ereignis* "is" outside of how it inhabits the texts, I hope to demonstrate how this movement both decentres any fixed understanding of ontological certainties and allows them to come into their own as part of the scene of a renewed unfolding.

Heidegger's Destruction of Metaphysics: Thinking the Ontological Difference as Difference

Heidegger's philosophical project can be seen as an attempt to destabilise the ontological grounding of Western metaphysical thought which has tended, due to a historical destiny which is inseparable from the concealment of Being, to privilege ontic comportment towards beings rather than asking about the difference between beings and Being itself. With this orientation, all fundamental attunement towards the questionability of Being remains insufficient because it is not pursued at its most primordial level. For Heidegger, the stakes of this inquiry involve nothing less than the total environment of intellectual, historical and scientific inquiry, as "metaphysics grounds an age, that, through a particular interpretation of beings and through a particular comprehension of truth, provides that age with the ground of its essential shape" (*OBT* 57). As Heidegger states in *Being and Time*:

> Ontological inquiry is indeed more primordial, as over against the ontical inquiry of the positive sciences. But it remains itself naïve and opaque if in its researches into the Being of entities it fails to discuss the meaning of Being in general. (*BT* 31)

Metaphysics has not succeeded in opening up the question of Being because it has not apprehended the fact that Being presences as beings only as its *difference* from beings. This philosophical difficulty of capturing in the language of metaphysical tradition what both exceeds and makes that tradition possible positions Heidegger's discourse at a complicated distance from the philosophers he reads and critiques. As Rex Gilliland puts it, "Heidegger embraces metaphysics at the same time that he criticizes it and also indicates the limits of this embrace: though he sees himself as part of the tradition and draws his resources from it, Heidegger takes great pains to distinguish himself from the other members of it who, in his view, have failed to extricate themselves from the metaphysics of presence" (650). In a reading of Plato's allegory of the cave entitled "Plato's Doctrine of Truth", Heidegger pushes back against the philosophical language he inherits by an interpretive intervention with respect to the "turn" of thought Plato inaugurates. By focusing our attention on the moment when the enlightened philosopher encounters things as they are in their reality through visual perception, "the look that show[s] what things themselves are, the ideas, constitute the essence in whose light each individual being shows itself as this or that, and only in this self-showing does the appearing thing become unhidden and accessible" (*P* 169–70). Given this mediation of the apprehension of truth through the idea, certain historical and philosophical paradigms for truth are fatefully established through this moment, for "this determination of the essence of truth no longer contains an appeal to Αλήθεια in the sense of unhiddenness; on the contrary, Αλήθεια … is thought of as correctness. From now on this characterisation of the essence of truth as the correctness of both representation and assertion becomes normative for the whole of Western thinking" (*P* 178). Read as a decisive step in both the forgetting of Being and the history of the culmination of metaphysics in the modern condition of subjectivity and the "standing-reserve" of technology, Plato's setting up of the primacy of adequation as the ground of Being delineates a transformation in metaphysical thinking "whereby human beings, in differing respects but always deliberately, move into a central place among beings" (*P* 181).

Inasmuch as the subject-object relationship *grounds* the philosophical understanding of Being and beings, Heidegger reads Nietzsche's anti-Platonic focus on the phenomenal world of becoming as against all eternal values as only presenting an inverted view of Platonism without really escaping from the hermeneutical framework laid out by him: "As a mere countermovement, however, it necessarily remains trapped, like everything anti-, in the essence of what is in challenging. Since all it does is turn metaphysics upside down, Nietzsche's countermovement against metaphysics remains embroiled in it" (*OBT* 162). Heidegger's emphasis on the difficulty of thinking outside of the language of the metaphysical tradition not only reiterates his insight that the human being is never the master of the linguistic medium which structures the frameworks through which any thinking first becomes possible but also points to the fact that to philosophise differently about metaphysics means first becoming attentive to how Being both presences and absences itself in each epoch of philosophical thought, and how this sets limits to and frees our comportment towards it. Indeed, it is in finitude and contingency that the human being can understand how authentic philosophising is not about random assertions or erecting new conceptual edifices which further occlude openness; as Robert Pippin asserts, Heidegger "is not talking about *how we situate ourselves* within a tradition (or how we legislate the norms regulating our lives), but how we are, contingently and ineffably, *situated* in the revealing and concealing process within which 'fundamental' sense is made" (28). I argue that Heidegger's focus on the question of grounding and how we ground ourselves with respect to beings provides him with the insight that the fundamental movement of Being as *aletheia* can never be reduced to an ontotheological concept.

Heidegger deals with the concepts of the ontotheological understanding of Being and grounding in the text "The Onto-Theo-Logical Constitution of Metaphysics". (As with Heidegger's pronounced use of hyphenation elsewhere to characterise *Da-sein* and ek-sistence, the punctuation signals both separation and conjunction, for the particle hyphenated only achieves significance when it is en-owned by the happening of the word as a whole.) Heidegger rehearses the philosophical development of the notion of substance in its articulation in Spinoza to its transformation to Absolute Spirit in Hegel only to enact "the conversation with historical tradition", which for him is "a question of entering into the force of earlier thinking" in order to seek "in it something that has not been thought, and from which what has been thought receives its essential space" (*ID* 48). As highlighted earlier, the rupture of metaphysics can only proceed within the language of metaphysics and how that constitutes a historical happening, for having an authentic relationship with Being does not mean standing over and against it as a subject disinterestedly manipulating objective "knowledge", but hearkening to the unheard possibilities and discontinuities the opening of Being into history presents us with. The way Being manifests itself cannot be made into a totalisable object for our circumspection, for "the inchoate contours of that which is not yet a thing need to be drawn out in an original way in order to release the possibilities inherent in this tradition (including the roads not taken, forgotten, or bypassed), and so create or renew humanity's ontological inheritance for the future" (Thomson 100). I extend Thomson's insight with respect to the question of grounding by arguing that Being cannot ground itself (or grounds itself in the No-thing, apart from beings) precisely because it is the horizon for all possible grounding and grounding of possibility. Heidegger delineates the unthought contours of thought through focusing on the concept of difference. In his formulation of the issue:

> We speak of the *difference* between Being and beings. The step back goes from what is unthought, from the difference as such, into what gives us thought. That is the oblivion of the difference. The oblivion here to be thought is the veiling of the difference as such, thought in terms of concealment; this veiling has in turn withdrawn itself from the beginning. The oblivion belongs to the difference because the difference belongs to the oblivion. (*ID* 50)

For Heidegger, the ontological difference between Being and beings is fundamentally inseparable from the withdrawal and concealment of Being, itself an integral part of the event of truth. Portraying truth as an event implies revealing it in its wrestling with untruth. Heidegger goes a step further in claiming that untruth derives from the same essence (and thus movement) of truth: "the concealment of what-is in totality is not *successive* to our always fragmentary knowledge of what-is. This concealment, or authentic (*eigentlich*) untruth, is anterior to all revelation of this or that actuality. It is even anterior to the letting-be of what-is, which, by revealing, conceals and thus establishes the dissimulation" (*EB* 340–1). Heidegger's (re)engagement with the history of metaphysics and what remains *un*thought in it necessitates a mode of thinking which aims not at "representing" the happening of truth in its dialectical interplay with dissimulation, but at appropriating truth's eventual disclosure and the way this disclosure transforms our hermeneutical relationship to beings. In this way, Heidegger's turn towards *Ereignis* as the appropriative event signals a deeper mode of engagement with the openness of the human being's comportment towards the unconcealment of Being, which in turn grants new possibilities of ecstatic dwelling with beings that technology closes off. Indeed, for Heidegger, all metaphysical thinking which does not seize upon the ontological difference as difference hypostasises the ground of beings as the highest being, still thought of in terms of simple presence: "Metaphysics is theology, a statement about God, because the deity enters into philosophy" (*ID* 55). In saying that Being "is" different from beings, Heidegger is not only claiming that Being cannot be conceived of as a being, but that Being "presences" as this difference from beings:

> That differentiation alone grants and holds apart the "between," in which the overwhelming (of Being) and the arrival (of beings) are held towards one another, are borne away from and toward each other. The difference of Being and beings, as the differentiation of overwhelming and arrival, is the perdurance (*Austrag*) of the two in *unconcealing keeping in concealment*. (*ID* 65)

In the double movement of overwhelming and arrival, Being grants us hermeneutical access towards beings by both opening up the space through which they can be encountered and paradoxically concealing itself as the inexhaustible ground of the opening. This implies that the human being's relationship to Being cannot arise from the untrammelled volitions of the subject grasping at an object which has been revealed to us denuded of all uncanny significations. Instead, he or she stands in the truth of (the unfolding of) Being in as far as Being first makes possible the conversation between language, history and self-understanding. As Being partakes both of unconcealment and of dissimulation, I argue that the happening of *Ereignis* occurs in a distinctive and contingent way each and every time it happens. Similarly, if Being temporalises itself in historical understanding without ever exhausting itself, then an authentic appropriation of poetry by philosophy will be attentive to how the event of the poetic act is inseparable from the event of thinking. Reading Heidegger's abstract language attentively is thus to understand how presencing is inextricable from difference and how presencing comes into its own in the context of what Heidegger terms the abyss (*Ab-grund*): "All we can say is that there is presencing, never presence, and so while there is no difference in the sense that there is no being of beings, in another sense there is nothing but difference, in that presencing is simply differentiation" (Allen 44).

THE HAPPENING OF THE WORD *EREIGNIS* IN THE CONTEXT OF HEIDEGGER'S PHILOSOPHY

Ereignis appears as "the central concept in [Heidegger's] post-1938 thinking" (Young 90) to designate the event of the opening of Being, and the human being's en-ownment (being en-owned and coming into his own through the event) by Being, which can never be thought of metaphysically. The move beyond the language of *Being and Time* towards the thinking of *Ereignis* as the event of co-appropriation signals an important shift in Heidegger's philosophising. As David Wood points out, the structural analyses of the authentic modes of Da-sein's being instantiates a metaphysical picture of the human being wherein "representation seems to be in control" (202), both intellectually and rhetorically. Emphasising the transition in Heidegger's thinking of Being after *Being and Time* is to underscore how Heidegger tries to reorientate metaphysics towards the event of disclosure, which is also the event of the possibility of metaphysics as presence. Heidegger's focus on *Ereignis* thus works not through conceptual definition but by the turning of thought which manifests through the sounding of language *within language*. We will have to be sensitive to *how* the word works at showing itself through its polysemic resonances. Here, I follow Jeff Malpas in seeing three senses of the word and their associated implications:

> The idea of *Ereignis* as event or happening, the first element, is something given in the ordinary German usage of the term (although unlike the English "event," which normally appears only as a noun, "*Ereignis*" has an associated verb form, "*sich ereignen*," to happen or take place). The dynamic element in *Ereignis* is important inasmuch as it constitutes a move away from the static idea of being as presence … [and also] indicates a way in which the unity that is a key element in *Ereignis* is a unity that arises through the interaction of elements rather than through their mere "standing near" to one another. The sense of "belonging" or "being proper to" that is the second element in "*Ereignis*" is the primary focus of the translation of "Ereignis" as "enowning." … Ereignis is thus understood in terms of the "happening of belonging" in the sense of a gathering or bringing of things into what is their own … The third element in "*Ereignis*" is the idea of "coming to sight," "being disclosed," "being made evident." (215)

Malpas' rich evocation of the semantic nuances of the word does not fully underscore the performative dimension inherent in *Ereignis*. Firstly, the word (as with Heidegger's arguments about the work of art) is the source of its own space and time by opening up the associations between eventing, gathering and bringing things into their own, for it is in what the event gathers in the encounter which not only heightens the encounter (what Hans-Georg Gadamer refers to in *Truth and Method* as "an increase in being") but also allows the participants in the encounter to emerge as participants. Indeed, this is precisely the way in which interpretation encounters the word *Ereignis*, for the senses of the word resonate against one another in the gathering of the word and mutually bring one another into being (Heidegger's musical metaphor for the structure of

Contributions to Philosophy, in which *Ereignis* (re)sounds continually is thus aptly a fugue). Secondly, the word performs its third sense of disclosure not by revealing a secured sense of metaphysical grounding which would function as a transcendental signified. Instead, the event of disclosure happens in the context of the abyss [*Ab-grund*] which opens up the space through which language manifests Being as pure presencing and as the mystery of withdrawal and concealment. In this way, there is no unchangeable "truth" which is asserted *prior* to the opening of the word and of language—in the words of Albert Hofstadter, "thinking is called on to perform a unique task, thoroughly paradoxical, [for it must] think what by its very nature appears to be incapable of being reached by thought, the mystery which conceals itself, withholding itself from thought in the very act of liberating everything that is brought into the clearing of truth" (22). Thirdly, in the context of Heidegger's philosophy, the figure of sightedness which functions as the third sense of *Ereignis* is, as Malpas outlines, "suggestive of a connection back to *Being and Time*–to the idea of the 'moment of vision,' *Augenblick*, in which being-there (i.e. *Da-sein*) grasps its existential situation" (215). I make a stronger case than Malpas here in arguing that in retrospectively reading the traces of the earlier work into the later, Heidegger's philosophy is fittingly appropriated not only with regards to the later work, but also in relation *to itself* in the encounter which is interpretation and reading. Indeed, I wish to claim that one of the most important aspects of a Heideggerian reading of a philosophical and literary work, or of philosophy and literature, does not reside in "applying" Heideggerian terms and concepts to the work as if there is an essential grounding to what "Heidegger" means. Instead, reading as Heidegger reads is to understand that a text "works" not by providing an objective account of an event, but by sustaining its readers in proximity to what language both uncovers and dissimulates, by way of the twofold happening of truth as *aletheia*. This way of reading is precisely attentive to Heidegger's arguments that poetic language does not primarily represent Being, but brings beings into presence through the word. In this way, language becomes both a *gathering* and the site of a *showing*. In the words of Timothy Clark:

> The essence of language is not propositional form, but an openness to the resonance of a nexus of relations and senses from out of which the 'real' and the 'human' emerge. It effects an ontico-ontological difference in that it is through language that things stand revealed in their being. (*Derrida* 34)

Ereignis designates just this poetic appropriation that solicits language out of hiddenness; it relinquishes representational mastery in order for words to re*sound* to their fullest extent.

Ereignis and Heidegger's Analyses of Poetry and Art

Heidegger's analyses of poetry and the artwork thus enact the encounter with beings in all their familiarity and strangeness through the opening of Being provided by the work of language. In the addendum to his famous text "The Origin of the Work of Art", Heidegger is quick to distinguish the unique way in which the artwork presences itself as against a detached object of rational circumspection:

> Placing and laying have the sense of bringing *here* into the unconcealed, bringing *forth* into what is present, that is, letting or causing to lie forth. Setting and placing here never mean the modern concept of the summoning of things to be placed over against the self (the ego-subject). The standing of the [artwork] … is the constancy of the showing or shining. (*PLT* 81–2)

I argue that in the standing-forth of the artwork, Heidegger sees its significance in terms of clearing the space through which the polarities of human existence may be held in productive tension. For Heidegger, art thus means no less than a happening of truth as disclosure. Calvin O'Shrag thus points to how (as outlined earlier) the artwork "has to do with the performance within the work of art itself, with what is *at work* in the work of art" (117). The work of art is therefore the opening through which beings rise into the truth of their disclosure and find their significance in the world. Heidegger emphasises that the Greek temple and Van Gogh's painting of a pair of peasant shoes do not simply reveal an isolated thing which can be divorced from the relationality it has with the Open:

> Truth happens in the temple's standing where it is. This does not mean that something is correctly represented and rendered here, but that what is as a whole is brought into unconcealedness and held therein … Truth happens in Van Gogh's painting. This does not mean that something is correctly portrayed, but rather that in the revelation of the equipmental being of the shoes, that which is as a whole … attains to unconcealedness. (*PLT* 54)

As with my argument in this chapter, the “meaning” of the work of art as opening cannot be decided beforehand and outside of the presencing of Being—in this way, it is an origin. Heidegger thus argues that all art is poetic in nature because poetic language “by naming beings for the first time, first brings beings to word and appearance” (*PLT* 71). Giorgio Agamben posits the intimate link between language and Being as such: “The opening of the *ontological* dimension (being, world) corresponds to the pure taking place of language as originary event” (quoted in David Nowell Smith 69). Indeed, language sustains our relationship with the Open, effecting nothing else than a renewed orientation with what is unpredictable and potentially risky. In “What Are Poets For?”, Heidegger characterises the Open as “the non-objective character of full Nature” (*PLT* 110), the term no longer to be thought of in the metaphysical sense of physical being but as the region of “a self-opening, which, while rising, at the same time turns back to what has emerged, and so shrouds within itself that which on each occasion gives presence to what is present” (*EHP* 79). The Open both opens the ground and withdraws as ground. Faced with this endless ambiguity of Being, “man is admitted into the Open with even less restraint than are those other beings” (*PLT* 107) like animals who do not have language. However, the human being is ironically less secure in this world because language presences as the event “in which everything present or absent announces, grants and refuses itself, shows itself or withdraws” (*OWL* 122). By not being the master of language, he or she participates in an event infinitely more monumental than himself when speaking, as he “relinquishes … the supremacy of subjectivity as ground … [and lets himself] be open to a destiny, to something sent, to something to which it is in advance delivered over and called upon to correspond to” (Sallis 81).

Ereignis and Poetic Encounter: Heidegger, Stevens and the Hermeneutical Moment

Indeed, what the artwork demonstrates is precisely the kinetic tension which belongs to *Ereignis*. Heidegger’s famous distinction between the world and earth as a tension which, as a relation thought out of *Ereignis*, brings each into its own, is positioned in terms of disclosure and sheltering:

> The world is the self-disclosing openness of the broad paths of the simple and essential decisions in the destiny of an historical people. The earth is the

> spontaneous forthcoming of that which is continually self-secluding and to that extent sheltering and concealing. (*PLT* 47)

Any authentic historical decision has to be grounded upon the possibilities of being which have been projected and disclosed through language. However, these possibilities never stand in an unchanging relationship to a historical people, as truth is precisely an eventing of disclosure which cannot be separated from dissimulation and hiding. In fact, as David Nowell Smith asserts, "the opacity of meaning [which earth represents] becomes the very opening of meaning" (86). Heidegger's thinking about the opening of Being thus holds everything in relation: world and earth, truth and untruth, revealing and concealment, presence and absence, Being and the human being. In the nullity of the abyss [*Ab-grund*], what is important in the aesthetic act is not the disinterested gaze of the spectator or the reader, but encountering, as Iain Thomson says:

> something more deeply rooted in existence that the modern subject/object dichotomy skates right over. Our encounter with the work teaches us that meaning does not happen solely in the art object or the viewing subject but instead takes place … *between* us and the work … For, what we lucidly encounter in art is our making-sense of the place in which we find ourselves, a fundamental "world-disclosing" that is always-already at work in human "existence". (98)

Because *Da-sein* is ex-sistence towards Being in the event of *Ereignis*, he or she understands the pressing need to interpret the world of beings due to the fact that beings could very easily *not be*. As a model for reading texts and approaching the relationship between philosophy and poetry, I argue for a structure of interaction in which both enterprises become questionable to themselves in their proximity of application. This ensures that philosophy does not become a reductive repetition of poetic tropes, and that poetry is not simply philosophy dressed up in linguistic gaudiness. This mode of reading seems to me particularly productive in unpacking the linguistic densities of and oftentimes contradictory impulses in Stevens' poetry, not only due to his assertion that philosophy and poetry are both fundamental perspectives about Being, but also stemming from his poetic appropriations of philosophical language and inclinations to accrue language with ontological weight and urgency. By recasting the Stevensian polarities of the "imagination" and "reality" in order to argue for the dynamism of *Ereignis* as a way of breaking down metaphysical absolutes, I hope to underscore the poetic happening of the "continuous process[es] of encounter" (Baird 265) which often unfold in the very immediacy of poetic perception.

Ultimately for Heidegger, "human beings remain committed to and within the being of language, and can never step out of it and look at it from somewhere else. Thus we always see language only to the extent that language itself has us in view, has appropriated us to itself" (*OWL* 134). If language effects this appropriation because it allows beings to first come to the light of disclosure and to rest within the world, it also has the capacity to withdraw into silence, refusing itself to us in hiddenness and concealment. The eventing of *Ereignis*, although always already at work in language, has nothing certain about it. The dialogue between the human being and Being, and poetry and thinking, is at its most resonate when the *questionability* of the relationship arises. This for Heidegger has always been the value of philosophy—not in parading intellectual theories and feeling secure about our interpretive stance towards Being, but when questioning clears a path for thinking which raises questioning to the forefront of philosophising. To dwell in one's own abode is thus difficult:

> Whatever is their own is that to which human beings belong and must belong if they are to fulfil whatever is destined to them, and whatever is fitting … Yet that which is their own often remains foreign to human beings for a long time, because they abandon it without having appropriated it … One's own must come to be appropriate. And in turn, whatever has become appropriate needs to be appropriated. (*HHTI* 21)

If, as Gianni Vattimo asserts, "there is no 'eternal' way of opposing philosophy and art … because there are no 'essences' of art and philosophy that would form a natural opposition" ("Aesthetics" 287), then thinking carefully in language sustains the timbre of *Ereignis*, bringing the age-old conversation between philosophy and literature, speaker and world, and imagination and reality into renewed relevance and ever-deepening formulations—what Stevens catches sight of in his evocation of the "ghostlier demarcations [and] keener sounds" which tell us of "ourselves and our origins" (*CPP* 106). Though curiously unaffected by the modernist experiments of T. S. Eliot and Ezra Pound which link poetic innovation with crisis and rupture,[2] Stevens was canny about how the writing of poetry happens when the imagination seizes on the fact that "it is always at the end of an era" (*CPP* 656), and, in sensing this, is constantly attaching and accommodating itself to a notion of reality which is also defined by change and movement. I turn to *Harmonium*, Stevens' first poetic flourishing, to explore how his language is constantly turned towards the world and the ways in which the world presences.

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[2] The fact that Stevens saw himself as aesthetically opposed to Eliot's brand of modernism is attested to in a 1950 letter he wrote to William Van O'Connor, wherein he states that "Eliot and I are dead opposites and I have been doing about everything that he would not be likely to do" (*L* 677; quoted in Strom 291). The lack of historical grounding in Stevens in relation to a received poetic tradition to be mined and updated also suitably distinguishes him from Pound. As Kia Penso points out, "Pound and the nineteenth century English poets believed that something essential to poetry was lacking in their time and had to be borrowed from the past. Stevens found plenty of poetry in his own experience" (45). As I will argue in the next chapter, the absence of the dominant traits of Anglo-American modernism in *Harmonium* contributed significantly to questions about readerly reception. In providing a phenomenological account of the workings of these poems, I attempt to tie together what many have seen as a disparate collection.

CHAPTER 4

Considering Presence and Place in Stevens' *Harmonium*

The Reception of Stevens

The aesthetic of Wallace Stevens' first book of poems *Harmonium* (1923) has suitably been characterised by a defiant sense of difference. Andrew John Miller's survey of the early reaction to the collection points to the fact that he was "an emphatically modernist innovator who was testing the limits of poetic diction" (304). In fact, this difference to be sought at the limits of language adumbrate the main concerns of the Stevensian oeuvre-to-come: they crystallise both an Arnoldian disillusionment at the erosion of transcendent faith which would serve to reanimate the "sea of belief" and confidence that poetry turned towards the openness of the world as it presences as "fresh transfigurings of freshest blue" (*CPP* 85) can serve to reinvigorate perception, itself a necessary condition for an imaginative transaction with reality. Early journal entries by Stevens demonstrate how he seeks to ground poetic insight not in the metaphysical, but in the mutability of the quotidian: in an entry in 1902, he writes that "an old argument with me is that the true religious force in the world is not in the church but in the world itself: the mysterious calling of Nature and our responses" (*L* 58). Two years later, he laments how "we have [utterly] forsaken the Earth, in the sense of excluding it from our thoughts …

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[Nature] is still a disparate monstrosity, full of solitudes + barrens + wilds. It still dwarfs + terrifies + crushes" (*L* 73). However, the poetic encounter with the Romantic sublime does not terminate in the Kantian split between subjective representation and "the veritable ding an sich" (*CPP* 23); instead, Stevens continually seeks unprecedented ways in which the imagination can "match [reality] in intelligence and force" (*L* 360).

This language of adequation seeks to delineate the structures of poetic appropriation, fully determined by the attempt "to make oblation fit" the "great hymn" of reality (*CPP* 13). The emphasis on the ineluctable presencing of reality not as metaphysical symbol, but as immanent presence, implies that poetic language places us in direct communion with what "will not declare itself/Yet is certain as meaning" (*CPP* 15). One important aesthetic result which emerges in *Harmonium* is the sense that Stevens "encouraged no recourse to … [any] consolatory [framework of metaphysical meaning] but often seemed purposely to invoke and enjoy the chaos of the universe" (Newcomb *Wallace Stevens* 64). This lack of an organising principle is aptly mirrored in the composition of the 1923 edition. As Chris Beyers points out, as Stevens put together the collection of poems, he consciously broke up sequences of poems which had been previously published in magazines such as *Poetry* and *Rogues*, while ignoring their original dates of composition and publication (83). Indeed, Stevens himself worried about this apparent arbitrary assemblage which seemingly followed no discernible pattern: in a 1922 letter to Carl Van Vechten, he writes that he "feel[s] frightfully uncertain about a book" (*L* 228), and in a note to Harriet Monroe (the editor of *Poetry*) shortly after, he states that it is "depressing" to collect together "things for my book" (*L* 231). Highlighting Stevens' anxieties about the overall shape of his first poetic collection helps us to pinpoint an important reason behind the readerly difficulty of coming to a synoptic assessment of the aesthetics of the collection. As Penso observes:

> One of the first, disconcerting strangenesses that the reader encounters with this poetry is the lack of any discernible order or sequence from one poem to the next. Who has not at one time or another wished that the [poems] were all dated? (16)

Beverly Coyle notes that between 1917 and 1923, 50 percent of Stevens' poems were published in groups of between 5 to 15 poems (33). With no obvious links between these groups, Coyle puts forth a suggestion that the coherence of *Harmonium* may be sought in "the reader's sense of contrapuntal-complemental relationships between poems and … between ideas implicit in that relationship" (33), which surely begs the question how Stevens himself conceptualised these linkages, given that we have no explicit statements in his correspondences.

The literary reception of *Harmonium* has seen puzzlement over its wilful flouting of poetic convention. Newcomb's detailed study of the gradual formation of a Stevensian literary canon points out the singularity of the poems' formal features as such:

> Few of Stevens's "forms" [in *Harmonium*] had a conventional length, foot, meter, or anything else. It is little wonder that they seem to early critics to have no relation to the poems that followed, since they existed in no prior frame of reference. By inventing forms rather than using existing ones, Stevens remained in a realm of his own generic creation, which could be directly set against no one else's poetry because no one has used them. (*Wallace Stevens* 63)

To this point, Newcomb contrasts Stevens' hermeticism with Eliot's own. For Newcomb, Eliot's *The Waste Land* explicitly foregrounded the esotericism of its cultural references in order to not only exclude the ordinary reader but also to "clubbishly admit those who did follow it into the priesthood of a prestigiously erudite tradition" (*Wallace Stevens* 78). By doing so, the cultural capital accrued sustained an important link to the poem's avant-garde nature. Stevens' own exclusions, on the other hand, functioned "to promote a play of elusive 'suave sounds' by not letting them take on meaning as conventional, skimmable words" (Newcomb *Wallace Stevens* 78). Contemporary reviews of the 1923 edition seemed to sense how Stevens' linguistic sense of the world presses up against readerly consciousness in ways which imply a revelling in a defamiliarised polyphony—Matthew Josephson's review from November 1923 emphasises the poet's exotic affectations by noticing how the "colours are richer [and] sounds are sharper in him than in other minds" (41), and Paul Rosenfeld writes in 1925 that "so novel and fantastic is the tintinnabulation of unusual words [in *Harmonium*], and words unusually rhymed and arranged, that you nearly overlook the significations, and heard outlandish sharp and melting musics" (72). However, the later part of Rosenfeld's assessment of Stevens' achievement in *Harmonium* ironically opens the early poetry to the critical charge of a wilful aestheticism which reduces poetic statement to the sensuous play of linguistic signifiers, confirming Stevens' inability to depart from his reliance on *fin-de-siècle* poetics and the influence of the French Symbolists[1].

In response to this, my main argument in this chapter is that Stevens imparts philosophical gravity to his use of language in the early poetry in a Heideggerian way, through grounding the self in a fundamental attitude of openness towards the world. Crucial to Heidegger's understanding of the human being as *Da-sein* is how his subjectivity is never closed off to its possibilities for Being, but is always situated as transcendence towards its world. By analysing Heidegger's arguments about ek-sistent projection and how this constitutes a radical critique of the metaphysical notions of subjectivity, I emphasise how the poems in *Harmonium* enact a philosophical dynamism where the poetic self is put continually in response to a world which can no longer function as a predetermined object of theoretical calculation, but as the transcendental horizon of the opening of Being. Indeed, it is *only because* the self is projected as en-owned by Being that beings can come into appearance and meaningful intelligibility through language. Ultimately, this necessitates an alternative appreciation of poetic language as Stevens conceives it—far from being a tool for abstract representation, poetry is the measure of an encounter between *Da-sein* as the being who sustains a humanistic understanding of the world through language and Being which evanesces as linguistic event. I will thus examine closely how the utterly pluralistic and decentred sense of the universe which critics like Lee Jenkins (1997) and David M. La Guardia (1983)[2] see in the early poetry is underpinned by the multiple ways in which language constitutes the world by putting us in relationship with beings and attuning us to Being as opening, and reminds us of the

[1] See, for example, John Gould Fletcher's polemical review on December 1923 outrightly identifying Stevens as "an aesthete … [who] is definitely out of tune with life and with his surroundings, and is seeking an escape into a sphere of finer harmony between instinct and intelligence" (46). The critic Edmund Wilson's 1924 review of *Harmonium* summarily casts the poetry as ironically suffused "by a sort of aridity" even though it demonstrates "the richness of [Stevens'] verbal imagination", concluding that Stevens is ultimately "impervious to life" (63).

[2] By way of brief illustration, Jenkins reads the poems in *Harmonium* as "compris[ing] a *range* of registers and instincts" (89) which she sees as integral to the overall structure of the collection. La Guardia observes that Stevens "aligns himself to the … world of multiplicity, disorder and change", and that the poems in *Harmonium* reflect the imagination's relationship with "the chaos of reality" (39).

contingencies of the subjective processes of meaning-making by undermining any final objective grasp of Being as it steps away from language. In sum, language *sustains* us in an active stance of communion with Being as communication.

Heideggerian Poetics and a Renewed Reading of *Harmonium*

Heidegger's emphasis on poetic language as performing a gathering together of *Da-sein* and his or her environment gestures towards an understanding of place not primarily in terms of the Kantian paradigms of spatiality and temporality, but as a site which grounds perception in a hermeneutic openness towards imaginative encounters with the textures of reality. If early readers of Stevens sensed a wilful inwardness of the creative imagination that enshrines polyphonic word play to the detriment of a more concrete grasp of the world behind his poetic statements, they have failed to consider how consistently Stevens illustrates in *Harmonium* the ability of poetry to make "visible … an invisible element of … place" (*CPP* 41). Indeed, as long as Stevensian criticism posits him as attempting (and failing) to represent reality, they cannot account for an alternative picture of language having an equal ontological density as what it allows to come into presence: "Be the voice of night and Florida in my ear" (*CPP* 69). In other words, language thickens by making present, drawing us into an imaginative apprehension of the value of place, and the realised awareness of it. I argue that Stevens uses language not so much to represent the world as to bridge the divide between external reality and our subjective responses to it, thereby bringing the human person and Being into renewed relationship with each other through the sounding of the poetic word. In arguing this, I disagree with the critical paradigm which reiterates Stevens' failure to overcome the problem "of a disparity between the thing itself in its most literal identity and the necessary doubling of representation, which can bring the thing to life only in a relational and analogical manner" (Eeckhout *Wallace Stevens* 166). As long as Eeckhout reads the language game of poetry in representational terms, he understands Stevens as being unable to reconcile the disjuncture between the presence of the signified and the absence inherent in the signifier.

I contend that Stevens presents his reader with an alternative view of poetic language, one which allows beings to come into presence through words. As the saying of Being, language does not distance us from beings in a second-hand or derivative manner; instead, it situates us in inexhaustible response towards a world which we project ourselves towards. For Heidegger and Stevens, poetry cannot be a free-floating aesthetic pursuit disassociated from our engagement with reality; in the words of Paul Ricoeur, "poetic discourse brings to language a pre-objective world in which we find ourselves already rooted, but in which we also project our innermost possibilities" (306). Poetry can only do this if it enriches our attitudes towards the world wherein we find authentic possibilities-to-be—it is as much turned from the world as tropological as it is "owed to the world and given to it" (Cavell 48). I seek in my reading of the poems in *Harmonium* an understanding of how Stevens dramatises encounters between the questing imagination and the reality which is in turns welcoming and hostile towards it. For Stevens, the place of poetry is also intimately the poetry of place—place as it is poeticised, and place as appropriative harmony between word and fact. In this way, the description of place is at the same time a description of our existential finitude and spiritual attachment to it. By seeking congruences between Heidegger's understanding of language as projection and Stevens' verse, I look to analyse the value of Stevens' language as having phenomenological ballast, a weight which both anchors perception to a preunderstanding of its environment, and imbues poetic insight with an ontological measure of earthly finitude and worldly openness[3].

Death and the Sense of the World in *Harmonium*

To read *Harmonium* is to encounter the transaction between the person and his or her environment—to understand how, as Richard Ellmann puts it, "Stevens' poems are based upon images which somehow participate in [the] primal force of being" (103). Stevens succeeds in opening up the imagined fecundity of Being to which the poetic consciousness responds on an almost pre conceptual level. However, as Frank Kermode writes, if Stevens was aiming in *Harmonium* to evoke the widest horizon of Being, then poetic language must necessarily run up against the Nothing, which, as Being, is precisely no-thing, but Being's fundamental absence:

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[3] My reading of Stevens thus stands in contrast to critics who engage with rhetorical strategies in *Harmonium* as indicative of a poet who purses linguistic effects and ironies as the primary motors of his verse. See Eleanor Cook's reading of rhetoric in Stevens' early poetry as the "sense of the play of words that offers, for me, one of the best methods for reading Stevens" (51), and Robert Buttel's analysis of how Stevens utilises "irony, wit, satire, and humour" (169) in some measure for "protective covering" (169) against the public perception of poetry. My reading of Stevensian irony, in contrast, emphasises the qualitative disjunctures and readjustments between imaginative value and ontological facticity.

> The flash and flare of its Florida, its paradise of earth, is known not merely in itself, but as part of a larger human whole which involves the idea of its loss. (*Wallace Stevens* 41)

Apart from the gaudiness of poetry which is a flourishing of presence, Stevens also seeks to "grip more closely the essential prose/As being" (*CPP* 29), as if to seek an accommodation between language and Being's simultaneous dynamic of presencing and withdrawal. Indeed, Stevens deliberately works against the idea of metaphysical consolation in the early poems through the guise of parody in order to foreground the immanence of presence which poetry can engender in the reader. If there is no realistic amelioration which can be sought through Christian theodicy, then poetry which remains responsive to the temporal dimensions of worldly existence may provide an alternative way to accommodate subjective vision to the fact of its finitude. The poem "The Death of a Soldier" (*CPP* 81, added to the 1931 edition of *Harmonium*) begins bleakly by fatalistically linking death to the autumnal denuding: "Life contracts and death is expected,/ As in a season of autumn". The polysemic register of "contracts" serves both to dramatise the diminishment of vitality—which is starkly picked up in later stanzas by the repetition of "stops"—and to remind us how Being is inevitably contracted to its ultimate cessation. If Being is not to be interpreted metaphysically, then the fact of death is denied any narrative of transcendence. Stevens mocks the Christian idea of the resurrection of the flesh by stating how the fallen soldier "does not become a three-day personage"—his death is ironically memorialised in verse at the cost of anonymity. Indeed, Stevens abstracts from the nameless soldier's death in order to reach a bitter conclusion that "death is absolute and without memorial". What is left of life is inert physicality and the disintegration of the body. This sentiment is fully displayed in the poem "The Worms at Heaven's Gate" (*CPP* 40), where the seemingly elegiac evocation of the mock-exotic name of "Badroulbadour", and the compensatory notion of the afterlife figured in the threshold which separates earthly life from heaven terminate in the grotesque enumeration (this poetic gesture ironising the tradition of the blazon) of Badroulbadour's body parts. As Jahan Ramazani observes, "Stevens' mock-elegy bitterly transforms elegy's compensatory light into the cruel light of the reality principle" (572). Lacking any metaphorical or synecdochal significance which could serve to reintegrate them into an imagined totality, his body parts serve to demonstrate nothing more than pure corporeality:

> Here *is* an eye. And here *are*, one by one,
> The lashes of that eye and its white lid.
> Here *is* the cheek on which that lid declined,
> And, finger after finger, here, the hand,
> The genius of that cheek. (Emphasis mine)

Juxtaposed to the discordant mosaic of body parts is the repetition of the copula: here is …, here are …, as if to underline how nothingness presences as an absent presence. If poetry is essential to the opening of Being as worldly horizon, it also does not let us forget how Being refuses itself from us in absence and nothingness. Indeed, if language allows us to sense the "pungent bloom" of the world in all its secular effulgence, it also sets this epiphany against the "shade" (*CPP* 39) of absence, inscribing a dynamic wherein Being ambiguously advances and recedes.

Stevens' much-anthologised poem "The Emperor of Ice-Cream" (*CPP* 50) seems to aptly demonstrate the contradictory impulse between the freshness of poetic description and the barrenness of signification. The poem's initial invocatory tone not only sets the reader in a specific and textured social setting but also alludes to the bardic function of the poet who is able, through his language, to call into life "the roller of big cigars" and the ostentatious display of colours from the dresses of those attending the funeral of the anonymous woman. If the first stanza is defined by ocular and aural excess—albeit uneasily punctuated by the poet's dictum "let be be finale of seem"—the second stanza is dialectically circumscribed by loss and diminishment: the dresser of the woman is "lacking three glass knobs", and the sheet which represents the artifice of human endeavour cannot cover her body fully. I read the word "feet" in the grotesque phrase "horny feet" as a pun which links the ugliness of non-being with poetic foot—the word not only metrically obtrudes by adding one more stressed syllable in front of the spondaic word "protrude", but also demonstrates how poetic language paradoxically discloses that which lacks all signification. Stevens' injunction to let being be the teleological end to appearance thus emphasises how the ultimate apperception of Being cannot be just defined as simple presence, which can devolve into a representational concern with ontic beings. As much as *Harmonium* is suffused with the poetry of the earth, it soberly reminds us that death is "an unavoidable aspect of being" (Longenbach 68).

Stevens' reminder to "let be be" is thus not only an evocation of Being as it looms over and overwhelms mere appearance, but also a description of a disposition towards the inevitable concealment which Being effects. I argue that the poem "The Snow Man" (*CPP* 8) is crucial in allowing the reader to understand this affective orientation. As with the other poems in *Harmonium*, this poem succeeds in breaking down the separation between subject and object, and perceiver and environment in order to immerse the reader in an affective experience of a non-metaphysical totality which suspends the division between "being" and "non-being". The hermeneutical force of the single sentence of the poem which drives towards a philosophical state of mind is premised upon a new envisioning of subjectivity, one that apprehends the environment as phenomenological upsurge, and not as an object which fits pre-existing conceptual frameworks. Stevens drives home this point by foregrounding the inseparability between perception and phenomenal data in the first line of the poem: the self "must have a mind of winter" in order to be immersed in the landscape of winter and, more importantly, to understand winter for what it *is*, without the clichés provided by pathetic fallacy. As the poem begins evoking the metonymical contours of the landscape which is linguistically mediated by the perceiving subject (as evidenced by the infinitive phrases "To regard" and "To behold"), Stevens performs a Heideggerian "clearing" which cleanses metaphysical subjectivity of its need to "frame" external space as a manipulable totality, thereby allowing an object-less "Nothing" to arise and appropriate the human perceiver into its unique poetic rhythm and event. No clearer example in *Harmonium* is offered of the way in which poetry locates both speaker and reader in projection towards Being as a non-metaphysical space, which gathers up and opens the clearing through which we encounter "the pine-trees crusted with snow" and "the junipers shagged with ice".

Indeed, the poem ultimately concerns itself with a "thinking" which moves beyond metaphysics in order to substitute the imperialism of subjective mastery with a mode of attentiveness which is at the same measure a gentle "letting-be". As Heidegger makes clear in his focus on poetry, the pristine silence of the genuine word allows that which is unheard of in language to resound and clear the space for genuine attunement towards the presence of Being. Stevens demonstrates this transition by substituting the visuality of the beholder for an aural abiding which "listens in the snow" for that which exceeds the compass of the self.

However, what the reader comes across is precisely the linking of this exceeding with the apprehension of the Nothing as no-thing, for the natural objects in the landscape point beyond themselves towards the abysmal foundation of their being. This fundamental but difficult effort to conceive poetically of the Nothing as intimately linked with the upsurge of Being not only informs the environmental totality of this poem but also connects the productive barrenness manifested across Stevens' poems of winter. In the poem "The Course of a Particular" (*CPP* 460), Stevens revisits this earlier attempt to imagine a condition of "mere-ness" which forms the necessary prelude to the appropriation of "life as it is", abstracted from the paradigms informing philosophical dualism. Stevens' figure of capable imagination must first be a figure of negation, as much able to project existential affordances from its renewed constructions as being able to countenance a significance in things beyond significance:

> It is not a cry of divine attention,
> Nor the smoke-drift of puffed-out heroes, nor human cry.

The movement of *Ereignis*, which designates how *Da-sein* and Being are turned towards each other in mutual appropriation, thus maps onto the discovery of the loss of subjectivity—the perceiver understands that he is "nothing himself". At another level, the poem depicts the hermeneutical moment when the reader realises that meaning arises in the course of the reading experience, and that the text ushers the reader into the space of its unfolding, just as we transform the meaning of the text through the act of interpretation. In the paradoxical economy of both Heidegger and Stevens, this "poverty [of meaning] becomes his heart's strong core" (*CPP* 367)—to work past poetic tropology opens up new spaces where appropriation attunes perception to a world it cannot be separated from. In this way, *Ereignis* is as much associated with de-sedimentation as it is with reappropriating the relationship between the human being and Being. Stevens follows this dialectic apprehension in another poem of winter "No Possum, No Sop, No Taters" (*CPP* 261–2), wherein "the savagest hollow of winter-sound" destroys our attachments to the Platonic trope of the sun in order to "reach/The last purity of the knowledge of good". This may be seen in terms of what "The Snow Man" suggests about existential attunement—as David S. Helsa suggests, the poem "does not tell us what one must do or be in order not to think of any misery" (quoted in Wargacki 95). In other words, the poem's logic *depends* upon the feeling of misery which rises from what Heidegger elsewhere calls "mood" (*Stimmung*), a complete immersion of *Da-sein* in his or her environment. The last line of the poem becomes a site of illumination where the reader discovers the inextricable link between Being and Nothing. Indeed, Nothing is paradoxically nowhere and everywhere—the opening of Being is conterminously the opening of the Nothing. Heidegger's insight that to think of the Being of beings as widest and most universal concept is nothing else than to think of the Nothing seems to me to be a very illuminative way to think about not only the strange conjunction Stevens effects between the "Nothing that is not" and "the nothing that is" but also the fact that language places us in an uncanny relationship to that which exceeds our conceptual and enunciative capacities.

"Sunday Morning" and the Post-Metaphysical Poem

Stevens' mediations on death and Being reach a crescendo in the grand poem "Sunday Morning" (*CPP* 53–6). By writing what I argue to be a post-metaphysical poem about the possibility of belief in the wake of the death of myths of transcendence, Stevens emphasises how poetry allows us to reimagine possibilities of being in the phenomenal world. By an early juxtaposition between the now-insubstantial "the thought of heaven" and sensuous comforts of "pungent fruit" coupled with "unsubdued/Elations when the forest blooms", Stevens locates lasting delight not in a metaphysical realm of "that old catastrophe", but in the woman's understanding of how she dwells and defines her sense of being amidst the passage of the seasons and the vagaries of the weather. As Heidegger puts it, dwelling poetically in the world cannot be reduced to inhabiting a locale objectively defined by space and time; instead, dwelling is ecstatic projection towards Being as opening. Stevens emphasises this new understanding of projective transcendence by refuting not only the Judeo-Christian narrative of Christ's death and resurrection but also Classical images of the afterlife:

> 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 …

By reorientating the woman and reader's perception towards the earth which ultimately will be "all of paradise that we shall know", Stevens emphasises how the lived significance of our existences can only make sense, as Heidegger writes, "out of the original enactment" (*PRL* 85), which defines our fundamental stance towards Being. As with Heidegger, Stevens' "destruction" of traditional metaphysical narratives has a constructive purpose, for it clears the space through which a new humanistic attunement towards the world can be poeticised. The performative dimensions of the poem cannot be separated from the perlocutive force of its assertions: for Stevens' speaker, to enunciate her quotidian delight in "the reality/Of misty fields" is to enact a way of being with her environment that becomes palpably present in the moment of reading in the poem.

The second half of the poem necessarily acknowledges that this openness needs to countenance death as the opposite of the desire for "some imperishable bliss". The often-quoted line "Death is the mother of beauty" sustains the full pitch of a philosophical thinking which brings the fullness of existential and earthly plenitude right up against its non-dialectic Other. What is more, the "beautiful" art-object cannot be evaluated based on aesthetic standards—it cannot be considered as an object of artistic consumption. If Heidegger is right to accord ontological significance to what the artwork "sets to work", then the artwork not only gathers together *Da-sein* and his or her attunement towards Being, but also opens up the world *as* world. As William S. Allen elaborates, the artwork "is not an imitation of the world of presence, but of what grants it and does not appear, which is the ground of nothing that enables the world to world" (70). In this way, death as non-being allows the artwork to come into its presence just as much as the artwork opens up the possibility of *Da-sein* having a world. As the poem delineates, it is the fragility of beauty which imparts visual lustre to the "new plums and pears" and gustatory savour to the eating of them. Indeed, it is the impermanence and perishability of beautiful things which both draw the perceiver close when they presence and stimulate desire when they withdraw into absence. Stevens thus goes on to adduce the most important reason for turning away from an otherworldly realm: it can never appeal to our delight in change and transience: “Is there no change of death in paradise?/Does ripe fruit never fall? Or do the boughs/Hang always heavy in that perfect sky”. Stevens pointedly writes against the ideological view of the work of art outlined in Keats' poem “Ode to a Grecian Urn”, where the speaker admires the static grandeur of the urn as betokening a permanence which is beauty's signature. Instead of this, Stevens offers his own ode to the sun, where “a ring of men” chant and celebrate “the heavenly fellowship/Of men that perish”. This vision of secular transcendence towards Being is ultimately transient, and the poem's last section returns to sombre intimations of mortality:

> 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.

The paradoxical juxtaposition between “free” and “inescapable” becomes significant in reemphasising one of the crucial themes of the poem—freedom is to be located not in an imaginary afterlife which makes up for the limitations of earthly existence, but in a resolute attention towards our relationships with beings which we have access to due to an authentic attunement facing Being and our possibilities to be. Once this truth has been intimated by the reader, the full significance of the final image of the poem can be understood, for it intimates no less than a deepening of our sense of the world—as imaged by the extension of the wings of pigeons now seen for what they are, outside of any metaphysical schema—which we are contentedly en-owned to:

> At evening, casual flocks of pigeons make
> Ambiguous undulations as they sink,
> Downwards to darkness, on extended wings.

“The Comedian as the Letter C” and Poetic Appropriation

For Stevens, the poetic imagination, in its encounter with reality which indelibly shapes it, is what allows us to articulate our deepest truths and preserve our nobility. Stevens' long poem “The Comedian as the Letter C” (*CPP* 22–37) is a mock-epic of the poet's voyage to reconcile imagination with reality, which ultimately brings home the truth that “the restrictions environment imposes upon man ironically provide just enough freedom to comprehend the nature of those limitations” (Guereschi 76) which liberate poetry by allowing it to find its authentic measure. Framed from the ironic perspective of a speaker who narrates the story of Crispin and his attempt to write the grand poem of his environment, the poem charts his self-discovery as gradual accommodation to what poetry can realistically achieve. Rajeev Patke has outlined the literary antecedents for Crispin—in Horace’s Roman satires, Crispinus figures as “a poetic upstart who dares to challenge [the poet] to a verse-writing competition” (10), and in Ben Jonson’s play *Poetaster or The Arrangement* (1602), Crispinus is mocked and arraigned as a plagiarist and inferior poet (Patke 11). Stevens’ comic deflation of Crispin thus already frames the reader’s attitudes towards the pomposity of his attempts (in the first section of the poem titled “The World Without Imagination”) to entrench a “mythology of self,/Blotched out beyond unblotching”.

As the erstwhile “lutanist of fleas” and “general lexicographer of mute/And maidenly greenhorns”, Crispin starts off his voyage being confident that the internal resources of his subjective language will be enough to meet the externality of his environment. Predictably, the magnitude of the sea smashes not only his words into “clickering syllables” but also his assumed integrity: “Crispin was washed away by magnitude.” Faced with the world as the opening of Being, Crispin realises that he cannot reduce its sublimity to conceptual structures—just as the figures Odysseus and Aeneas fail to aid him in mythologising his quest, the sea loses its former lustre as nightingale to the Romantic Imagination. Triton, the figure who can reinvigorate the imagination in Wordsworth’s sonnet, has “nothing left of him,/Except in faint, memorial gesturings”. In Crispin’s despair before the sea which is presented *as it is*, Stevens enacts the dramatic exchange between the imagination and the reality it is inexorably exposed to. As the self is appropriated by his environment, Crispin is “dissolved” in it “until nothing of himself/Remained, except some starker, barer self/In a starker, barer world”. The observer and environment thus cohere, as Crispin senses that Being cannot be reduced to a metaphysical construct, any more than the self can represent to himself this openness towards his world. The creative imagination is irresponsibly solipsistic if it chooses to “evade” the overwhelming sway of Being by clinging onto the “last distortion of romance”. Rather, Crispin now learns that as Being presences through language—the “veritable ding an sich” is still “a vocable thing” which has "one vast, subjugating, final tone"—so the self must dwell in that opening and meet its sway appropriately.

As Crispin emerges from his encounter with the sea, which echoes that of a secular baptism (Patke 15), he espouses a changed aesthetic with relation to his new environment. More attentive to the unfolding of the natural world, Crispin's phenomenological openness towards the landscape of Yucatan "much enlarged/His apprehension" towards not only the "beautiful barenesses" but also the "savagery of palms" and the "cadaverous bloom/That yuccas breed". Alive to the grotesque fecundity of nature figured in the inexorable processes of birth and decay, Crispin now seeks to write a new poetry of the earth: "The fabulous and its intrinsic verse/ Came like two spirits parleying". However, the dialectical momentum of the poem as voyage necessitates that Crispin's new attitude is implicitly another form of escapism as romantic embracement of the natural world. In experiencing the force of a thunderstorm which "proclaimed something harsher", Crispin learns that "this was the span/Of force, the quintessential fact" which he is yet to capture poetically—poetry must match the force of Being if it is to be poetry at all. As Crispin leaves Yucatan and sails towards his destination, Stevens charts his relentless quest to strip away the inessential embroidery of verse in order to seek "the blissful liaison,/Between himself and his environment". Not only must he avoid the evasive tropes of Romantic poetry—which Stevens depicts as "a passionately niggling nightingale"—he must grip to himself "the essential prose/ As being". Crispin's epiphanic recognition that "prose should wear a poem's guise at last" is not so much a rejection of poetic figuration in favour of bald statement, as it is Stevens' belief that poetic tropes turn the reader towards the plain sense of things as they are. Crispin is finally able to settle into his home and enjoy the bliss of domesticity and fatherhood by seeing past his false Romanticism and preferring to "dwell in the land" and to accommodate himself "to things within his actual eye". For Stevens, poetry increases our perception of the actual through our ability to articulate and appropriate it linguistically. Crispin's final and most important lesson is of subsuming the "shall or ought to be" in the visible presence of the "is", just as the woman in "Sunday Morning" ultimately maintains her faith not in any utopic or transcendental realm, but in her deepening sense of her environment. Indeed, Stevens' sentiments here prefigure his insistence that the Supreme Fiction of the first idea abstracts itself from other fictions which have accumulated around the first idea and, in doing so, maintains itself in the difficult apperception of its non-metaphysical being.

In this way, "The Comedian as the Letter C" may be read as Stevens' own *ars poetica*, wherein the movement away from Romantic and Symbolist poetic sensibilities towards a phenomenological poetry of Being signals Stevens' increasing belief that poetry must not seek primarily to represent, but to present, instead of evasion, exposure.

Harmonium and the Philosophical Force of Multiplicity

The poems in *Harmonium* then, far from demonstrating what Vendler terms Stevens' "dislike for that multiple reality which makes a dump of the world" (*On Extended Wings* 50), depict the poet embracing the heterogenous ways in which consciousness linguistically embraces a world which advances to the perceiver in moments of disclosure, and withdraws by shrouding itself in mystery. This dialectic is succinctly captured in the poem "Of the Surface of Things" (*CPP* 45–6), where Stevens writes:

> In my room, the world is beyond my understanding;
> But when I walk I see that it consists of three or four
> hills and a cloud.

For Stevens, there can be no metaphysical ground or substrate undergirding the world as horizon of Being, for the whole effort of poetic language is to maintain itself in the environment of that which presences. Stevens cannot be seen as either a realist or idealist; in fact, as Tom Quirk writes, the poems in *Harmonium* "satirize the tendencies of both [realist and idealist] to stabilize and idealize an essentially unreifiable world, and thereby to remove it from the concrete relations of living experience" (49). Stevens' gleeful polemic against the Christian woman who grounds her "moral law" in the emptiness of "haunted heaven" (*CPP* 47) culminates in the amoral cacophony of fiction, which opposes sheer aural presence "unpurged by epitaph" (*CPP* 47) to her ineffectual outrage, and the unflattering depiction of "rationalists" whose intellectual frameworks are clearly stymied by their refusal to countenance anything other than "right-angled triangles" in "square rooms" (*CPP* 60) clearly demonstrate Stevens' implicit commitment to a different epistemological mode. More subtly, the opening image of the Ur-parakeet, which "prevails" over other parakeets in the poem "The Bird With the Coppery, Keen Claws" (*CPP* 65), is a parody of the desire to ground the Being of reality in a "higher" ground. Stevens makes the point clear when the poem mocks the hollowness of this parakeet figure, for not only is it blind, it presents a sham image of "paradise" because it "broods there and is still".

The poem "Sea Surface Full of Clouds" (*CPP* 82–5; added in the 1931 edition) undercuts any attempt by the reader to emerge with a fixed understanding of the relationship between perceiver and external reality. In five sections of six unrhymed tercets each, the same scene of an observer noticing the play of colours on the surface of the sea is repeated, each time with subtle variations in adjectives and phenomenal texture. As the observer starts noticing the presencing of colour which spreads on the sea's surface, description gives way to impression, as the poem's language shifts from linguistic construction of the external scene towards examining how the mind of the observer actively changes the way the scene is perceived. This transition is aptly signalled by the first line of the second tercet of each section, which begins: "And made one think of …". As the hue of "morning summer", which morphs into the genteel ambience of "rosy chocolate/And gilt umbrellas", gets replaced by the sickliness of "jelly yellow" which consequently modulates this ambience into the flimsiness of "chop-house chocolate/And sham umbrellas", the poem observes how *both* mind and reality fluctuate without ever collapsing into an idealistic unity. Rather than objectively representing reality, Stevens argues that the imagination works by creating resemblances between poetic images which increase our affective sense of reality. In this way, new aspects of reality are constantly being disclosed in poetry.

The poem which explores this idea most radically in *Harmonium* is "Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird" (*CPP* 74–6). As ambiguous signifier, the blackbird is both concrete and abstract, physical presence and mental projection. By locating the blackbird in incongruous contexts in each of the thirteen sections of the poem, Stevens presents uncanny ways through which perception is unsettled by reality, thereby suggesting that the "acute awareness of the constant mutations in the external world" (McNamara 82) needs to be met with a vitalistic and open-ended optics. Section I of the poem juxtaposes the minute movement of the blackbird with the stasis of its background, as if implying the need to see more intensely and deeply—just as we see the blackbird, the blackbird looks back at us, inscribing a dialectic between perceiver and perceived. The symbolism of colour (black vs white) brings into play thematic undertones of life and death, presence and absence. As we have seen from other poems, the opening of Being cannot be separated from nothingness—the blackbird's presence is therefore paradoxically its absence. Section III reminds us that the blackbird is only "a small part of the pantomime", expanding the zoom-like focus on the bird in Section I, thereby foregrounding how it forms only a tiny part of the horizon of the world. Any attempt to impute objective meaning and significance to the blackbird is a futile abstraction from the task of perception. This vital transaction with nature that showcases an epistemological disposition is highlighted by Buttel as such: "For [Stevens], the mind must constantly reach … new accords with nature, capturing its fluidity in poetic form that does not because of its abstraction exclude life" (165). The poem makes this clear in the inscrutability of Section VI, where Stevens presents an almost collage-like image of the "shadow of the blackbird" crossing the "barbaric glass" of icicles. However, the glass ironically does not allow the reader to penetrate the density of the image. If the image succeeds in demonstrating one of Stevens' most famous pronouncements that "poetry must resist the intelligence almost successfully" (*CPP* 306), then it returns the reader's focus to the contingent and arbitrary ways perception becomes an act of phenomenological construction.

Indeed, as Section VIII emphasises, the blackbird "is involved/In what" the observer knows, for knowledge is as much theoretical knowledge as it is an expression of the human being's existential projection towards Being. The poem thus ends with the blackbird's motion of flying paralleling the flowing of the river, in a moment which echoes Elizabeth Bishop's famous description of the fluidity of knowledge which we cannot fully grasp because it ceaselessly escapes objectification. This idea of flux becomes the poem's most important image suggesting the openness of perception, and our capacity to be changed and shaped by that which we too change and shape. In a world made more imaginatively vivid by the death of metaphysical certainty, language restores our belief in our place in the world.

Conclusion

This chapter demonstrates that the poems in *Harmonium* inculcate in the reader an attentiveness towards the "luscious and impeccable fruit of life" (*CPP* 11) which partakes of the fullness of the earth. Ironically, the fruit's excellence derives from the fact that it "comes rotting back to ground" (*CPP* 11), for belonging to the earth as we are, it too is bounded by death and decay. As Stevens elaborates, "it comes, it blooms, it bears its fruit and dies./This trivial trope reveals a way of truth" (*CPP* 13). For Heidegger and Stevens, the importance of locating the truth of thinking and poetry in the existential realm lies in the revelation that the world in which we find our being is a thoroughly human one, replete with human significations and desires.

A philosophy which entrenches an objective worldview not only imprisons us in inert subjectivities, which can only relate to Being through the language of domination and irresponsible consumption, but also denies us richer avenues of self-discovery and relationality. Poetry is thus philosophical in nature when it registers an ontological and epistemological accord between language and the world; as Coyle states, "at the basis of all Stevens's thought is the concept of changing reality on the one hand, of changing imaginative awareness on the other, and of the poem as a momentary agreement between the two" (40). In seeking the rationale for a Heideggerian poetics in the early Stevens, I go against Wit Pietrzak's comparative analysis of both in a significant way. For Pietrzak, Stevens' *Harmonium* can be read in tandem with "Heidegger's *search* for Being in the sphere of poetic language" (171, emphasis mine). The early poetry is not accorded much weight in Pietrzak's estimation because Stevens' focus is on "depicting" (171) the poetic approach to reality. Pietrzak surely goes wrong that he writes that Stevens and Heidegger use language as an instrument to understand "the unearthing of Being in the beings" (171)—Heidegger's well-known metaphor for language as the "house of Being" instead emphasises how language gathers and sustains the human being by opening up hermeneutic pathways of comportment towards reality. In other words, phenomenological thinking attunes us to the sense of the world which escapes linguistic objectification, rather than imposing pre-established theoretical frameworks upon it. As I have argued, Stevens' focus in *Harmonium* is far from any "depiction" of a search; instead, it is a poetic rendering of the ways in which the perceiver is brought up against a sheer fullness of worldly presence he or she also participates in bringing into being. Stevens' invocation to the poetic Muse in the poem "To the One of Fictive Music" (*CPP* 70–1) thus celebrates poetic music to be the sacred bridge which both separates and connects the human being to his or her world:

> Now, of the music summoned by the birth
> That separates us from the wind and sea,
> Yet leaves us in them, until earth becomes,
> By being so much of the things we are …

CHAPTER 5

Ideology, Politics and Life in the *Polis* for Heidegger, Stevens and American Poetry in the 1930s

POLITICS AND COMMITMENT TO THE *POLIS* IN HEIDEGGER AND STEVENS

The terms with which readers and reviewers of Stevens' poetry were to judge his output after the publication of the 1931 edition of *Harmonium* entailed a shift in the broader concerns with regards to the poet's political commitments. As Newcomb helpfully delineates:

> Collectively the reviews of the [poetry of the 1930s] were both assertions and reflections of Stevens's increasing prominence in a cultural climate that held sensitivity and adaptability to a rapidly changing contemporary society among its paramount values. Stevens's shift in status from fastidious eremite to prolific participant forced nearly all readers and critics concerned with modernist poetry into a reevaluation of the dominant opinion of him as a dabbler rather than as a committed poet. (*Wallace Stevens* 101)

The political realities of the 1930s would prove decisive in articulating how Heidegger and Stevens came to terms with the relationship between poetic projection and geopolitical circumstance. Both philosopher and poet understood how the communicative function of language could connect deracinated individuals to a larger sense of hegemonic belonging based on a mutual understanding of the world as constituted by meaningful social practices and cultural inheritance. In essence, Heidegger and

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Stevens during this period reflected deeply about how the openness of the human being towards his or her world necessitated a thinking about the link between language and an imagination of the political sphere. However, language plays a crucial role in *both* political expression and repression, for if it builds bridges amongst people by mediating between individual utterance and unifying narratives and ideas, it can also reduce complex realities to unambiguous clichés and, in so doing, obviate the need for situating discourse in critical self-reflection. Indeed, the question of how poetry enables the self to shore up a viable notion of individual identity and integrity in the face of the impingement of monolithic ideologies, thereby signalling a valuable ethical resistance to the dangers of totalitarian thinking, results in a crucial divergence between the disastrous political ramifications of Heidegger's thought as related to the National Socialist ascendancy in Germany, and Stevens' strident assertions that poetry insulates us from a questionable absorption "within a fixedly prescribed … political order" (Simpson 53) by erecting our own imaginative bulwarks.

I begin this chapter by situating poetry's place in relation to political thinking in the 1930s, within the ideological parameters of absorption and resistance. This binary entrenches a critical stance which "divides American poetry of the 1930s between a straightforward, rhetorically transparent leftist poetry and a politically quiescent (or even reactionary) modernism" (Scroggins 729). However, I move past this binary because the assumptions involved in such clear definitions of both poetry and politics "limit the range of political poetry to either an autonomous realm of assertion or one of contestation" (Dowdy 12). This analysis allows us to nuance the idea of "political commitment" in order to maintain a crucial self-reflexivity against certain positivistic notions of "reality" and "society" unhelpfully entrenched by rhetoric and partisanship. As I demonstrate, Stevens' supposedly "apolitical" stance of the 1930s does not so much indict him of aesthetic amorality as it sheds critical light on an unjustified reification of "political reality", an illegitimate absorption into an articulation of "presence" which Heidegger's intellectual legacy continually wrestles with. I next turn to Heidegger's philosophical thought in the 1930s in the context of National Socialism which Heidegger himself interpreted as a historical event in the unfolding of Being. To bring up the already-detailed and vexed discussion of whether Heidegger subscribed fully to Nazism or whether his entire philosophy should be discredited because of his membership in the party is not my aim here; rather, I intend to emphasise how the direction of Heidegger's thought in that decade provides an unfortunate illustration of how the appropriation of the human being by Being naively translated into an absorption of the former by a certain reified political understanding of Being. Heidegger's illegitimate transmutation of the notion of projective transcendence towards the world into ideological hegemony illustrates how language can dangerously entrench an uncritical attitude of unreserved openness towards ideological formations couched in the language of the nonconceptual.

The negative consequences of Heidegger's thought will allow me to illustrate a countermovement in Stevens' poetry as collected in *Ideas of Order* (1936) and *The Man With the Blue Guitar and Other Poems* (1937), wherein poetry is shaped by the political by being resistant to any overt communitarian gesture which seeks to incorporate individuality into an unthinking collective. The fact that both Heidegger and Stevens engaged with political questions during the 1930s in the context of the conceptual frameworks I have been highlighting thus far, while reaching different conclusions about the essence of the political as opposed to the individual, is remarkable in itself. Faced by the demand to trim the aesthetic of *Harmonium* by bringing the imagination "into accord with less personal conditions and more immediate, less pleasant realities" (Riddel "Rhetoric of Politics" 350) palpably present in Depression-era America witnessing the inevitable rise of Fascist movements in Europe, Stevens avoids writing ideological poetry by pursuing the notion that language aids us in accommodating to the traumatic impact of the world upon our sensibilities, not by indulging in fantasies of an "ideal society" which is to come, but by exerting a necessary counterpressure against any political ideology which seeks to limit the open play of the poetic imagination.

My argument for the political valence of Stevens' poetry of the 1930s will then react against the charge that a Stevensian aesthetic cannot be embedded in the empirical conditions of materiality and historicity because of his penchant for abstraction. This is the view of Alec Marsh, who contrasts the poetic "objectivity" of Stevens and Williams in order to suggest that, for the former, "reality is a private activity of introspection and contemplation" (40). For Marsh, the operations of the imagination in Stevens enshrine a poetic abstraction that "can have no meaningful contact with, or relationship to, the world of which it is not a part" (44). However, the point for Stevens precisely lies in the vitality of an imaginatively created sense of order which "enables us to perceive the normal in the abnormal, the opposite of chaos in chaos" (*CPP* 737). This self-reflexive contingency towards the chaotic present opens up the need for pragmatic accommodation towards the historical moment, in that language is seen as an expression of our own creative attitudes towards the world, rather than a set of ideological concepts imposed upon us. Angus Cleghorn's study of Stevens' poetry of the 1930s stresses the poet's perspective towards history and society at odds with Eliot and Pound: "While [Eliot and Pound's] figures strike telling historical poses, their objective personae are not accompanied by reflexive expression about their roles in composition" (130). For Cleghorn, Stevens puts political rhetoric "to play" inasmuch as he is interested in highlighting how his own "figures engage readerly participation by reflecting on their own inception so that metaphors become known as comparisons that we imply, rather than comply with, like fixed statues" (32). In this way, Stevens gives voice to a dialectical understanding of poetry, for it protects the vitality of the imagination from the pressures of the political whole while demonstrating that its insights "nevertheless arise within a world stirred up by the changes in [the social and political] spheres of experience" (Costello "US Modernism I" 177). For Stevens, this dialectical tension between art and society is crucial in ensuring that the imagination remains alive (ironically in its stance of being noncommittal) to the continual formations of political reality which can never be fully ossified by any one ideological doctrine. Indeed, in opposition to the positionality of the Heideggerian political subject in relation to Being, I argue that it is Stevens who ultimately enunciates a fuller vision of openness, for the Stevensian subject can negotiate politics on his own terms without being completely limited by it. As Steven Miskinis puts it, "for Stevens the imagination is never outside or distant from the political—rather, it is distinctive from the political—it opens the very possibility of such a distinction" (225). Reading Heidegger and Stevens in opposition to each other will thus concretise the complex ways in which poetic language articulates the human being's intimate belonging to the "real" world which, in the context of the decade both were writing in, intensely solicited a heightened level of engagement with.

Political Poetry in the 1930s: Absorption, Resistance and Pragmatic Accommodation

To assess the place of poetry in the America of the 1930s is to shift critical lenses between what Jane Tompkins calls the "modernist demands" for texts wherein "psychological complexity, formal ambiguity, epistemological sophistication, stylistic density [and] formal economy" become standards of excellence, and a translation into the exigences of the historical moment where "literary texts are conceived as agents of cultural formation rather than objects of interpretation and appraisal" (quoted in Thurston 37). The resistance against New Criticism's emphasis on the autotelic function of the poem allows the critic to shift the focus away from the poetic text as a self-contained refusal of historical momentum for disinterested aesthetic ends, and towards a liberation of what Walter Kalaidjian terms "the social text of contemporary history" (14) which enters into the discourse of political and literary language. Alan Wald details how American poetry of the 1930s became a public outlet for public dissatisfaction with social inequality and a galvanising force for a vision of change:

> Soon the landscape of the early Great Depression itself became a text to be read by all poets from all regions and age groups. According to one literary textbook from the decade, "By 1931, there was a poet on every soap box" (Anderson and Walton, 581); in 1932, the leading Marxist critic V.F. Calverton (1900–1940) declared literary radicalism "a mainstream affair" (Calverton 26). With the help of appropriate language and forms, writers were giving narrative shape to the desperate facts of sudden impoverishment and growing anxiety. (102)

To this effect, the critical apparatus surrounding poetic production aimed at foregrounding the mass appeal of poetry and its demotic potentialities. Archibald MacLeish's 1936 review of Carl Sandburg's poem *The People, Yes* in the radical journal *New Masses* praises the poet for channelling "the one great tradition in American life strong enough and live enough to carry the revolution of the oppressed. That tradition is the belief in the people" (quoted in Reed 182). The value of poetry is thus in its ability to energise the revolutionary power of the masses by manifesting an affective sense of authenticity which finds its voice in the totality of folk community. Contemporary criticism of Sandburg has likewise emphasised the synthetic function of the poet's voice and its links to the collective imagination: Helen Choi's 2012 article on *The People, Yes* argues that the poem "posits the attainment of democratic utopia as a function of a consciousness-raising project, implicitly exhorting 'the people' to remember their way to positions of privileged subjectivity and political *voice*" (110). To quote from Cary Nelson's important study *Repression and Recovery: Modern American Poetry and the Politics of Cultural Memory*, it was important for poetry to participate and contribute to political discourse precisely because poetry “became one of the most dependable sources of knowledge about society and one’s place and choices within it” (127).

How then should we situate Wallace Stevens’ supposedly “apolitical” stance towards politics? That this is a pressing issue for a poet writing in a time of ideological fracture is made clear by Patricia Rae as follows:

> In the debate between the American New Critics and their left-wing opponents … about the merits of literary realism in a time of crisis, Stevens was praised by one camp and derided by the other for what both perceived to be his unabashed formalism. Although John Crowe Ransom, Yvor Winters, and Alan Tate praised Stevens’s refusal to corrupt his hermetic poems with direct references to world events … Alfred Kazin, Howard Mumford Jones, and others on the left had little patience with Stevens’s “polished littlenesses,” with what they saw as closed systems of references, impervious to the harsh realities of their time. (200)

Rae’s highlighting of the hermetic qualities of the poems has been read as a manifestation of Stevens’ comfortable separation of his professional life as a well-heeled company man from his poetry writing. For example, Peter Riley argues that both Stevens and Eliot saw “the possibility of gaining well-paid and professionally stabilizing work as a … palliative solution” (6) to an otherwise disorientating immersion into the political sources of poetry. In other words, both poets reify their bardic personas at a distance from the social field they inevitably aestheticise through poetry. For a critic like Kevin Stein, who reads Modernist aesthetics as an erection of a “private code that simply would not admit world or reader” (10), Stevens has no historical sense. Indeed, if Nelson asserts that the leftist poets of the 1930s employ the lyric voice as “a special site for expressive subjectivity” (151), it becomes difficulty to see how the disengagements enacted by the poetic observer in “The Idea of Order at Key West” and the sceptical poet-figure in “The Man With the Blue Guitar” constitute a concern with the political. However, I wish to argue that Stevens provides us with a third option *beyond* (and, in some sense, prior to) the alternatives of absorption and resistance which I have mapped in this section. As I will argue below, Stevens’ politics is one of *pragmatic accommodation*—the imagination has a transhistorical sensibility because it is alive to how language accommodates subjective vision to political and social change. The imagination must erect a vital bulwark against the "totalizing"[1] tendencies of political rhetoric if it is to be expressive of the concrete ways men and women function as political beings. On the other hand, the imagination must appropriate reality through "a poetics of receptivity, of sensing those burdens which the world has placed on the poem rather than asserting a prior theoretical, vatic, or prophetic privilege" (Heller 157). In terms of the Heideggerian argument I have been pursuing thus far, the imagination is a statement of how we *come to be* in a world lighted up by political engagements (which is precisely the *possibility* of the political). Reality can therefore not ossify into any overarching doctrine—Stevens' valid scepticism is what misleads his critics to understand him as being politically disengaged. This form of scepticism is also what makes him a political poet—as Michael Thurston points out, the political valence of poetry is to be sought in the impetus to enunciate new possibilities of being while being vigilant to the fact that political ideology has no natural link to what reality is (19).

In fact, Stevens' pragmatism provides a necessary corrective against Heidegger's unfortunate conflation of Being with the *polis* of Being. An unexamined assertion of the Being of the "people" as one with the articulation of the political leads Heidegger to link the language of the poet with an idealised space of possibility so vague it disarms critique with the disingenuity of its claim to authenticity. By contrast, Stevens places his emphasis on poetry's ability to accommodate earthly vision to "the demands of actuality" (Rae 205). In this way, poetic truth is a discovery which is contingent upon the shifting relationships between art, society and the human being. That this poetry contains a utopian impulse is highlighted by Pryor, who states that Stevens is "also anxious about the possibility of change, and so about an alternative order of happening" (*Poetry* 145). Following on from Pryor, I would argue that Stevens maintains his poetry at the limits of the sayable, which is also the boundary lit up by Heideggerian *Ereignis*. As I discuss below, Stevens opens up the possibility for political intervention because he pursues an agential definition of the political, wherein poems are seen "as objects in the mix of social and political space, as contestation points between actors, structures, and material realities" (Dowdy 23). What the battle between co-option and resistance misses is how language instantiates and refracts a committed stance of being-in-the-world which cannot be totalised in advance. What Heidegger takes for granted as historical culmination, Stevens rehistoricises by demonstrating how poetry both formulates and contests intersubjective beliefs and values which build spaces for political understanding.

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[1] The dimensions of "totality" in relation to Williams and Louis Zukofsky is explored by Michael Rozendal in an article which explains the former's "direct if hedged invocation of communism" (142). Insofar as both sought a poetics open to being embedded in the body politic, Rozendal links their attempts in "calling for [poetry] that bridges words and much more nebulous, social ideas to achieve a structure which "resolves" these two" (143). As my analyses of Stevens will show, accommodation to the body politic (however this is defined) follows a different trajectory.

Heidegger's Political Thought in the 1930s and the Unity of Being as *polis*

Despite his later disavowals that he had been misled by the initial directions of the Nazi party, the extent of Heidegger's willing involvement in the National Socialist movement has been well documented and discussed. In his biography *Martin Heidegger: Between Good and Evil*, Rüdiger Safranski outlines the fact that "the National Socialist revolution has electrified [Heidegger] philosophically", for in it "he discovered a fundamental metaphysical happening [and] a metaphysical revolution" (233). Nowhere is this naïve optimism of Heidegger's more evidently on display than in his 1933 address titled "The Self-Assertion of the German University", which was delivered on his appointment to the rectorship of Freiburg University. In it, Heidegger outlines the need to preserve and elevate "the *spiritual world* of a Volk" (*SGU* 33), which is the authentic expression of the German spiritual existence. As a people gathered together in a political community which resolutely holds firm to the destinal unfolding of Being, the power of the Volk "comes from preserving at its most profound level the forces that are rooted in the soil and blood of a Volk, the power to arouse most inwardly and to shake most extensively the Volk's existence" (*SGU* 33–4). Genuine belonging to the German homeland then necessitates certain duties of allegiance to the Volk, couched in terms of "bonds and forms of service" (*SGU* 35) which Heidegger goes on to detail. These are the labour services which oblige the individual to contribute to the physical toil of the Volk, the military service which shores up Germany's strength, and most importantly the knowledge service which puts the professional services of the country in subordination to realising "the Volk's highest and most essential knowledge, that of its entire existence" (*SGU* 35). For Heidegger, the German university was to form the basis for an entire reshaping of German society, one that would fulfil its historical destiny by being truly open to the eventing of Being. Heidegger's inadequate understanding of the rise of National Socialism is thus demonstrated by his willingness to read the political events in Germany as part of a historical *Ereignis* which presented the German people with tremendous opportunity and potential to belong to Being as *Da-sein*. Theodore Kisiel appropriately captures Heidegger's mood during this period as such:

> [Heidegger is] reconstructing a *Kultur- und Erziehungspolitik* in terms of his own ontology of Da-sein and temporal-historical be-ing. This is clearly evident in the Rectoral Address [of 1933], where the Da-sein of the German people is described in terms of the fateful communal decision that it must make over the critical historical situation in which it finds itself in Europe's middle. *A people deciding for the state appropriate to its be-ing*: this is the [met]*ontological essence of the political* for Heidegger during these trying times. (133)

The momentous folding of the authenticity of *Da-sein*, which is defined by Heidegger as projective transcendence towards Being, onto authentic belonging to a political community, defines the disastrous transition of philosophy into political vision. As Jürgen Habermas notes, Heidegger suddenly gives his philosophy "a collectivist turn: Dasein was no longer this poor Kierkegaardian-Sartrean individual hanging in the air … Dasein was the Dasein of the people, of the *Volk*" ("Morality" 195).

Heidegger clearly pursues the organic connection between the people and the state in a series of seminars he delivered in the years 1933–1934, which have been collected and translated by Gregory Fried and Richard Polt under the title "On the Essence and Concept of Nature, History and State". In it, Heidegger defines the political as "the fundamental possibility and distinctive way of Being of human beings" (*NHS* 45). Since the human being expresses its authentic potential-to-be as a political entity, "every people takes a position with regard to the state, and no people lacks the urge for a state. The people that turns down a state, that is stateless, has just not found the gathering of its essence yet" (*NHS* 46). Heidegger goes on to argue that the Being of the state expresses itself in terms of the will of the people. This willing as conceptualised as such: "Just as every human being wants to live, wills to *be here* as a human being, just as he keeps holding on to this and loves his Dasein [Being-here] in the world, the people wills the state as its way to be as a people" (*NHS* 48). Even more than this, this will uncomplicatedly shows itself to be submission to the ruler of the state: "Here we have a mastery that recognizes nothing higher than itself; here mastery becomes sovereignty, where the supreme force is taken as the essence and expression of the state" (*NHS* 58). The voluntarist implications of Heidegger's arguments about the "will" of the people highlight the totalitarian gestures congruent with the assertions of National Socialism. In the attempt to translate the philosophy of *Da-sein* into a political philosophy which preserves the relationship between the individual and the state as a manifestation of *Da-sein*'s openness towards Being, Heidegger unfortunately endorses the language of subordination to the political leader in the service of an aggressive nationalism. Peter E. Gordon astutely comments on the slippages in Heidegger's thought as such:

> Throughout the seminar the political significance of its argument emerges chiefly through analogy. The leader understands the political *just as* Dasein understands Being. The people *belongs* to its geopolitical terrain *just as* Dasein belongs to its own region of space. Such analogies are deceptive because the comparative term belongs to the more "respectable" elements of Heidegger's work: after all, the proposition that the human being finds itself always already situated in a distinctive space appears to be little more than a fundamental discovery of phenomenology … But this formal insight into the constitution of existential space serves as the license for a politics of colonization. (100)

Indeed, as Reiner Schürmann notes, Heidegger's approach to the political relevance of philosophy results in a terrible conflation of "ultimate [i.e. metaphysical] with regional [e.g. political] referents" (319). Paradoxically, the abstraction of Heidegger's use of the term Volk "is too haunted by its unitary and exclusionist character in German nationalism" (Phillips 219) to function as a valid term in the philosophy of Being which Heidegger promotes. This "contamination" of philosophy by political agenda is, as many commentators have noted, inherent in the very contours of Heidegger's thought. It is one short step from the attitude of openness to Being to the unquestioned subjection to an ideology of Being. As Pierre Bourdieu argues, political ideology is flexible enough to speak in *both* philosophical and non-philosophical language. In the case of Heidegger and National Socialism, "nationalism, with its apologia for the German race and imperialist ambitions, can speak the political or semi-political language of resolution and mastery, of commandment and obedience … but it can also, as in Heidegger, speak the metaphysical or quasi-metaphysical language … of self-overcoming or … the language of the resolute confrontation with death as authentic experience of freedom" (33–4). By centring his approach to philosophy on the indissoluble links between *Da-sein* and its place in the world, Heidegger is ultimately vulnerable to preaching an assimilation to a politics which lauded "the mystique of the people's community" (Safranski 261).

In essence, this lapse betrays a larger failure in Heidegger's thinking about the human being's belonging to Being. In his arguably exclusive focus on the relationship between *Da-sein* and Being, Heidegger bypasses the question of what lies *between* that between. In other words, Heidegger's analyses of the authenticity of *Da-sein* as it ecstatically ex-sists towards the unconcealment of Being implicitly interpellates *Da-sein*'s existential loneliness as an authentic measure of its appropriation of Being. In this way, Heidegger neglects to consider "another realm, that in-between, where men exist in their plurality: the many who differ from one another, pursue diverse interests, encounter each other in action, [thereby giving rise] to what may be called political reality" (Safranski 264–5). In pursuing an ontological analysis of the human being which is prior to any metaphysical designations, Heidegger fails to account for how *Da-sein* emerges as a sensible member of a political community and a responsible actor in a world made up of irreconcilable human conflicts and complex needs and desires. Paradoxically, the Heideggerian *Da-sein* is *closed off* to any other way of relating to Being than that of open attunement. Without a coherent picture of how communal realities modulate individual expression and how language plays a significant role in mediating between the private and public realms, Heidegger's conception of the Volk turns out to be a reduction of "the fundamental plurality of this world of humans" into "the collective singular–the nation" (Safranski 265). In this way, the nation totalises the aggregate of individual human beings who all monolithically incline towards a certain historical understanding of Being as manifested in the state. Consequently, language which unfolds the truth of Being can very easily modulate into "the saying of a 'we' … thus allowing [it] … to lapse all too carelessly into nationalism" (de Beistegui 95). Indeed, Heidegger's insistence that language can never be regarded authentically as a subjective tool for communication can all too easily give voice to a scenario where the human being has no other recourse than an obedient adherence to the oppressive language of ideology as it presences in philosophical discourse or in works of art. Once individual will is subsumed into the idea of the collective will, there is thus no other political alternative to the consolidation of the state as a predetermined expression of the historical narrative of Being. As Hannah Arendt writes apropos of totalitarian regimes, they "can be safe only to the extent that [they] can mobilize man's own will power in order to force him into that gigantic movement of History or Nature which supposedly uses mankind as its material and knows neither birth nor death" (622). Substituting "Being" for Arendt's "History" or "Nature" would yield something very close to the Heideggerian picture.

What this may call for is not art which reveals the truth of Being, but art which is produced by and held in tension to social reality. Adorno is right to criticise the Heideggerian concept of the artwork which gives *Da-sein* an outlook on Being by gathering a world onto itself in these terms: "Heidegger rescues the unifying element in art, that which makes it art, but at the price of a situation in which theory reverently falls silent when confronted by the question of what it is" ("Art" 381). All dissent about the function of the artwork is thus obviated through its auratic link to Being, which is non-conceptual in the first place. For Adorno, the language of art must escape this lure of mystifying jargon if it is to reflect anything meaningful about society. If the function of art's relationship to society is to be submitted to critical reflection, then art must productively exist in the interstitial spaces between the individual and his or her larger environment. In contrast to the language of artworks which lose the specificity of their material and linguistic being by demonstrating the abstract unconcealment of Being, an alternative picture of language's living link to political and aesthetic discourses revitalises the question of the individual's role and responsibility towards his or her social others, and how the poet can define the scope of his or her craft with respect to the urgent needs of his community. Language is as much a reflection of reality as it is resistant towards it; if the poet is the unacknowledged legislator of the world, he or she is equally fashioning ways to sing about diminished things and accommodating personal beliefs to that. Faced with the pressures of reality which threatened to inundate imaginative fecundity with its bleakness, it is in the 1930s that Stevens sought to think about these issues, both in terms of the extent to which poetry could yield to external circumstance and, more interestingly, what it could yield as a result.

STEVENS AND THE NECESSITY FOR/OF CHANGE AS POLITICAL STATEMENT

Although Stevens insisted that the poet flourishes in an atmosphere which is "apart from politics" (*NA* 57), studies of his poetic output in the 1930s locate his writing in the intersection between an individualism which is resistant to populist ideology, and the establishment of a shared social vision through literary production. In opposition to Perloff's argument that Stevens hermetically seals himself off from political reality through the negation of social others in his poetry, critics such as Filreis underscore how Stevens takes up political questions in the 1930s by writing in order to secure a nuanced poetic position which both relativises and accommodates conflicting ideological stances (*Modernism* 9). Indeed, Filreis is adamant in arguing that this supposed "apolitical" stance is political in orientation—in an earlier book on Stevens in the 1940s, Filreis fleshes out this position as follows:

> When [Stevens'] poetic efforts made him feel small in relation to worldwide conflicts … it was because great political positions had impressed themselves upon him? The effects of these impressions are not predictable from period to period, not even perhaps from year to year; nor thus, are they assimilable into a discrete, maintained, or defended ideology—something to be called, simply, *Stevens's politics.* But they are nevertheless ideologically expressive, for they arise as particular counterarguments to particularly compelling arguments. (*Wallace Stevens* 9)

This stance maintains itself against easy absorption into any political creed, thereby affirming "the interiority, primacy, and privacy of the reflecting poetic subject" (Harrington 106) who mediates between the pressures of reality and the power of poetic discourse to create alternative forms of order. Underwriting this disavowal of any outright political commitment is Stevens' understanding that any form of political order, be it conservative or revolutionary, is ultimately detrimental to the openness of the poetic imagination which continually restates and reshifts its most vital impetuses. Indeed, Stevens states just as much in a letter written in 1935 to Ronald Latimer, wherein he states that "the only possible order in life is one in which all order is incessantly changing" (*L* 291–2). For Stevens, the passage of time consigns all attempts to establish a permanent sense of order with which to found a transhistorical political community to the dump; death erodes the self's belief in any transcendent foundation on which the utopian impulses of the masses can be realised. Taken in a more positive vein, Stevens' subscription to a philosophy of pragmatism which places faith in contingent social practices aimed at building our competencies in the face of an ever-changing world signals "the virtue of not maintaining fixed thoughts about the nature of poetry or politics" (Longenbach 34).

Inasmuch as political statement is held in dialectical tension with the poetic imagination, Stevens unabashedly champions the freedom the imaginative self who understands the need to abstract himself from any monological conception of what "reality" is or should be. Gillian White convincingly demonstrates how Stevens subtly questions the nature of reality by undermining any notion of an unmediated access to it. As White shows, this puts him at odds with the discourses of mass marketing and propaganda in the 1930s which sought to present a unified sense of objective reality lying outside of the individual. By shoring up a social understanding of belonging to a distinctive American culture premised on "a set of patterns, values, and beliefs" (Hegeman 4), collective anxieties about the Depression and the threat of war and totalitarianism could be assuaged by appealing to a collective belonging to a political cause. However, Stevens seeks precisely the opposite accommodation: the life of the imagination is affirmed because it is able to effect a necessary abstraction from "historical particulars", thereby affording an interior perspective on external events such that they "become less personal, more distant, and therefore more amenable" (Harrington 106). Poetry must be held at a distance from politics if it is to be an authentic statement of the imagination's relationship to reality, and the self's place in the world. This continual affirmation of the aesthetic purity of poetry in a time when the question of the political relevance of poetry meant the poet had to justify the scope of his or her art in relation to society marks Stevens' refusal to commit to the demands to write in the service of politics. Indeed, this is all the more extraordinary given the fact of the number of journals in the 1930s committed to espousing "political poetry" and the number of writers in this period who stopped writing poetry to focus on others forms such as documentary prose (Lowney 90). To note this is not to say that Stevens' poetry cannot say anything meaningful about politics. As Newcomb elaborates:

> This nonconclusion was not, however, to cede the poet's responsibility for engagement with social questions. If it was necessary to acknowledge that

> poetry, as part of a complex and difficult social world, would yield no easy or complete solutions, it did not mean that poetry was not potentially one of the strongest articulations of that world. (*Wallace Stevens* 116–7)

To put it plainly, Stevens registers the need to account for what the biographer Paul Mariani describes as the larger sense of the moment being "ugly, unnerving [and] unsettled" (188). To that effect, he substitutes the tonal melodies of *Harmonium* with an almost-obsessive focus on dilapidation, destruction and the crumbling of facades. To read the poems in *Ideas of Order* is thus to understand how Stevens seeks to define the significance and scope of poetry in a world which becomes increasingly unamenable to aesthetic (re)shaping. It is as if Stevens understands that the tonal lyricism of the imagination sustained in *Harmonium* has to also ring true to "these sudden mobs of men" and the "sudden clouds of faces and arms" (*CPP* 100) who are impelled to articulate an alternate vision of political and spiritual order at the price of inevitable betrayal and disappointment. More audaciously, Stevens puts his own poetic hypothesis to the test: Should poetry generate "an afflatus that persists" (*CPP* 82) in a milieu defined by the "epic of disbelief" (*CPP* 101)? My interpretive aim in reading these poems will be to mark out the contours of a political thinking in Stevens which demonstrates an uneasy but necessary accommodation between the disclosive powers of the private imagination and the abstractions of the universal. This does not imply that Stevens, as James Lucas suggests, "produces [a political subjectivity] which remains immune to political influence *and* to charges of escapist irrelevance *because* it is never developed" (759). On the contrary, reading Stevens allows us to complicate and nuance the Sartrean notion of politically committed art because it probes the inevitable difficulties of "converting or translating political irrationality and cultural abstraction back into a morally answerable set of concrete actions, assumption [and] motives" (Schaum 203). If, as I have been arguing, Stevens maintains that poetic imagination is a final good because it sustains belief in the fragile and finite pleasures to be found in external reality, then the aesthetic attitude has political force because it "allows the construction of something meaningful from elements which might otherwise remain imprisoned by the tyranny of habitual social forms" (Monroe 146). To insist upon this space is not to escape into wilful aestheticism;

rather, it is to produce the necessary abstraction[2] required for political vision to be enriched by imaginative perception.

IDEAS OF ORDER AND THE CHANGE OF "HARMONIC" AESTHETIC VISION

The abstractions which therefore underlie the poems in *Ideas of Order* demonstrate Stevens' search for the aural lineaments of some "heroic sound" (*CPP* 103) capacious enough to encounter "the great height of the rock" (*CPP* 103) as it is without any evasion. The emptiness of belief which had been sustained by religion is concretised in the poem "Gray Stones and Gray Pigeons" (*CPP* 113–4), which depicts the degradations wrought upon an archbishop's church when the presiding spirit no longer sustains it. The gaudiness of environment which sustains the undulation of images underpinning *Harmonium* ("The renewal of noise/And manifold continuation" [*CPP* 47]) recedes, leaving the bareness of "the bony buttresses" and "the bony spires" that cannot be animated. The poem opens with the stark fact of the absence of the archbishop who has left his abode: "The archbishop is away. The church is gray". The syntactical parallelism of the two sentences in the line is punctuated by the caesura, ironically folding the non-presence of the human figure into the denuding of colour as the church is reduced to the outlines of its architecture. Lacking any substantial way to revitalise its significance in the face of the collapse of transcendent belief, Stevens presents the church in the bareness of its being. Shorn of a creed which coalesces the understanding of historical time as a teleological continuum figured by the phrase "globed in today and tomorrow", the architectural site ironically presences as pure absence. In ironic juxtaposition to the Heideggerian artwork which becomes instrumental in gathering together a historical community based on a shared openness towards Being as it is revealed in the artwork, Stevens demonstrates how the artwork delineates the impossibility of any larger unity.

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[2] For an extended discussion of the "aesthetics of abstraction" in Stevens' poetry, see Edward Ragg's (2010) study *Wallace Stevens and the Aesthetics of Abstraction*. In contrast to Ragg's central claim in the book that abstraction allows for the disappearance of the "I" in the poetry, I seek a critical vocabulary which ties imaginary engagement with reality to a non-metaphysical orientation of subjectivity.

The paring down of the significance of art in a questionable time is reiterated in the ironically-titled "Mozart, 1935" (*CPP* 107–8), which both brings together and holds apart art and the issue of its cultural and historical relevance. The forceful injunction by the speaker to the poet to "play the present" in the first stanza, thereby ironically invoking the traditional trope of the muse, is cynically undercut by the reduction of aesthetic themes to a meaningless babble of sounds: "its hoo-hoo-hoo,/Its shoo-shoo-shoo, its ric-a-nic". As if to extend this point, the poem performs the incongruity of linguistic register, resulting in an unresolvable tension between the vision of the artist and the demands of the present. This tension precipitates in the poem as horror: the image of the "body in rags" which protrudes in the second stanza not only revisits the same philosophical terrain in the earlier poem "The Emperor of Ice-Cream" but also revises *Harmonium*'s aesthetic credo to suggest how art cannot countenance suffering and loss on a grand scale. The high-brow references to "arpeggios" and "divertimento" cannot be satisfactorily sublated with the "voice of angry fear" and "besieging pain". This results not in a Hegelian dialectic which reconciles individual discord into the universality of art, but in the inability of the Mozart-figure to encompass the cacophony of the present into the ambit of his or her unifying harmonics.

In the face of the basic inability of high art to ameliorate social injustice, Stevens' speaker realistically considers what a stripped-down version of artistic statement could be. This is signalled in the fifth stanza, where the artificial musicality of the previous stanzas is replaced by "that wintry sound" that the artist must become. In this way, Stevens castigates the practice of art-for-art's-sake as an irresponsible evasion from the necessity of political intervention. However, the tension between the artist and his or her social peers reveals yet another form of irreconcilable conflict, for art must always either sound the "lucid souvenir of the past" or the "airy dream of the future"—it cannot belong fully to the needs of the masses by being absorbed into the time of the unmediated present. The naïve urge to integrate the artist with his or her society results in the divide between the permanence of social conditions and artistic expression immured in the subjectivism of "angry fear" and "besieging pain"—music cannot reconcile the private and the public. The terms of resolution for Stevens (if any) are ultimately vexed: if the bare music of the artist channels emotions in the same way that "The Snow Man" suggests it can, then the putative catharsis achieved is torn between the terms "dismissed" and "absolved" (or between evasion and compensation). Indeed, Stevens leaves open the question about whether art can ever "absolve" in the absence of metaphysical certitude, channelling a fundamental ambiguity by the end of the poem as to how Mozart can ever be returned to in an age which is "full of cries" but with no answers. If Heidegger unequivocally turns to Hölderlin as the "national" poet whose vision performs a saving function, Stevens is cannily ironical about the possibility of any artist enacting the same role.

Stevens is thus demonstrably tentative about the ultimate value of political order and poetic statement which seek to make permanent what cannot be fixed. Casting his historical gaze into the future, Stevens views the achievements of the past in a similar vein to Walter Benjamin's Angel of History, as debris which cannot resonate with "struggle for existence" (*CPP* 902) in the present tense. The poem "A Postcard from the Volcano" (*CPP* 128–9) suitably captures Stevens' melancholic awareness of the incommensurability regarding the sense of "reality" as it changes between generations. Projecting the reader towards the inevitable scenario wherein the children of the future surmise the shape of our present lives from the bare fact of our "bones", Stevens outlines not a reverential attitude towards civilisation as it is understood in the future, but an appalling indifference: they "least will guess that with our bones/We left much more". As each generation reinvents their own sense of "reality", along with new imaginative appropriations of it, the "mansion" of the current generation will necessarily be reduced into "a dirty house in a gutted world". Stevens ironically celebrates the liberating power of a historical perspective which does not fixate upon the presumed stability of the present, but which understands that the possibilities of the future are built upon the destruction of the past and its meanings. Indeed, the condition of misreading and incomprehension is also the very condition for the intelligibility of a future world. Stevens thus relativises Heidegger's mistakenly teleological and triumphalist reading of Being as it manifests politically in the Germany of the 1930s, for he insists that any permanent attachment to a particular reification of social and political "reality" signals an inauthentic understanding about the openness of history and the contingencies of social formulations. Indeed, the vitality of the poetic imagination is premised on its being open towards the provisional nature of the historical process, for the imagination "is always attaching itself to a new reality, and adhering to it" (*CPP* 656). As Justin Quinn notes, the inevitable "dismantling and reconstruction of social forms" (58) may no doubt testify to the foolishness of our political hubris, but it also opens up the political realm as a complex field of meaning which only poetry can accommodate our sensibilities towards, for it always aims to match our awareness of reality and change with equal imaginative intensity.

This dialectic between loss and recovery is thus on display throughout *Ideas of Order*. In the poem "Autumn Refrain" (*CPP* 129), Stevens first charts the inevitable disappearance of the plenitude of summer, which modulates into a lament for the "name of a bird and the nameless air" that the speaker will never hear. By locating the identity of this bird as a nightingale, Stevens alludes specifically to Keats and the heritage of English Romantic poetry and, in doing so, suggests the extent to which he is himself excluded both from the poetic scene of Keats' speaker addressing the nightingale and the poem which precipitates as a result of that encounter. Equally, the symbol of the Romantic imagination cannot be transposed to the poem which Stevens is writing, both because the poet arrives belatedly and because the scene of writing has irrevocably changed. However, in contrast to Harold Bloom who regards Stevens' poetic output as being haunted by the lack of possibilities in a universe overdetermined by Romantic troping, I read Stevens' realisation of this exclusion to be a source of strength. Indeed, after this evocation of absence, Stevens' speaker insists that "beneath/The stillness that comes to [him] after this", "something resides". More than remaining a "residuum" of poetic tradition, this presence implicitly fills the consciousness of the speaker. For Stevens, this is the movement of the poetic imagination as it articulates a renewed understanding of Being, which it must necessarily do in the face of a lack of poetic tradition. As if to underscore the point, Stevens reverses the initial impression of the nightingale at the end of the poem, for its song changes from an inaccessible Ideal to being an "evasion"—it is the mistaken adherence to tradition which now forms an obstacle to our relations with reality and future poetic possibilities. The pendant poems "Botanist on Alp (No.1)" (*CPP* 109–110) and "Botanist on Alp (No.2)" (*CPP* 110) strike up a hypothetical dialogue which allays the Bloomian "anxiety of influence" by reaffirming the centrality of the aesthetic transformation of experience. The first poem starts by laying out a now-familiar scenario in which the world is stripped of significance because the artist "has been dead for a long time". Without the consolations of art, "the pillars are prostrate, the arches are haggard, /The hotel is boarded and bare". The dream of a transcendental significance to art which gives voice to "the central composition", and the despair which accompanies the death of the artist is happily undermined in the second poem, which answers back to the first by declaring that "what's down is in the past …

as sure as all the angels are". The function of the art of the present cannot be to present a repetitious alternative to a unifying creed like religion or the Marxist political doctrine. Instead, Stevens argues that poetry reconciles us to the "earth" by teaching us "delight". Far from enunciating a "settled" ideological position which purports to offer a changeless utopic vision, poetry must be alive to the ironies and contradictions of experience—in the words of the poem "Of Modern Poetry" (*CPP* 218–9), it will always reside in the "mind in the act of finding/What will suffice".

Stevens' long poem "Like Decorations in a Nigger Cemetery" (*CPP* 121–8) tests the impulses of both politics and poetry in giving voice to what will suffice in the face of death and the turbulence of history. The first canto invokes the spirit of Stevens' literary forebear Walt Whitman as he is "singing and chanting the things that are part of/him". Representing the bardic voice of American poetic tradition, this song of universality ultimately cannot be sustained, for that ecstatic vision is undercut in the second canto by images of exhaustion and somnolence: "I am tired. Sleep for me, heaven over the hill". As Patrick Redding points out, the logic of the poem calibrates "the Whitmanian pleasures of visionary indulgence" (25) with the return to the boundaries of mortal existence. The poem presents a poetic self who is searching for and failing to find "a tranquil belief" which might redeem the tragedies of the past by a final imagining of a utopian future. However, this fantasy is soberly undercut by the insight that "the search/And the future emerging out of [the past] seem to be one"—any vision of an authentic utopian future must emerge from life as experienced and understood by us. The hollow logic of philosophers who feast on unrealistic theories while disassociating themselves from the common throng who starve is thus another example of how systems of thought which sublimate the human experience in the crucible of theory cannot claim to be "universal" by any stretch. Against this sham idealism, Stevens juxtaposes the perpetuity of the seasons in a reminder that "we are physical beings in a physical world" (*L* 348). It thus seems that the only thing which stands against "farewell and the absence of farewell" is the wind and the sudden fluctuations we perceive in nature. Our mastery over nature through the establishment of the *polis* and articulation of our political being is undermined by the fragility of all our institutions of power. Stevens thus positions the edifices of philosophy and ideology like the decorations which litter a neglected cemetery, which avail naught in the face of our inevitable annihilation.

In fact, the sense of growing unease deepens as the poem progresses, with Stevens alluding to "the current [political] situation, with the Japanese incursions into China and the Far East and the rise of the Third Reich as destroyers" (Mariani 192). Juxtaposed to the half-buried nature of these references are the immediacy of human needs as reflected in society—"the fish are in the fisherman's window,/The grain is in the baker's shop". Stevens gloomily underscores how the relevancy of art declines in such a society ruled by political aggression and self-satisfaction. Consequently, the utopic imagination reduces itself to making one class of people superior to the other class: "Rich Tweedle-dum, poor Tweedle-dee". Stevens rescues the significance of poetry by claiming that it survives "radiantly beyond much lustier blurs". Throughout the poem, Stevens maintains that poetry effects an increase in natural Being which forms a vital bulwark against ossifications of political rhetoric and the destruction of former beliefs. An imaginative perception of "the rouged fruits in early snow" quenches our spiritual desire, and the ripening of a pear in Autumn which reminds us of the fertility of Spring is enough to "beguile the fatalist" who cannot see past the diminishment of the former season. For Stevens, poetry must restore our belief in the "here and now" of reality if it is to enable us to live more humane lives in the face of mass conformity. Indeed, so strong is Stevens' faith in poetry to allow us to carve out individualised spheres of autonomy that he states "the chrysanthemums' astringent fragrance" is enough to "disguise the clanking mechanism/Of machine within machine within machine". In this way, the human person dwells poetically in the proximity of Being, not by full assimilation into the anonymity of the political system, but by creating a sense of order which allows life to be lived more amenably.

To return to Heidegger, Stevens champions a mode of existential vision which embraces death and human limitations as authentic ways of being-in-the-world and relating to other people as beings similarly conditioned. Stevens sees that this articulation of sociality is in variance to the Marxist mobilisation of the proletariat as a social mass, criticising it to be no more than a "union of the weakest" which cannot develop "wisdom". By deepening our sense of our place in the world, poetry allows us to accept necessity in a way which politics cannot. To put both Heidegger and Stevens in conversation here, both understand that poetry must be an expression of our relationship to Being, which translates to an awareness of our fundamental stance with relation to beings, whether in the context of a political community or in more individualised social transactions with others.

However, Stevens' conceptions about poetry allow us to articulate how language enables a more dialogically responsive understanding about the self's role in appropriating Being through the establishment of a life-affirming sense of order necessary to its engagement with reality. In sum, to be open to Being means first opening the interiority of the self, without it collapsing into Being.

The Song of the Singer and the "Art" of Order at Key West

For Stevens, art can transcend historical circumstances and exert a unifying role through the creation of aesthetic order which expresses our human engagement with the world. The complexity of this creation is explored in the poem "The Idea of Order at Key West" (*CPP* 105–6), which foregrounds the capacity of the female singer to make meaning out of the sounds of the external world which seem inhuman and alien at first. The intractable otherness of the sea is emphasised in the first stanza, where the speaker notes that "the water never formed to mind or voice". Approaching the inexorable flow of natural being which presences in its immanent being shorn of all transcendental meaning, the speaker nonetheless senses that "its mimic motion/Made constant cry" in a language which comes to consciousness without meaning. The poem thereby enacts a scenario in which everything hinges on the epistemological terms through which *Da-sein* is appropriated by Being. Without poetry or the work of art gathering together sites of meaning which effect the unconcealment of Being, we remain immured in our own subjectivities, thereby sensing the ontological divide between ourselves and the world. It is thus at this point that the singing of the woman achieves its significance, for the song has the ability to unveil Being as it presences without "a [representational] mask". The aesthetic power of the song is further emphasised in the second stanza, as the sound of the sea is transfigured into an aesthetic phenomenon: "It may be that in all her phrases stirred/The grinding water and the gasping wind". Stevens' language performatively enacts this dynamic, as the consonantal rhoticity plays off the onomatopoeic adjectives to open up an aural atmosphere where the sound of the sea is conveyed by language, which then saturates consciousness. Regarding this link between the sounds of words and phenomenological presence, Edward Allen notes that Stevens' poetry is one "in which the raw units of prosody constitute a type of cognition, a means of hustling [sounds] into fictive consciousness" (929). In this way, the singer creates the most suitable sense of order through which the inhospitable otherness of the external world may become amenable.

We should therefore understand Stevens' emphasis on the singer as a "maker" and an "artificer" not primarily in an overly aestheticised way, but in the Heideggerian sense of art being a form of *techne*, or the unconcealment of Being by allowing Being to presence by coming into appearance. Stevens underscores this by emphasising that what the speaker hears is "more" than "sound alone" which comes to him in "the heaving speech of air". The singer's song is able to bring into presence a "world" which is its own source of space and time. Through the communicative function of sound, her song allows the speaker to sense the sky at its "acutest", and by "measur[ing] to the hour its solitude", the song establishes the human being in the proximity of Being. If the poem started off with the implied scenario of the Cartesian *cogito* neutrally observing an external world which is "like a body wholly body" in its sheer difference from the mind, then its progression enacts and performs the way in which the language of the singer—and indeed, the language of the poem—explodes this separation by drawing us near to the unfolding of the song, itself an eventing of the unconcealment of Being. Even more than this, the authenticity of the song (and therefore of the poem) inheres in the woman's response to the world—the speaker states that "there never was a world for her/Except the one she sang and, singing, made". Stevens highlights that poetry is never primarily a representation of the world, for it always arises in an adequately powerful response to an experience of the world.

However, the poem does not stop there, for Stevens is also interested in how poetry is able to effect a form of affective sociality which can bind people together in ways that political rhetoric cannot. In the penultimate stanza, the poem introduces a third party, the philosopher Ramón Fernández, who we realise has been watching the woman sing alongside Stevens' speaker. As the both of them turn away towards the town after the singing has ended, they realise that their sense of their environment has been changed due to the power of the woman's song. As the "lights in the fishing boats" dynamically interact with the darkness of the night to measure out "emblazoned zones and fiery poles", poetry enacts what Heidegger calls the "clearing" (*Lichtung*) in which beings step forward from concealment into the shining of their Being. For Heidegger, this clearing is what enables *Da-sein* to have a world in the first place—poetry is political because it lights up a world of shared human concerns which puts the individual in touch with significant social others. Indeed, the emphasis on "fixing" and "arranging" highlights how the sense of order of the woman's world which had been created by her song is almost magically transferred to them. And yet, the repetitious use of the continuous tense in the line "arranging, deepening, enchanting night" serves to show how the distance which has been newly established between the human being and his or her world cannot be primarily measured and calibrated objectively. Rather, the aesthetic order created by poetry enlivens the world both as experienced by the individual and as shared between members of a community. Stevens thus ends the poem with a turn towards the collective, as underlined by the appropriate use of the pronominal form in the line "And of *our*selves and of *our* origins" (emphasis mine). I argue that it is in this way that Stevens conceives of the authentic relationship between the personal and the political, for what he emphasises is how language reveals Wittgensteinian "forms of life"[3] inscribing social and political practices linking the individual to his or her community. In other words, the use of language involves speakers in networks of significations which tie individuals to what Nancy terms as the "inoperative community"—implicit in the enunciation of the "I" is the speaking of the "We". To expand on this, the Nancean thinking of a political "collective" is not based on an ahistorical sense of a Heideggerian *Volk* which ruthlessly aggregates its members into a doomed understanding of its social destiny. Instead, the value of sociality, or language "turned towards" a shared communal immanence, discloses the fragile truths of existence which become the nodes for political understanding:

> A community is the presentation to its members of their mortal truth … It is the presentation of the finitude and the irredeemable excess that make up finite being: its death, but also its birth. (*Inoperative* 15)

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[3] Stevens' rejection of a logical positivistic view of language which insisted upon "linguistic precision and validity" (Han 166) not only further foregrounds the pragmatist balance between subjective belief and communal norms that undergirds his claims for poetry as a mode of life-affirming utterance but also draws the parallels between him and the Wittgenstein of the *Logical Investigations* closer. Crucially, both argue against the linguistic attempt to totalise an objective worldview and to instantiate an ahistorical framework of perception that remains alien to existential and phenomenological openness. For Heidegger, this mode of thinking signals the unfortunate stranglehold of metaphysical thought.

This space of immanence which preserves respect for singular political beings while embedding them in modes of communal and social Being opens up the space for a political understanding of poetry in the context of the American experience. As Scroggins writes *apropos* of Oppen, what is elucidated is "the fundamental American paradox, [which is] to form a single polis out of inviolable individualities" (744). Seen in this light, the poet renovates relevant political belief by ceaselessly mediating between his or her individual sense of the world and how that sense translates into a wider understanding of Being.

"Owl's Clover" and the Response to Stanley Burnshaw

However, in an age which demanded poetry to provide direct protocols for social change, Stevens invites criticism from the political left. In a 1936 review of his poetry, Ruth Lechlitner notes that "by recognizing the importance of political and social change but refusing to admit the desirability of the union of the mass in an 'orderly' life, Stevens is obviously open to attack from the left" (160). This attack came most notably from the Marxist critic Stanley Burnshaw, who in 1935 indicts the poems of *Harmonium* for being "the kind of verse that people concerned with the murderous world collapse can hardly swallow today except in small doses" (139). Reeling from this overtly negative assessment of his earlier collection and Burnshaw's argument that *Ideas of Order* presented a Stevens who struggles to "keep his balance" (139), Stevens responded in 1936 with a long poem titled "Owl's Clover" (*CPP* 152–70), which takes as its theme the limits of art turned towards a social collective while being necessarily different from utilitarian outcomes foisted upon it. That Stevens saw the relationship between the demands of the times and the ameliorative potentialises of art in fundamentally dialectical way is attested to by a statement written on the 1937 Alfred A. Knopf edition of "The Man With the Blue Guitar":

> In one group, *Owl's Clover* … reflect what was then going on in the world, that reflection is merely for the purpose of seizing and stating what makes *life intelligible and desirable* in the midst of great change and greater confusion. The effect of *Owl's Clover* is to emphasize *the opposition between things as they are and things imagined*; in short, to isolate poetry. (*CPP* 998; emphases mine)

Stevens's ideas here underpin a place for poetry as it paradoxically registers an affective attunement to the value of the "present moment" without entirely capitulating to the exigencies of communal emotions that negate the more fundamental ontological functions of poetry. In other words, Stevens thinks of poetry as being able to preserve the human being's deeply personal sense of his or her lifeworld as imaginative *comportment* to the larger realm of political commitment. As is made clear from the paragraph quoted above, Stevens forges a crucial link between the sublative force of the imagination and an epistemic justification for the split between "things as they are and things imagined". Critical responses to this evident meta-poetic awareness have influenced judgement upon whether Stevens' strategy succeeds in the poem. In a reading consistent with his exploration of the changing value of "abstraction" to Stevens, Ragg points out that at this stage of his development as a poet, "Stevens fears abstraction as 'evasion', an aesthetic withdrawal from what, in 1935, he calls the 'actual world'" (59). Joel Nickels reads the poem as a test case for modernist abstraction, arguing that Stevens positions "the artist … as one who proposes orders that either do or do not withstand the testing-operations of an engaged collectivity … the poet is a member of his collectivity—one who is constantly *mimicking* and studying its own possibilities for social cohesion" (124, emphasis mine). Although I agree with both Ragg and Nickels that Stevens consistently positions the "poetic" at a distance from modes of social and political engagement, I wish to suggest a more robust "working through" of the value of poetry in "Owl's Clover" than that of the disingenuous and non-committal that Nickels implies—the sources of self-consciousness stem from a re-evaluation of the relationship between poetry and society that develop in the poem. If there is evidence of a "thought-process" that unfolds performatively in the poem, the emphasis is placed on what Riddel notes as the pragmatic "testing" of order—the word itself suggesting both an imagined political utopia and what Stevens terms "the central of the composition" that poetry enables us to sense:

> The method is analytical as well as rhetorical. Stevens takes certain existing possibilities of order in our century and puts them to the test of what he feels order must be. Lying behind the method is the assumption that any abstract, imposed system necessarily fails to acknowledge the human and thus can be invalidated … Eschewing abstractions, Stevens wishes to return to the well-fount of man's need for order, the innate force that drives man

> to create out of himself and his environment an account of the ineffable [that manifested in the urge to read and write poetry]. ("Poets' Politics" 120)

The first section of the poem juxtaposes a marble statue of a group of horses in a park with an old woman viewing it. The description of the statue fittingly combines the earthiness of its material with the artistic bent towards idealism, as the "white forelegs [of the horses are] taut/To the muscles' very tip for the vivid plunge". However, the woman cannot sense the majesty of the statue as artistic object. Immured in her despairing solitude, "she was that tortured one,/So destitute that nothing but herself/Remained and nothing of herself except/A fear too naked for her shadow's shape". Stevens ironically portrays an unbridgeable divide between the claims of art to provide a stay against confusion through ennobling the human condition, and the limits of its relevance for this particular individual, herself synecdochally representing the masses in society. Elsewhere, Stevens juxtaposes the sterile permanence of art with a society which senses its disassociation from it: in "Dance of the Macabre Mice" (*CPP* 101), the anthropomorphic mice ridicule the statue of "The Founder of the State" for its "beautiful tableau" which fails to translate into any viable communal vision, and the commemorative function inherent in the statue of Andrew Jackson in "The American Sublime" (*CPP* 106–7) is irreconcilable with "the weather" and "the landscape" which define the speaker's phenomenological sense of the possibility of the sublime. Indeed, the only world in which the statue of the marble horses could "thrust/Hoofs grinding against the stubborn earth, until/The light wings lifted through the crystal space" would be a world unintelligible to the old woman. Stevens thereby juxtaposes this poetic flight of fancy with the blunt force of the rhetorical question "What sound could comfort away the sudden sense?" to emphasise the disjunction between art and reality, history and circumstance. It also charts, as Bloom opines, "the vanishing of [aesthetic] vision under the pressures of the social theme" (*Poems* 113).

The solution proposed at this point in the poem would seem to be the eradication of art which has nothing to say for the masses. The second section of the poem dramatises an encounter between a speaker who resembles Burnshaw and the marble statue. From his perspective, the statue has entirely lost its political relevance. The devaluation of art to be no more than "mud" or "sugar or paste or citron-skin" not only denudes its spiritual significance by returning it back to its sheer materiality of being which is "part of the immense detritus of a world" but also captures a world in flux, wherein “everything is dead/Except the future”. From Burnshaw’s ideological perspective, all art which cannot speak of the future is “completely waste”. In dialectical opposition to this, Stevens invokes the name of Percy Bysshe Shelley as the poet-rhapsode whose claim that poets are the unacknowledged legislators of the world might rejuvenate whatever significance is left of the statue. However, Stevens’ sceptical awareness that poets “are never of the world in which they live” results in the “dismissal of the Shelleyan ideal” (Vendler *On Extended Wings* 81), for poetry does not so much articulate a programmatic notion of what utopia should be, but provide a valuable critical perspective through which to view history as ironically progressing from “the hopeless waste of the past/Into a hopeful waste to come”. Inherent in this is Stevens’ validation of art which recognises “the eccentric to be the base of design” (*CPP* 121), in that it stands obliquely to political ideology by sensing its ultimate transience, thereby providing the space through which to resist the imperiousness of its claims. Stevens reiterates his focus on the necessity of art to not only reflect change, but to accommodate humanity to change: “It is only enough/To live incessantly in change”. Political change cannot lead to true freedom, for Stevens is aware that “transformation, executed in an inclusive and non-hierarchical fashion, is too easily co-opted and subjected to the dictatorial will of a vertically-structured social order” (Nickels 115). Against the spurious verities offered by theories of political being which separate themselves from the engagement with reality, art reconciles us to “the maudlin, true meridian” which is the atmosphere of our lives on “the breathing earth”. The poet is thus a true member of the collectivity of society not by proposing a panacea for social ill and political utopia, but by creating sustaining fictions which liberate our imaginative capacities and enrich our experiential understanding of the imperfect world in which we live.

In the third section of the poem, Stevens casts his geographical vision towards Africa in order to underscore humanity’s potential for imaginative vitality. In the wake of the emptiness of “the heaven of Europe”, Stevens turns towards a semi-mythologised portrayal of what he terms “the greenest continent”, wherein the consolations of an otherworldly utopia are replaced by “death without a heaven”. In his evocation of this space, Stevens emphasises that “no god rules over Africa, no throne,/Single, of burly ivory, inched of gold”. As with the poem “Sunday Morning”, Stevens insists that in a post-secular culture without any metaphysical understanding of Being, the imaginative apprehension of life becomes more intense when death looms as the utmost (im)possibility of being-in-the-world: “Death, only, sits upon the serpent throne:/Death, the herdsmen of the elephants,/To whom the jaguars cry and lions roar”. Placed in that context of brutal vivacity, the statue of the marble horses cannot stand anymore, for it represents a false attachment to Eurocentric values which have irrevocably crumbled. For Stevens, the folly of colonialism was to violently impose these values upon Africa which has “no place in the sense of colonists”; indeed, the dissolution of empire ironically reveals “the insecure standing of Westerners and their culture” (Siraganian 344), now seen as completely illusory. However, Stevens’ search for a revitalising force in the wake of the metaphysical death of God culminates in the figure of Ananke, who is “the final god”. As Leonora Woodman points out, Ananke stands for both an “inflexible order” (772) of Necessity which asserts the brute realities of life and death, and “the primitive and savage energy of man’s instinctive life” (773). Stevens’ recourse to primitivism not only mimes the insights of Freudian psychoanalysis in its emphasis on the creative energies of the Id but also foregrounds how the imagination can, in Nietzschean fashion, effect a transvaluation of all values. If there is to be a future state of political Being, it is to be founded not upon Christian or Marxist doctrine, but in the sanctity of the imagination. In responding to Burnshaw through this poem, Stevens highlights how the poetry can be a more utopic endeavour than politics.

After this imaginative sojourn in Africa, Stevens returns to the question of the political body. The possibility for political unity founded on a shared ideological vision is brought up—“Are all men thinking together as one, thinking/Each other’s thoughts, thinking a single thought”—only to be dismissed as “not contrived for parks,/Geranium budgets, pay-roll waterfalls”. Any doctrine aimed at unifying people “in an age of concentric mobs” is doomed to fail by virtue of the fact that, as Stevens emphasises, “the man [is] the state, not as the state the man”. It is significant that at this point in the poem, Stevens returns to the statue, not to highlight its tragic separation from the milieu it is placed in, but to recalibrate the relationship between art and the world it discloses. If the statue is to be more than just “gaudy bosh” to the masses, it must allow people to “see and feel themselves, seeing/And feeling the world in which they live”. Indeed, the statue might be the place wherein “the private and the public can meet” (North 278), for it “is the sculptor and not the stone”—by expressing himself through the artwork, the artist surrenders his or her private meaning to the wider world, thereby capturing something essential about art’s belonging to the world. Art therefore returns us to the human world of perception, where the separation between subjective apprehension and objective "reality" is dissolved. This sentiment is aptly captured in an earlier poem titled "Tea at the Palaz of Hoon" (*CPP* 51), where the speaker discovers that "I was the world in which I walked, and what I saw/Or heard or felt came not but from myself". The authentic artist who can build the future is characterised as someone who, by "twanging instruments/Within us hitherto unknown", awakens in us new possibilities of response to the world. The aural resonances implied by "twanging" perfectly demonstrates Nancy's argument that sound puts us incessantly in touch with exteriority, opening us up to the world as it presences. In this way, Stevens insists that a genuine vision of political community must allow individuals to find themselves anew in a world which they recognise as their own—"more of ourselves in a world that is more our own". Consequently, the world presences as an inexhaustible horizon of meaning because of our inextricable relationship with it:

> More of ourselves, the mood of life made strong
> As by a juicier season; and more our own
> As against each other, the dead, the phantomesque.

The Guitarist and the Multitude: The Portrait of the Artist as Stevens' Guitarist

Interestingly, Stevens' poem "The Man With the Blue Guitar" (*CPP* 135–51) highlights how this process is punctuated with tensions and anxieties concerning both the wider reception of poetry and the self-conscious "image" of the poet and his or her capabilities and responsibilities. When the eponymous artist who twangs his or her guitar faces the audience he or she is playing for, they accuse him or her of not playing "things as they are". As the dialectical tension between the private vision of the artist and the answerability of art in the public domain is sustained, Stevens questions how aesthetic order can be constructed out "of things *exactly* as they are" (emphasis mine). The denuded function of art in a political landscape solely interested in encountering bare "reality" is aptly conveyed through the activity of "patching"—just as in T. S. Eliot's seminal poem of ruin and barrenness, the artist can only succeed in shoring up and piecing together fragments against despair. This is literally enacted in Canto II, where Stevens outlines how the artist can only sing of "a hero's head, large eye/And bearded bronze", without the ability to synthetise these disassociated body parts into a coherent vision of man. However, if art cannot universally synthesise "a million people on one string", it can offer the consolations of the imagination. Stevens once again returns to the idea of how "Poetry//Exceeding music must take the place/Of empty heaven and its hymns", providing an aesthetic substitute in the wake of the passing away of religion and mythology. Challenging the Platonic argument that art provides an illusory façade which detracts away from reality, Stevens insists that "there are no shadows in our sun": art must present the source of reality as it is. It is thus in the vision of art which does not evade reality that the artist finds his or her true significance. As Stevens himself notes in a paraphrase of Canto V of the poem, "poetry, then, is the only possible heaven. It must necessarily be the poetry of ourselves" (*L* 360).

However, this tentative conclusion is now undermined by the insecurity of the artist, for he fears that even this may be a distortion of reality. Faced with "the vivid, florid, turgid sky" and the "clouds tumultuously bright", the man with the blue guitar senses how the cold rock of reality may be beyond the ability of art to render. In the same measure, Stevens undermines the moralistic impetus of art, for there is a further disassociation between nature as represented by "the drenching thunder" and the attempt to "call it good" and "merciful". Being may ultimately be a thing which cannot be captured in language. Without any recourse to the pathetic fallacy, the artist senses how his or her instrument emits only a "lazy, leaden twang", the labial consonance ironically sounding against the onomatopoeic "twang" to suggest diminishment. Stevens thus intuits how his or her severance from the Romantic poetic tradition results in the tragic gulf between language as a human construct, and reality which resides ineffably beyond representation. This anguished awareness modulates into a questioning of art as "the chord which falsifies" while "the discord … magnifies" between aesthetic meaning and social reality. Stevens' bleak evocation of how "time [inexorably] grows upon the rock" emphasises not only humanity's enchainment to the processes of time and the limitations of finitude but also highlights how the earth ultimately becomes "an oppressor" which becomes inimical to all our collective attempts to transcend our mortality. Through this testing of the limits of the imagination when measured against the cold facts of existence, Stevens self-consciously defines the scope of what Dylan Thomas calls "my craft or sullen art". If the artist cannot provide an ultimate vision of aesthetic transcendence which might prove to be an alternative to the pain and suffering of earthly existence, he can refine our imaginative sensibilities which allow us to willingly encounter, as James Joyce puts it, "for the millionth time the reality of experience". Stevens dramatises this truth in Canto XIX by characterising reality as a "monster" which the artist (or the imaginative individual) must "reduce" to himself through meeting it with the strength of the imagination. Furthermore, the contest is won when the artist becomes himself "in the face of the monster", and can "play of the monster and of myself" through his or her art. In this way, Stevens emphasises how the artist must not use his or her art to enshrine what Hegel terms to be the "beautiful soul", a being who falsely maintains its moral distance from social and political reality, thereby achieving an insubstantial freedom. Instead, the artist must sing of an imagination strong enough to "match [reality] in intelligence and force, speaking … with a voice matching [reality's] own" (*L* 360). Far from advocating, as Perloff argues, an inward-turning notion of the imagination, Stevens outlines the political significance to the vitality of the imagination: poetry en-owns us to the world in all its complexity, allowing us the imaginative potential to understand and be reconciled to it.

It is in this sense that Stevens claims in Canto XXII that "Poetry is the subject of the poem": behind every poem lies an authentic statement of the imagination's engagement with reality. For Stevens, "the validity of the poet" is justified as "he adds to life that without which life cannot be lived, or is not worth living" (*L* 364). If, as Stevens elsewhere insists, that the only joy we have is to live in a physical world of change, then the delights of poetry can be suitably described to be "like a duet/With the undertaker". From this point on, the poem foregrounds the idea that poetry locates happiness in transience and change. As the "undertaker's song in the snow" is mapped onto the tune the man with the blue guitar plays, Stevens emphasises that the language of the poem "apostrophizes wreaths" by allowing us to embrace mortality as a fundamental part of life. By returning to the notion that the artist plays "the nature of things as they are" in Canto XXIII, Stevens highlights how the reading process has allowed the reader to deepen his or her understanding of the nature of Being, and how poetry ultimately reveals and presents Being without any evasion. Indeed, Stevens collapses the teleological understanding of history—as presented in the lines "Things as they were, things as they are,// Things as they will be by and by"—into a single perspective, thereby indicting political ideology for reducing the complexity of reality and the immutability of necessity into a totalising narrative. In a Heideggerian way, "Dichtung" (i.e. Poetry) is "Wahrheit" (i.e. Truth) for Stevens not because it presents a representational frame through which to fit an accepted sense of what reality is or should be, but because it attunes the sensibility towards the unfolding of a world in its being. In other words, poetry not only builds the imaginative capacity which allows us to resist "the swarm of thoughts" and "dreams" which futilely construct an "inaccessible Utopia", it also enables us to sense its inevitable transience, figured by Stevens as listening to "a mountainous music [which] always seemed/To be falling and to be passing away". By attaching itself constantly to the changing senses of reality which cannot be reduced to a totalisable object for circumspection, the imagination has a positive ethical function, for it provides us with the "fortitude to resist the rapacity of political and ideological absolutism" (Newcomb "Life Anywhere" 108).

In sum, poetry restores our understanding of a Habermasian "lifeworld"[4] which opens up the space for the engagement with the political because it remains separate without being entirely irreconcilable with it. Stevens highlights the crucial role of autonomy at the end of the poem by invoking the idea of the individual being "a native in this world". By not being co-opted into the sham dream of "inaccessible Utopia", the self can "inhale profounder strength" as he or she is in his or her being in a world he or she understands to be his or her own. The emphasis on using language to articulate this unique place in the world becomes important to Stevens, as it forms an important resistance against the simplifications of ideological definitions. Indeed, the penultimate Canto of the poem exhorts the reader to "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". By envisioning a direct link between the act of naming and the thing which is named, Stevens implies that language can carve out an authentic space for appropriation to Being apart from political cant or clichés. Through the act of discarding worn-out words in the moment of genuine articulation, the individual understands that language is both a product of social forces which can potentially lull the self into a passive inculcation of political norms and a powerful conceptual resource which allows for the shaping of identity at a distance from totalitarian absorption. The essential fictions which poetry creates enable us to fashion "many truths [which can never be] parts of a truth" (*CPP* 186) because they express our multifaceted understandings of the world. In the end for Stevens, it is the workings of the imagination which helps a community to understand its being-together and belonging to the world.

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[4] To put it very briefly, Habermas argues that language, as defined by intersubjective encounters between social actors who collaboratively enact and redefine political and cultural norms through dialogue, is inseparable from the dynamic processes that construct the semioticity of the lifeworld. Habermas offers a definition of the lifeworld to be "a culturally transmitted and linguistically organized stock of interpretive patterns" (*The Theory of Communicative Action* 124). With this interpretive horizon in mind, Habermas rightly argues that we cannot take an objective stance towards the lifeworld, simply because our critique of the lifeworld must unfold from within it. As he points out, "the lifeworld is, so to speak, the transcendental site where speaker and hearer meet, where they can reciprocally raise claims that their utterances fit the world (objective, social, or subjective), and where they can criticize and confirm those validity claims, settle their disagreements, and arrive at agreements" (*The Theory of Communicative Action* 126). In this way, language unfolds dimensions of the lifeworld, while providing its users with a quasi-objective point of view through which to survey its unfolding.

CONCLUSION

The vexed relationship between poetry and society in the 1930s ironically provided Stevens with an important testing ground for the role of the poet. It convinced him that poetic order must be sought through abstraction from "reality" as "the squirming facts [that] exceed the squamous mind" (*CPP* 195), not in order to separate consciousness from the world, but to *return* to it in the saving light of the imagination. As Legett points out, "the poet must be able to resist the pressure for active response to events "that engage us with what is direct and immediate," countering such pressure with the internal pressure of a contemplative view … greater than the utilitarian world's mastery through action and reaction" (*Wallace Stevens* 83). This chapter has pursued the "political" relevance this sentiment in the context of Stevens' poetry of the 1930s through an examination of how political consciousness is necessarily embedded in phenomenological questions of "reality" and "world", terms that form the basic texture of much of Stevens' poetic statements concerning the imagination. In doing so, I am in agreement with a vision of political consciousness put forth by Frederick M. Dolan, who argues that

> Political consciousness … is a heightened perception of the reality proper to the human world: a shared appreciation of its frailty, intangibility, concreteness, complexity, and eventfulness. (447)

Seen from this perspective, Stevens' abstractions trace the importance of poetry in mediating a subjective response to the "lifeworld" which is alert to existential finitude, and how that finitude shapes commitment to others as social and political beings. At the heart of Stevens' political thinking (as I have outlined) is a consistent pragmatic scepticism about any "objective" vision of political utopia or political doctrine which enshrines a false sense of order. This sentiment implies a fundamental openness towards the (de) formulations of history which bears out Stevens' own claims that the imagination constantly creates its own sense of order in the face of the *contemporaneous* pressures of reality. In this way, Stevens can arguably be aligned to other political poets whose divergence from Eliot may be characterised as such: "American poetry's … elements are not used, as in Eliotic modernism, to show up the degradation of modern society by comparing it unfavourably with the achievements of the past, but to open up new contexts" (Hickman 31). Transposed to a Stevensian poetics, this orientation outlines the main dynamics of the imagination, which is constantly driven to fashion order out of these "new contexts", while crucially acknowledging that such order is ultimately, and happily, transitory in nature (Nassar 19). If what I have been pursuing so far is correct, the theoretical outlines of the "Supreme Fiction" as necessarily protean and abstract have already been adumbrated. Stevens comes to envision how a "Supreme Fiction" might encapsulate the Ur-statement of the human being's impulse to recover his or her humanity through discovering imaginative belief in the world as a non-metaphysical openness. It is thus, next, necessary to read Stevens' conceptualisations of what the "Supreme Fiction" should be (and the shape it takes in his long poem "Notes Towards a Supreme Fiction") against the backdrop of a changed philosophical understanding of the potentialities of truth as *created fiction*.

CHAPTER 6

Stevens' Supreme Fiction and the Location of Truth as/in Philosophy

The Supreme Fiction Reconsidered

A good reason why Stevens can be considered to be a philosophical poet is his profession of a theory of a Supreme Fiction which increasingly dominates his thinking about poetry and how it effectively substitutes for religion as an object of "final belief" (*CPP* 226). As Stephen Sicari points out, "the idea that all his poems were small bits moving towards an emerging larger goal [had] been part of Stevens' thinking from his early days" (210). Stevens makes the connection between poetry and the Supreme Fiction explicit not only publicly—as evidenced by his note to his publisher in 1942 that "by supreme fiction, of course, I mean poetry" (*L* 407)—but also privately, as he repeats in a letter to Henry Church written in the same year that "of course, in the long run, poetry would be the supreme fiction" (*L* 430). Although Stevens intimates an intriguing connection between poetry and a theory of the poetic as implied by the word "supreme", criticism has been mired in determining Stevens' problematic employment of the category of the fictional, and how genuine belief in a fictional construct can be philosophically possible. When readers of Stevens try to unpack the contours of a Supreme Fiction from his important long poem "Notes Towards a Supreme Fiction" (*CPP* 329–52), an interesting dialectic obtains between readings which stress unification and readings which underline deferral and fragmentation. As an example of the former

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tendency, Vendler's intricate analysis of the poem argues that "for all its difficulty, the poem has the fascination of complete, if eccentric, self-possession both in its breadth of view and in its final contemptuous dismissal of all sound" (*On Extended Wings* 179). Set against this Hegelian appropriation of the poem are deconstructive readings of the poem offered by critics such as Paul A. Bové who insist that Stevens ironically tropes the "supreme fiction" only to "demonstrate that all fictions are just [fictions] and that the idea of final harmony is an impossibility" (211).

While I agree with the impetuses of poststructuralist criticism that Stevens' language enacts and performs the conditions of the impossibility of closure by gesturing "towards" a centre inexorably voided by absence and deferral, I depart from these readings by locating the directionality of the poem's textual signifiers away from aporetic impasses towards the eventing of an(other) opening which allows us to read Stevens' investments in poetic truth in a Heideggerian way. In other words, deconstructive analyses of "Notes" like that of Krzysztof Ziarek and M. Keith Booker which highlight how Stevens' language gestures towards "a 'beyond' of a poem that never reaches words" (Ziarek *Inflected* 109) or which demonstrate how the poet "has not reached a priestly transcendence in which his search for truth can come to rest" (Booker 506) fail to account for how Stevens clearly states that the Supreme Fiction "satisfies/Belief in an immaculate beginning" (*CPP* 330) by returning us to a "first idea". This chapter will respond to Stevens' emphases on the importance of this first idea to the Supreme Fiction by reading it in the light of Heidegger's understanding of a return to, or retrieval of, a commencement of the history of metaphysics which functions as the thinking of another beginning of/to philosophy. This beginning, which provides the opening not only to the destruction of metaphysical thinking but also to a renewed relationship between the human being and Being, is intricately connected with a changed conception of truth, which is now not a theoretical correspondence between propositional statements and an objective world picture, but an unconcealment and revelation of the ways in which Being comes into language. I thus argue that what is at stake in Stevens' otherwise bafflingly paradoxical statement that "we could no longer really believe in anything unless we recognized that it was a fiction" (*L* 430) is a similar recalibration of the relationship between truth and fictionality, where fiction is untruth not because it is falsehood, but because it reveals the deeper truth of the poetic imagination. In turn, critics like Gregory Brazeal who invalidate the concept of a Supreme Fiction because belief in something which you knowingly understand to be a fiction is logically impossible misunderstand Stevens' portrayal of the difference between logical truth and poetic truth, something which a Heideggerian analysis will make clearer. Taking my critical orientation from the theologian Raimon Panikkar's phenomenological statement that belief is "an expression of total self-bestowal [and] an utterance of … abandon … [and] sheer openness" (154), I posit that both Heidegger and Stevens eschew the totalising tendencies of metaphysical belief and its stranglehold on the revelatory potentialities of poetic truth. In short, the total belief in an unverifiable fiction is a total statement of the human being's belonging to "something more radical and ex-centric than the full plenitude of univocal Truth" (Jarraway 102).

The Supreme Fiction and Theology: Poetry's Opening Towards God

Stevens' own intimations of the value of the Supreme Fiction might raise important questions about the theological import of poetry in a secular age. Despite professing a loss of orthodox Christian belief early on, Stevens' pronouncements of the function of the poetic imagination as an antidote against disenchantment seem to equate the idea of God with the most expanded potentialities of poetry. In a 1940 letter to Hi Simons, Stevens explicitly states:

> The idea of God is a thing of the imagination. We no longer think that God was, but imagined. The idea of pure poetry, essential imagination, as the highest objective of the poet, appears to be, at least potentially, as great as the idea of God, and for that matter, greater, if the idea of God is only one of the things of the imagination. (*L* 369)

This sentiment not only speaks to Stevens' lifelong faith in the imagination as enabling vital modes of belief in an inherent poetic ordering of existence but also places his poetry within a consideration of language's impulse towards the sacred and ineffable, despite the explicit eschewal of canonical belief. This dialectic between the sacred and secular has been raised by literary theorist Geoffrey Hartman as such: "As all poetry and indeed all writing—not only that of prima facie religious eras—is scrutinized by the critical and secularizing spirit, more evidence of archaic or sacred residues come to light … The sacred has so inscribed itself in language that while it must be interpreted, it cannot be removed" (quoted in Finkelstein 1).[1] Despite J. Hillis Miller's placing of Stevens within a trajectory of poets who move "from the absence of God to the death of God as starting point and basis" (*Poets of Reality* 283), a theological reading of the Supreme Fiction as a poetic substitute for the divine seems plausible given Stevens' own inclinations to arrogate religious significance towards the idea of poetry creating a sense of transcendental order. Scholarly commentary on Stevens as working in a religious mode stress how the force of his poetic statements opens up moments of intimation of a higher realm which can only be accessed through the exaltations of poetic language. Daniel Fuchs writes that "Stevens' poetry points to the fact that there is more piety in being human than in being pious … He wants nothing less holy than the oneness of man and his world" (92). William D. Dean's synoptic reading of the shift from negative theology in the early poetry towards an almost mystical affirmation of divine patterning in the later poetry emphasises that for Stevens, "aesthetic satisfaction is sufficient in the way that religious experience is sufficient and, like religious experience … is redemptive and its source lies beyond the ordinary" (196). William V. Davis' reading of an alternative poetic lineage from Miller positions Stevens as "the key *poetic* intermediary … figure between Matthew Arnold and R.S. Thomas" (372), arguing for a religious renaissance arriving after the "death of God". Indeed, Janet McCann is emphatic in her argument that what Stevens calls the "Supreme Fiction" constantly elevates "nothing less than God" (x).

However, I seek to understand the religious underpinning of Stevens' Supreme Fiction as based on a rejection of an ontotheological deity. For Stevens, the Supreme Fiction appropriates belief in a first idea by gesturing towards the transcendent, which is that of a *pure* opening as such. Religious belief is thus belief in a "beyond" which opens up belief to its own (im)possibility. In aligning the "force" of the religious in Stevens with the deconstruction of a metaphysically "present" Godhead, I want to examine the importance of the dialectic of loss and revelation as it surfaces throughout "Notes". In other words, it is only by paradoxically countenancing its own inability to imagine a "first idea" which inheres past poetic tropes that the imagination opens itself up to an encounter with that which lies beyond ontic beings. In reading Stevens' poem as such, I follow Elisa New's own theological reading of Stevens which emphasises the recovery of visionary innocence before the Fall by "rehabilitating nakedness, or better, un-knowing it" (63), thereby "unwriting the testimony of [the] consciousness" (79) of the event. However, New's argument fails to consider the extent of the poem's self-conscious negotiation with its own textuality, emphasised in the way it becomes obsessed not only with beginning but also with returning (Cook 217) to its status as a created fiction. To this end, I remind the reader of my earlier utilisation of Nancy's juxtaposition between literature and myth. For Nancy, the literary act insists on its own singularity through disruption, thereby unsealing the closed world of its images and narratives to the exigencies of human concerns and communicability. By "interrupt[ing] its own recitation" (*Inoperative* 65), literature exposes human beings to the non-metaphysical stirrings of a "sense" which leads beyond the phenomenal world.

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[1] Other critics have likewise noted a resurgence of the sense of the religious inherent in literature. Richard Kearney has written about "a sense of the transcendent … inscribed in everyday immanence" (102) as depicted by modernist writers like James Joyce and Virginia Woolf. Angela O'Donnell argues that "poetry brings us into close contact with the things of the world, but it also yearns toward the unknowable world—the one beyond us that poetry inevitably gestures towards" (99), and Finkelstein himself notes that "the sacred always adheres to what may appear to be even the most resolutely secular poems" (1). Indeed, the move by religious scholars such as Harvey Cox to deconstruct the boundaries between the sacred and secular leads to the insight that secular literature can perform a deeply religious function. See Eric Ziolkowski's article "Literature and Theology from a North American Perspective" (2012).

What the poem thereby interrupts, for Nancy, is its own closure. The poem intimates the coming-into-presence of the non-ontotheological deity because it paradoxically registers "the material and fading trace of a presence that is not worthwhile as sustenance, as being-present-there, stable and manifest, but which is worthwhile as passing, coming and going, arriving, occurring and departing" ("The Poet's Calculation" 99). In other words, the poem incarnates a non-metaphysical sense of presence in order to open up presence to what lies beyond it. It is in this paradoxical opening that poetry can be said to be "religious". Nancy's text *Dis-Enclosure: The Deconstruction of Christianity* argues for a relationship between Christianity and the de-sedimentation of metaphysics based on the opening of an absolute alterity which reorientates phenomenal consciousness to be outside of itself. Like Heidegger, Nancy takes up the question of the limits of ontotheology in terms of the difference between Being and beings. The conceptual edifice underlying the idea of the God of the philosophers "is played out in the mutual referral of ... two regimes of beings or presence: the 'immanent' and the 'transcendent'; the 'here-below' and the 'beyond'; the 'sensuous' and the 'intelligible'; 'appearance' and 'reality'" (*Dis-Enclosure* 6). Ontotheological religion enacts closure when it hypostasises these two eternal realms, leaving no space for a hearkening after that which opens up beyond metaphysics.

For Nancy, the particularly powerful philosophical intervention which Christianity represents is its ability to dis-enclose, defined by Nancy as delivering "forever and anew the *epekeina tes ousias*, the 'beyond beings': it foments in itself the overflowing of its rational ground" (*Dis-Enclosure* 7). Christianity is nothing less than the opening up of the closure of metaphysics; this rupture is also a turning of thought towards that which exceeds it—indeed, without which there is no possibility of thought. Nancy's consideration of the radical openness of Christianity has pertinent implications for the Heideggerian project of the destruction of metaphysics. As Nancy writes:

> Deconstructing belongs to a tradition, to *our* modern tradition, and I am entirely ready to admit that the operation of deconstruction is part of the tradition just as legitimately as the rest; consequently, it is itself shot through and through with Christianity. Furthermore, "deconstruction" has this peculiarity: if we look back at its origin in the text of *Being and Time*, it is the last state of the tradition—its last state as retransmission, to us and by us, of the whole tradition in order to bring it back to play in its totality. To put the tradition into play according to deconstruction, according to *Destruktion* … means neither to destroy in order to found anew nor to perpetuate … To deconstruct means to take apart, to disassemble, to loosen the assembled structure in order to give some play to the possibility from which it emerged but which, qua assembled structure, it hides. (*Dis-Enclosure* 148)

For Nancy, Christianity deconstructs itself by holding onto the possibility of an absolute openness which exceeds and destroys any assurance of closure and certitude. As Nancy argues, Christianity cannot be separated from the idea of the "death of God" because it is this a-theistic evacuation which allows the operation of the sense of the divine: "It is Christian because Christianity … relates immediately to its own origin, as a slack [*jeu*], an interval, some play, an opening in the origin" (*Dis-Enclosure* 149). The evacuation of representational sense from the world is the necessary prelude to the opening up of sense which lies beyond, in the realm of the transcendent. In short, Christianity relates to itself as the openness of its origin. This openness preserves the ontological difference between Being and beings, thereby rupturing metaphysical closure. Mapping this onto my reading of Stevens' long poem, I want to argue that it is the function of the Supreme Fiction to open up poetic language to the concealed possibilities of its history. In other words, the Supreme Fiction may be understood theologically as *the* opening of language's possibilities. For Stevens, the poetic imagination refreshes our collective perceptions by renovating past poetic tropes in order to allow truth as revelation to emerge. I thereby wish again to reorientate readings of Stevens which emphasise the gap between the materiality of reality and the idealistic nature of poetic perception. George Lensing sounds the note for the numerous critics of the poetry who stress Stevens' concerns "with epistemology" in terms of a divide between "the world outside [which] seems deeply rooted in … realism" and "the processes of perception [that] reshape our knowledge of it into a Kantian idealism" (658). In my view, the poetic image in Stevens explodes this dichotomy by exposing the reader to moments of "discovery [of] an order" (*CPP* 349) which reconcile perceiver and external reality. This suggests that poetic truth cannot be reduced to a barren equivalence between word and thing, but must clear the perceptual space through which reality can presence as deeply "created by the poet's senses of the world" (*CPP* 723). To read "Notes" is also to become aware of how Stevens renovates the philosophical notion of perception towards ecstatic appropriation. Heidegger's arguments about the leap out of the history of metaphysics in order to hearken to an inceptual beginning will help concretise the philosophical and poetic import of openness, which leads to a consideration of what he calls "the other beginning of immeasurable possibilities for our history" (*CP* 289).

Appropriating and/the Beginning: *Ereignis* and the Other Opening to Metaphysics

In his later writing, Heidegger places increasing emphasis on articulating how the movement of *Ereignis* leads away from metaphysical thinking towards what he calls "the gathering and naming of the inceptual" (*E* 49). Overcoming metaphysical thinking does not so much supersede the history of metaphysics as it hearkens back to the unexhausted reserves of thinking held at the beginning. Heidegger elaborates on the importance of the beginning as such:

> The first beginning is the act of beginning in the sense of disconcealing of disconcealment, but thus the emergence into the constancy of disconcealment

> in unconcealedness, but thus the appearing forth of the latter in the act of appearing, but thus the pressing forth of appearing as appearance …. (*E* 47)

This sense of (an)other beginning allows the human being to experience Being differently, thereby opening up a renewed sense of historical possibilities. Heidegger insists that this beginning cannot be sought by human volition alone, for the eventing of appropriation is not to be determined as an event within metaphysics. Inasmuch as the truth of the event and the event of truth lead us away from metaphysics towards the appropriation of Being, the human being stands in this truth through language. In other words, its language is essentially linked to truth as unconcealment. Heidegger thus writes that "the event is the inceptual word, because its arrogation (as the unique adoption of the human being into the truth of beyng[2]) disposes the human essence to the truth of beyng. Inasmuch as the appropriating event is in itself this disposing, and since disposition eventuates as an event, the event-related beginning (i.e., beyng as abyssal in its truth) is the inceptually disposing voice: the word" (*E* 145). Language appropriates the human being into his or her essence by hearkening back to the beginning, clearing the space through which beings come into presence. As with Stevens, I argue that Heidegger provides an implicit "theory" of a Supreme Fiction, for he inscribes a vision of language which is purified of all other content than the saying of Being. To be sure, Heidegger thinks of this language of the beginning as superior to other forms of speech: "language is in its historical beginning richer, freer, more venturesome, and therefore also always more strange than worn-out ordinary opinion may admit into the precinct of its calculations" (*E* 259). This language of saying can never be about Being (for Being lies beyond metaphysical concepts), but instead will be the saying *of* Being. Without veiling truth in metaphorical images and concepts which distract away from the happening of unconcealment, language (of the inceptual beginning) brings Being into unmediated presence.

It is in this way that Heidegger treats the work of art to be an origin. For Heidegger, "art happens as poetry" (*OBT* 49) because poetry founds truth as openness. As a projective saying which brings beings out of hiddenness into the light of the clearing,

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[2] In the form his philosophy takes in the late 1930s, where *Ereignis* as appropriative event features as a key concept in the thinking beyond metaphysics, Heidegger increasingly writes *Seyn* (beyng) instead of *Sein* (Being) to signal the truth of Being as non-metaphysical event.

> poetry is the saying of the unconcealment of beings. The prevailing language is the happening of that saying in which the world rises up historically for a people and the earth is preserved as that which remains closed. Projective saying is that in which the preparation of the sayable at the same time brings the unsayable as such to the world. (*OBT* 46)

At the source of language absolutely essential to a sense of the world in which "it is a world of words to the end of it" (*CPP* 301), the Supreme Fiction as poetry both precedes any particular example of a poem and encompasses the limits of the sayable which inhere in any poem. It is my contention that Stevens' idea of a Supreme Fiction operates as pure event, not by intimating that there is a metaphysical Ur-poem which lies behind each and every poem, but by revealing the very nature of Stevens' lifelong investment in poetry and how poetry replaces religious belief by sustaining our faith in the power of the imagination as it creates order by locating our sensibilities amidst the openness of Being. In other words, if there is a theory of the poetic to be gleaned from Stevens' increasingly abstract designation of the significance of belief in a Supreme Fiction, this can be sought in the way both Heidegger and Stevens understand poetic truth to be the revelatory truth of the poetic word.

Poetry and Truth: The "Theological" Language of Revelation and Belief in "Credences of Summer" (1946)

Perhaps the poem which makes the most obvious connection between the revelatory truth and belief in the world is "Credences of Summer" (*CPP* 322–6), as prefigured in the title itself. In a moment of pure presencing, Stevens brings Being into language "without evasion by a single metaphor". The question of the sources of belief animating the poem, and whether the comforts of belief is ironically presented by Stevens, has resulted in readings which are divided. Vendler dissects the pertinence of belief in the poem in terms of a fading movement from confidence to scepticism: "[The poem is an expression of] the creed of the believer rather than the certain projection of the prophet … but its intention cannot all command the strings" (*On Extended Wings* 234). In opposition to this, Charles Berger writes that the poem "is a poem of recovery", linking its equating of the intensity of poetic vision with "the limits of reality" (*CPP* 323) to a "sense [which] appears to be harmonious with desire, a fulfilment rather than a disruption" (84). My reading of the poem aims rather to locate the question of belief with projection, or rather to understand its performance in terms of the happening of "what is possible" rather than "what is not". In other words, it is the unfolding and revelation of a certain mode of poetic perception raised to its highest pitch that enacts belief in an organising principle to the landscape. As Lensing points out, the language of the poem aids the reader in imagining this deepening transaction between the perceiver and the environment:

> The rhythm of Steven's [poem] is everywhere influenced by … the penchant to redefine, refine, and refashion. Ideas unfold in a fluidity like the waves of the sea, each like its predecessor but subtly different. Syntax and rhythm necessarily expand in an unfolding that seems to have no set limitation or end. ("Stevens's Prosody" 109)

The first section of the poem intensely evokes the season at its height, its presence being made palpable through the phrase "the roses are heavy with a weight/Of fragrance". By distilling phenomenological time down to "the last day of a certain year", Stevens probes the essential link between summer and "the imagination's life". Juxtaposed against this abundance of Being is the barrenness of everything summer is *not*—shorn of metaphysical signification, it presents itself to the perceiver as "the barrenness/ Of the fertile thing that can attain no more". Stevens' invocation to the reader to "see the thing and nothing else" is a call to stand in the truth of Being as it discloses itself. The poem is thus the pure saying of Being, and the unfolding of the poem an invitation to the reader to countenance that which cannot be contained by metaphysical signification, for it is the unthought opening of metaphysics. The signifiers fertile/barren are themselves mapped onto presence/absence, in a further demonstration of the fact that Being escapes this dichotomy by inhering as the difference between Being and beings. Stevens' paradoxical figure for what exceeds figuration is the rock, and it emerges in the sixth section of the poem as that which "cannot be broken". If the rock metonymically represents the poem, it is because it demonstrates Heidegger's distinction between the world and earth in an artwork—insofar as it opens up a world wherein humanity gains an outlook upon beings, it insists in its own being, resistant to conceptual simplification.

The rock of summer thus is incomparable to "a hermit's truth nor symbol in hermitage", for it is sheer presence. Inasmuch as this non-metaphysical presence en-owns belief in "the brilliant mercy of a sheer repose", it secures a phenomenological trust in the workings of imaginative order and poetic truth. This analysis of the poem resonates with other recent studies which seek to find modes of coherence in the poem that exceed or supersede linguistic representation. Lisa Goldfarb's unpacking of the poem demonstrates how "Stevens creates a form and language in "Credences of Summer" to urge our belief in this paradoxical truth that there is a permanence to be found in the passing of time" (124), of which she locates in musical design. Karen Helgeson's analysis of the pertinence of a non-metaphysical "centre" to Stevens' poetics marshals a phenomenological lens to argue that "'Credences' conceives of the centering experience primarily as a more or less prolonged instance of heightened insight and that … the poem's characteristically way of rendering this experience is in terms of seeing and viewing" (35). In this way, Stevens emphasises that truth is the truth of Being, for it enacts disclosure and unconcealment without any evasion. In this way, the poem sustains belief in the fulness of the season, placing the perceiver in proximity with Being: "On this present ground, the vividest repose,/Things certain sustaining us in certainty". For Stevens, belief which is enacted and sustained by poetic truth fleshes out the Heideggerian event of appropriation.

The seventh section of the poem sustains this reading by probing the link between language and the "object". In an earlier poem "Description Without Place" (*CPP* 296–302), Stevens writes that "description is revelation. It is not/The thing described, nor false facsimile" (*CPP* 362), recognising that signification arises out of an unsurpassable gap between linguistic signifiers and Being. This gap is the reason why "it was difficult to sing in face/Of the object", for the object stands apart from objectification in language. In trying to describe the object, language ironically leads us further away from it. Stevens thus presents a satirical picture of the singers in the woods attempting to use language in order to "make captive, … to subjugate/Or yield to subjugation" that which cannot be encapsulated in words. If the singers represent an example of how language entrenches an inauthentic view of the relationship between the human being and his or her world, the "theory of the word" (*CPP* 301) offered in Stevens' portrayal of description as revelation consolidates how he thinks about language's ability to present and unfold, not simply represent. If, as the poem asserts, "the word is the making of the world" (*CPP* 301), then the Supreme Fiction plays a pivotal role in reconciling us to the splendour and terror of earthly existence. For Stevens, poetry affirms belief in a humanistic world without necessarily enshrining a simplistic doctrine of humanism. It will perhaps come as no surprise that Stevens intended the fourth section of “Notes Towards a Supreme Fiction” to be titled “It Must be Human”. In an essay titled “The Relations between Poetry and Painting”, Stevens expresses this idea as such:

> [I]n an age in which disbelief is so profoundly prevalent or, if not disbelief, indifference to questions of belief, poetry and painting, and the arts in general, are, in their measure, a compensation for what has been lost. (*NA* 171)

Poetry fills in the vacuum of belief by reaffirming 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” (*CPP* 233). For Stevens, there is nothing simplistic about the process of finally getting at that simple statement of belief in the weather and the self’s place in it, for to grasp towards a Supreme Fiction necessitates Stevens’ own climbing out of the Platonic cave of poetic metaphors. It is with this allegorical return to the “other” beginning of *poiesis* that any analysis of Stevens’ poem must begin with.

“Notes Towards a Supreme Fiction” as Poetic Statement

If I have been underscoring the theological dimensions of Stevens’ Supreme Fiction thus far, this has been to highlight how Stevens’ intimation of the necessity of the “first idea” that lies on the hither side of poetic images opens up a non-metaphysical attitude towards the truth of poetry. That Stevens, in the conception of the poem, had the necessity of beginning on his mind is attested to by Donald Stanford. As Peter Brazeau records, Stanford had heard a comment made by Stevens about Yvor Winters’ poetry as the urge to “start things all over again” (122), surmising that Stevens would have been looking forward to his own poetic ethos in “Notes” as a similar beginning. To read the poem is not only to imagine the nascent and inchoate contours of what a Supreme Fiction might be, for it is also to (re)enact the Heideggerian gesture of retrieval (*Wiederholung*), in which the possibilities for futural signification are only opened up on the basis of a de-sedimentation of tradition. In other words, the poem is about how poetry appropriates its own potentialities for truth, at the risk of a paradoxical impossibility. This re-evaluation of poetic tropes consequently demands a new understanding of language. John Fischer argues that Stevens' emphasis on a central poetry "calls into question our ordinary conception of the relation between language and reality" (268). What is philosophically significant in the employment of the term "Supreme Fiction" is how "language is no longer directed towards analysis or the imposition of order, but [instead] becomes a fully self-present speech that participates directly in reality" (Fischer 266). What is thereby hardest to countenance in the opening up of the poem towards the first idea beyond rhetoricity and troping is an inceptual epistemology, a way of seeing the world that "takes its qualities from the *insistences* of the object, rather than from the accustomed point of view of the active world" (Leggett *Wallace Stevens* 94).

The dedication which begins the poem proleptically outlines the contours of the Supreme Fiction which Stevens designates through naming the poem's main sections "It Must be Abstract", "It Must Change" and "It Must Give Pleasure". The Supreme Fiction must reveal "single, certain truth" which must paradoxically be "equal in living changingness to the light". In a Heideggerian way, Stevens interprets this light to be the clearing through which "the central of … being" may be manifest. Truth must therefore discover "a moment" through which speaker and reader, and the human being and Being may be co-appropriated. Read in this light, the poem highlights moments of ecstatic satisfaction wherein "the marriage of self and place" (Ausubel 369) happens without suggesting there can be complete self-possession in the way Vendler understands the poem. Stevens' description of Supreme Fiction as opening aptly begins with the desire for the beginning: the speaker instructs the "ephebe" to "become an ignorant man again" in order to "see the sun again with an ignorant eye". If my reading of Stevens thus far has been correct, this paradoxical search for an idea of the sun past all images of the sun not only represents Stevens' reinterpretation of the Platonic parable of the Cave but also highlights his desire to read the history of poetry and philosophy differently. As Raina Kostova points out, "When 'Notes' searches for the outlines of modern experience as a response to the past, it presents that experience as conditioned by the affect attached to transcendental signifiers, such as truth and rationality" (46). Indeed, if Heidegger reads Plato's parable as signalling the momentous metaphysical shift of truth from unconcealment to correspondence and ideation, I argue that Stevens' "Notes" reappropriates Platonic symbols precisely in order to reverse this philosophical determination.

The "image" of the sun thus must carry no other names, but instead "be/In the difficulty of what it is to be". Stevens immediately recognises the irony of such a claim, in that "the first idea becomes/The hermit in a poet's metaphors", the image of concealment implying that the Supreme Fiction must inevitably be contained and contaminated in metaphorical language. In a similar way, philosophy is determined by an oblivion of Being because the thought of Being remains on the ontic level without thinking of what opens this thinking in the first place. For Stevens and Heidegger, poetry and philosophy provide a corrective to this metaphysical worldview by opening up conceptual language to its unthought history, re-enacting metaphysical thinking in order to relate to thought differently. For poet and philosopher, it is "belief in an immaculate beginning" which accomplishes this reorientation, for it grounds history in a thoughtful recollection of Being. If the Supreme Fiction as the opening which poetry provides holds within itself all which can be enunciated, then Stevens' cryptic assertion that "we move between these points:/From that ever-early candor to its late plural" can be understood as a depiction of how poetic language creatively grounds and establishes linguistic lifeworlds built upon the human being's ex-sistence towards Being. The fourth canto of "It Must be Abstract" fleshes out this idea more, for Stevens writes that "we live in a place/That is not our own". Just as Heidegger derides humanism for focusing exclusively upon the values imposed by the human being, Stevens is chary of humanism for the reasons. In a letter to Henry Church, Stevens states that "the chief defect of humanism is that it concerns human beings" (*L* 449). In other words, if "the air is not a mirror but a bare board" wherein we cannot seek out our own reflections, the first idea remains alien to our human approximations. Stevens evokes the figure of Descartes as "a symbol of the reason" (*L* 433) in order to suggest how the Enlightenment focuses on human rationality has enshrined an inauthentic picture of the relationship between the human being and his or her world. Indeed, by claiming that "Adam/In Eden was the father of Descartes", Stevens provides a reinterpretation of the Fall as a descent into what Walter Benjamin calls "overnaming". For Benjamin, the representational language of humanity is "a parody–by the expressly mediate word–of the expressly immediate, creative word of God, and the decay of the blissful Adamite spirit of language that stands between them" ("Language" 71). Through overnaming, the link between Being and language is occluded, as concepts lead away from a creative naming which serves to bring Being into language. In a similar way, Stevens' invocation of "weather by Franz Hals" in the sixth canto further emphasises an aesthetic and epistemological relationality which rages to embrace "the giant of the weather" without intermediary. As Charles Doyle notes, "the idea of painting as a paradigm of [the process of perception] appealed to Stevens [not only] because of its visual character … but also because (to his verbal consciousness) painting as a medium … seemed free of rhetoric" (201).

As I interpret Stevens, this understanding forms the basis of the poem's exhortation to return perception to an originary response *towards* the Supreme Fiction. As is so often the case with Stevens, the sense of "the fragrance of the magnolias comes close" only when we imagine the event to be "without a name and nothing to be desired". This constant "restat[ing of] analogies of perception" (Patke 130) shifts the interpretation of language away from a tool through which the human being uses to describe the world in an objective manner towards a disclosive event of Being. In this way, the Supreme Fiction reveals the truth of the imagination as the truth of poetry. Stevens fittingly underscores this idea in the seventh canto of "It Must be Abstract" when he asserts that "the truth depends on a walk around a lake,//A composing as the body tires". No longer a statement of correspondence between internal propositions and external fact, truth *depends*, or is contingent upon, "balances that happen" between consciousness and the ever-shifting world of perception. If the word "happen" can be mapped onto the Heideggerian event which can no longer designate an occurrence within the totalising purview of metaphysics (but which hearkens to the unthought beginning of it), then Stevens' telling use of the word "appropriate" in ninth canto of this section not only concretises his poetic thinking of *Ereignis* but also prefigures the ecstatic moments of union between the human being and his environment which ultimately supplies the perfect figure of Stevensian reconciliation.

The second section of the poem registers Stevens' awareness that the Supreme Fiction cannot solidify into any determined metaphysical truth which we can access outside of the co-appropriation of the human being and Being. The (de)(con)struction of truths must express our ever-changing awareness of the presencing of the world; as Kathleen Dale writes, "change is vital to the construction of any 'fiction': orders must constantly be broken down, not only *in order* that new ones might take their place, but so that experiments might be made with the possibility of entering into a fuller reality" (266). A universe of flux paradoxically assures the permanence of presence, as the poet opines that "the bees came booming as if they had never gone,/As if the hyacinths had never gone". Stevens significantly juxtaposes tropes of return—"why should the bee recapture a lost blague"—with tropes of "repetition" to emphasise how there can be no question of experiencing the phenomenal world as a degraded or fallen copy of another transcendent realm. Instead, "this/Booming and booming of the new-come bee" indicates how repetition (as aurally presented by the onomatopoeic register of the lines) incarnates difference. Repetition, and the difference in repetition, implies freshness of vision, as the romance of the imagination with the world finds renewed force. The third canto of this section polemically juxtaposes this Bergsonian vitalism of the universe with the immobile statue of General Du Puy. By satirising how the lawyers and doctors study the statue in order to "study the past", the statue offers yet another representation of an ossified truth which bears no relevance to the spiritual and imaginative needs of the present moment. As with the earlier poem "The Man on the Dump", this statue must ultimately be consigned to the same dump which holds all past poetic images. Stevens' excoriation of the statue is fully expressed in the line "Yet the General was rubbish in the end". Indeed, for Stevens, "nothing had happened because nothing had changed": a genuine happening of the event must express an original appropriation. The next canto illustrates this movement by explaining that "two things of opposite nature seem to depend/On one another". Just as the union of man and woman in love signals a Badiouian event through the increase in being which brings the incalculable and unforeseeable into play, Stevens' focus on how day depends on night and music depends on silence are further illustrations of how the relationship inscribed by *Ereignis* brings the participants into proximity with each other and, by doing so, appropriates each into its own. Once again, the sensual register of "touch" proves useful in demonstrating how the interior space of representation is undermined by a dehiscence which brings this interiority in ceaseless contact with what exceeds it. Ontological identities are thus destabilised, as the event locates beings in an open totality where nothing can be decided prior to its happening:

> The partaker partakes of that which changes him.
> The child that touches takes character from the thing,
> The body, it touches.

Retaining this trope of union, Canto VIII of "It Must Change" envisages a *rapprochement* in terms of a fantastical marriage between Nanzia Nunzio and Ozymandias. If the statue of General Du Puy is one that is dead and complete, the figure of Ozymandias comes to the reader mediated through Percy Bysshe Shelley's famous sonnet about an unnamed traveller encountering the shattered visage of Ozymandias' statue. Stevens picks up on the resonances of the Shelleyan poem which imply the impermanence of worldly power and grandeur, in order to suggest that change is indeed the dynamic motor pulsing through the universe. As the female character Nunzio stands before Ozymandias "more nakedly/Than nakedness", a straightforward Heideggerian reading might drive home the point that this sexual union is the perfect figure of the human being's ecstatic standing in the truth of unconcealed Being. However, the last tercet of the canto reverses this by emphasising that "the bride/Is never naked" for she always wears "a fictive covering". This reversal leads a Nietzschean critic like Leggett to conclude that "the Nanzia Nunzio canto … takes us from the rejection of truth to the privileging of untruth" (246), and results in Derrida's deconstructive critique of Heidegger which suggests that there is no "truth" to the Heideggerian conception of truth which can be clearly delineated from falsehood and dissimulation. I argue that we can recuperate a Heideggerian reading of the tercet not only by emphasising that, for Heidegger, concealment is an integral part of unconcealment but also by arguing that if truth is openness and disclosure, then untruth can only be recognised as untruth because it stands in the light of the clearing opened up by truth. Nunzio's fictive covering is truth because it reveals the truth of her being. Stevens' blurring of the boundaries between truth and falsehood leads not so much to an aporetic undecidability between the two or an abyssal figuration of truth, but towards a thinking of a fiction which is true because it unveils and discloses. The second section appropriately ends with the most intense signifier of union, which is between the self and the world. By accepting that the "will to change" is a force which is "too constant to be denied", the self understands that "the freshness of transformation is // The freshness of a world". The appeal of the world is finally and ultimately an imaginative one, and poetry is the deepest expression of how perception is charged with life-sustaining force by being fully invested in phenomenological reality. By affirming the vitality of the world, we simultaneously affirm our ability to be moved by it. As Frank Doggett summarises: "[our minds are] united to world in the identical transformations of world and mind. The external changes are also the internal ones.

The flow of consciousness is our own version of the outer flux of reality" (296).

The third and final section of the poem presents what Stevens considers to be most noble about the Supreme Fiction: that it is able to engender pleasure by reconciling us to the world. Barbara L. Estrin's feminist reading of "Notes" emphasises the theme of reconciliation by stating that through "letting go of the need to remake the world in his own likeness, [the speaker in "It Must Give Pleasure"] becomes like what he loves" (213). Without following Estrin's subsequent analyses of how the dynamic between self and world is refracted through the discourses of gender and sexuality, I agree with Estrin that the poem culminates in an embracing of consciousness and place, which happens through the creative focus provided by poetry. Canto IV clearly emphasises the link between perception, poetry as *poiesis* and place: "we make of what we see, what we see clearly/ And have seen, a place dependent on ourselves". This insight is fleshed out in the Stevens' parable of the marriage of the captain and the maiden Bawda. Recalling the poet-voyager Crispin from *Harmonium* who finally settles in a locale conducive for both a renewed sense of self and a poetic insight, the captain makes a happy marriage to Bawda because he "loved the ever-hill Catawba" wherein he finds his bride. His devotion is reciprocally matched by Bawda, who "loved the captain as she loved the sun". Stevens analeptically brings back the reference to the sun with which he starts "Notes" off with, suggesting how the reading experience sustained by the poem repositions the reader's relationship with this "symbol". By being able to countenance it in its first idea, we encounter the sun as part of the open whole of Being. Indeed, the "marriage-place" in Catawba is a synecdoche of the clearing through which Being presences. This clearing is nothing metaphysical because it is the pure opening of metaphysics. Stevens makes this Heideggerian point through the figure of Canon Aspirin located in the fifth and sixth canto. As the Canon beholds the night unfolding and revealing a gaping absence, he senses the pure limits of thought and fact: "The nothingness was a nakedness, a point, // Beyond which thought could not progress as thought". To think now means to be open to that which *gives* thought, or provides the opening for thinking to happen. Faced with the dilemma between Being and nothingness, he realises that "it was not a choice // Between, but of". Being is thus precisely Nothing, for it cannot be conceived on the level of simple ontic presence. Like all the other visionaries in the Stevensian canon, he finally understands that "the whole,/The complicate, the amassing harmony" cannot be conceived of as an object of rational thought or a Deleuzian de-totalised totality, but can only come into being by being appropriated through the happening of poetic truth.

The final vision of "Notes" is thus that of harmony—if the first section of the poem asserted that "the truth depends on a walk around a lake", the final cantos reinforce the understated mood of homeliness within poetry. Canto IX emphasises that the ordinary sounds made by the wren and the robin must comprise "a thing final in itself and, therefore, good", the word "final" signalling both the terminus of the poem and the utmost limits of poetic insight. To be touched (both sensorially and affectively) by reality is to place complete trust in the physical world—for Stevens, this is the belief which the Supreme Fiction awakens in us. The utmost test of this belief is sounded by Stevens in the coda of the poem, which violently shifts registers to consider the reality of war from the perspective of an unnamed soldier. If Stevens has pursued union throughout the poem, he is ultimately consistent in showing that the life of poetry must depend on the ugliness of war and the banality of death. Reality experienced in all its actuality is the reality of wartime conflict. Although Stevens never directly engages with war in the way poets like Wilfred Owen or Siegfried Sassoon do, he gestures towards a notion of poetry which will dignify the soldier's wordless experiences by bringing them into language. If the poet's words petrify into lifelessness because they do not speak true to the soldier, the soldier's lifeworld remains inchoate without "the bread of faithful speech" poetry sustains him with. More than any particular poetic instantiation, the Supreme Fiction is the horizon wherein beings come into language through the word.

Conclusion

This chapter has positioned the Supreme Fiction to be an important poetic illustration of the Heideggerian event which leads to a (re)newed conception of metaphysics, not only because Stevens tantalisingly offers us only notes towards its realisation (thereby never fully describing what it is) but also because the Supreme Fiction uncovers what has been a constant in Stevensian poetics—the encounter between language and reality which is both inside and outside of it. In analysing the importance of a Heideggerian conception of poetic truth as unconcealment to the poem, I demonstrate the ways in which Stevens sought the value of the imagination as engaging with Being as non-metaphysical openness. This view of reality not only confirms Stevens' modernity but also fleshes out the continual dynamism of *Ereignis* as appropriative dwelling in the linguistic "house of Being". It is thus the intensity of relationality which the poem ultimately leaves us with: as Janet Ellerby points out, "the poet's image of the world is both rational *and* irrational. As rational, it is the never-satisfied mind's attempt once more to name the ideal. As irrational, it is the never-satisfied mind's attempt once more to name the ideal that will be forever a supreme fiction, and consciously *only* a fiction" (265). What Stevens offers for his readers to think is a poetry that is attentive to the sheer *difference* between beings and Being, or between metaphysical closure and poetic openness towards that which arrives in language instead of being represented by it. In short, the Supreme Fiction *is* the opening past metaphysics. If *Ereignis* designates the non-ground between *Da-sein* and Being, Stevens is sensitive as to how difference and dissimilitude both pull poetic perception and the world together and repel their fusion: "There can be no dialectical interplay between imagination and reality, no joining and separation, insofar as there is no common measure between them, no correspondence, each remaining irremediably excessive and deficient with regards to the other" (Shaviro 223). It only remains to look at the poems which emerge after "Notes" in order to investigate how poetry attempts to say—and unsay, or not say—that which is completely and utterly extrinsic to it.

CHAPTER 7

To See Things as They Finally Are: The Question of Being in the Late Poetry

The Question of Late Style in Stevens

Just as the marriage of excessive wordplay with mythical structure in James Joyce's last published work *Finnegans Wake* signalled both a radical departure from novelistic form and a return to the oneiric sources of language which opens up narrative in the first place, Stevens' late poems represent both a significant rupture from the expansiveness of the earlier poetry and a tentative coalescing of the themes he had pursued throughout his oeuvre. Critics who have engaged with the range of Stevens' output have singled out the late poetry as a distinct, almost self-contained object of study: Bloom summarily praises the poet's last phase as "his best" due to the production of work which has "an uncanny intensity and originality" (338) surpassing his previous efforts, and A. Walton Litz has noted that "the nature of poetry written in the last fifteen years of Stevens' life, as well as its bulk and complexity, make it a special subject in itself" (260). However, readers of Stevens have been divided in their assessments of how the late poetry exactly relates to the earlier. Seizing on Stevens' idea that his entire body of work achieves a unity—as designated by his desire to title the collected poems as "The Whole of Harmonium"—Marie Borroff sees the late poems as illuminating "an imaginative edifice of interrelated concepts, images, and symbols which acquire a cumulative power as we gain familiarity with them in the course of our reading" (19). Kathleen

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Woodward's observation that Stevens' late work evinces and attains a form of linguistic asceticism which crystallises an accord between the imagination and existential circumstance echoes Isabel MacCaffrey's reading of the poems in *The Rock* which persistently foregrounds "the interpenetration between the mind and the world" (625), concerns which animate Stevens' poetry from the start.

Other scholars have noticed a "falling-off" from the confident assertions about the poetic imagination Stevens infused in his earlier work. Longenbach opines that Stevens' last works "embody [his] final attempt to know the world, and they offer his most chilling condemnations of his failure to do so" (292). In a similar vein, Joseph Carroll writes that the incantatory power of Stevens' earlier verse falls victim to what he calls "the poverty of old age" (9), resulting in a diminishment which unsatisfactorily rounds off a poetic life lived in conditions of physical illness and emotional unavailability. More recently, Tim Morris has argued that in contrast to the *jouissance* engendered through the poetic exercises conducted by Stevens in his earlier work, the late poems move "from affirmation to its loss so quickly, that there is hardly any lingering on those same pleasures of effect that [these exercises] may yield" (161). Poetic spontaneity cedes to the plainness of statement borne out of senescence, as the late poems force the reader to confront a Stevens who not only converts to Catholicism before his death but also presents an ultimate scepticism about the reach of the imagination in its encounter with that which remains resistant to symbolisation[1]. In other words, the will to imagine what remains resistant to poeticising results in poetry which is about its own failure.

Such a critical assessment may lead one to conclude, as Perloff (1964) does, that Stevens evinces the ironic mood (of disavowal in contrast to his former confidence) in the late poetry. I want to suggest a different way of reading the late poems which balances both an awareness of diminishment and an intimation of a new form of knowledge which arrives "certain and ever more fresh" (*CPP* 450) even though it remains outside the boundaries of language. I wish to particularise this interpretation through locating two dialectical tropes in the poems collected in *The Auroras of Autumn* and *The Rock*—groundedness and journeying. Insofar as the late poems figure as poetic responses to what Stephen Burt calls "the problems of place-relations" (342), Stevens tethers the perceiving self to the particulars of place, effecting a gathering together of consciousness and its geographical embodiment in order that Being may manifest as pure presencing. If Stevens has been engaging in a poetic language which does not so much describe Being as manifest the eventual aspect of Being's breaking into language, the late poems demonstrate an intense awareness that the saying of Being is Showing, or allowing to come into appearance. For Heidegger, it is this saying which defines *Ereignis* as the event which "gives":

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[1] These reflections on the singular quality of stylistic lateness will naturally bring to mind Edward Said's notes on the subject, wherein he states that late style is dominated by "intransigence, difficulty, and unresolved contradiction" (7). As I make clear in this chapter, there are important philosophical reasons why the failed poetic approach to Being precipitates an awareness which ironically brings together Stevens' poetry as a whole.

> The appropriating event is not the outcome (result) of something else, but the giving yield whose giving reach alone is what gives us such things as a "there is," a "there is" of which even Being itself stands in need to come into its own as presence. (*OWL* 127)

The move from the early to late poetry as a transition from "the exotic to the homely" (Bates 277) thus represents how Stevens senses a (re)new(ed) awareness of how "self and earth, mind and phenomenon, share the same nature" (Harrison 667). That this knowledge arrives on the condition of a language stripped down to its bare essentials signals Stevens' most acute presentation of the self's appropriation by Being as it presences in excess of representation. This leads to the second trope of journeying, for I argue that Stevens' final statement of the self's sought-for union with the world can only be a deferred approach to it.

As Heidegger emphasises throughout his philosophy, thinking as poeticising, and poeticising as thinking, can only result in pathways towards Being. Indeed, thinking about Being is tarrying in the nearness of what Being opens up and gives to thought, never a complete objectification of it. As Heidegger writes with respect to releasement [*Gelassenheit*], "releasement would not just be the way [*Weg*], but rather the movement (on a way) [*Bewegung*]" (*CPC* 77). Releasement not only implies an approach to Being which remains circumspect about its otherness to language and ordinary thought but also releases the human being into the open clearing wherein beings appear and first become intelligible. I thus argue that Stevens' late poetry does not define absence as pure deprivation and diminishment, but instead enacts a Heideggerian understanding of how language opens the way of thinking (of Being). This precipitates an important dialectic in the late poems, wherein the more Being presences in language, the more it withdraws from it. In sum, Being is the event which opens and clears, never that which is opened within language. This clearing is Stevens' final statement of the human being's relationship to Being, itself gathering up what was implicit underneath the linguistic texture of *Harmonium*, and bestowing unity to a poetic vision earlier crystallised as the supreme fiction.

The Auroras of Autumn and the Approach to Reality

The poems in *The Auroras of Autumn* seek an intense embrace with reality and "the outlines of being" (*CPP* 365) unencumbered by metaphorical ornamentation which conceals Being underneath the extensions of analogy. Stevens enunciates this understanding most clearly in the poem "Metaphor as Degeneration" (*CPP* 381), where the juxtaposition of knowledge as an objective epistemological mode against the pure apprehension of reality reveals the poverty of the former and the mystery of the latter. The second stanza posits a final unknowable awareness of "a man in black space" who inhabits a realm which is "nothing that we know". Out of this negative awareness, Stevens crafts the ultimate litmus test for poetry: How is imagination to imagine its own "death"? Stripped of all the gaudy linguistic texture which defined the early poems, Stevens now builds his poetry out of repetitions. The sounds of the river Swatara in the poem "reverberate" and, in doing so, *insist* on the fact of its being. Indeed, the construction which stands out the most in the poem is "It is", appearing at crucial moments throughout the poem:

> It is certain that the river
> Is not Swatara. The swarthy river
> That flows round the earth and through the skies,
> Twisting among the universal spaces,
> Is not Swatara. It is being.

This unearths the dialectical movement which underpins the late poems, for the presence (of Being) obtrudes most strongly when language is pared down to a bare naming. However, just as absence reveals presence, presence unconceals absence and the No-thing which is Being itself. Stevens' construction "It is" literally designates nothing—it is ultimately impossible to pin down what the phrase "It is being" references. As Stevens is at pains to point out in the poem, the river exceeds naming: "It is certain that the river // Is not Swatara". As certainty ironically uncovers more uncertainty, Being can only be defined by what it is not.

The dialectical play between emptiness and fullness is emphasised in the next poem "The Woman in Sunshine" (*CPP* 381–2). The first stanza stresses the limits of figurative language by pointing out the limits of comparing "this warmth and movement" to "the warmth and movement of a woman". Indeed, the poverty of metaphorical designation is signalled at the very start of the poem through the sombre tone figured in the phrase "It is only". This disavowal of metaphor is duly repeated in the first two stanzas as such:

> It is only that this warmth and movement are like
> The warmth and movement of a woman.
> It is not that there is any image in the air
> Nor the beginning nor end of a form:

The poem steps further away from positing a poetic analogy between felt atmosphere of the moment and the feminine figure whose appearance appropriately recalls the animated singer in the earlier "The Idea of Order at Key West" only to suggest a tentative fusion between the two that dominates his late style. However, the dialectic of the poem suggests how this "withdrawal" from any lingering on "image[s] in the air" precipitates *the* non-metaphysical opening towards difference between Being and language. Disavowing imagery and the contours of form, the poem hollows out its vision at the beginning of the third stanza in the stark sentence "It is empty". Once again, the phrasal construction insists on apprehending an emptiness at the heart of Being, denuding poetic insight of all rhapsody. However, it is at this point that Stevens insists that Being cannot be mastered and approached through the will-to-know as represented in figures and tropes, for the significance of "a disassociated abundance of being" paradoxically makes the feminine presence "more definite for that she is". This understanding, which also performatively enacts the movement of *Ereignis* inasmuch as it defeats representational mastery by forcing the reader to confront "the taciturn and yet indifferent" openness of Being defined by the doubling of arrival and concealment, arrives not through the philosophical language of ontology, but by being immersed in an atmosphere of dispersal as indexed by the phrase "the odors of the summer fields". It is therefore the phenomenological awareness of a "strange" presence that (in a Nancean way) sustains the unfolding of sense while ex-propriating the totality of its "meaning" from linguistic and philosophical reduction and simplification. If the poetic significance of being in proximal contact with the world was crucial to the movement of the earlier poems, Stevens' late poems employ diminishment and diminution to strip down this truth to its most fundamental.

In the late poems, Stevens returns to the importance of vision and perception, testing out the potentialities of poetry to give the human being a sense of belonging in a world which increasingly insists on the fact of its being. The poem "Bouquet of Roses in Sunlight" (*CPP* 370–1) rehearses the dynamic found in many of the earlier poems of the perceived object as an *objet d'art*. The first word of the poem "Say" not only links the occasion of the poem with a speech act but also introduces a hesitancy which highlights the provisional nature of the poetic enterprise to describe the bouquet of roses: "Say that it is …". As with the other poems I have analysed thus far, lack is played off against excess, as the phenomenological awareness of the roses arrive "too much as they *are/To be* anything else in the sunlight of the room" (emphasis mine). The presence of the copula forms an insistent and an almost-suffocating chorus in these poems, as the imagination is time and again defeated by the impossibility of reducing this presence through comparing it to anything else: "things that in being real/Make any imaginings of them lesser things".

However, Stevens still accords the imagination a role in this diminishment: this lack of rapprochement is *still* an effect of the effort to imagine "the way/We feel". Rather than wreck poetry upon the barren abstruseness of reality, Stevens self-consciously probes the very devices which sustain poetic enunciation, for both metaphor and simile can only approximate our abundant sense of Being without fully encapsulating it. This results in a line which almost collapses in upon itself: "It is like a flow of meanings with no speech". Not only performing the way in which Being exceeds all ontic references in its uncharted flow through the world, the line also suggests how simile undoes itself when trying to evoke that which refuses itself to language. If "sense exceeds all metaphor", it is this non-metaphysical excess which still has to be imagined or brought to presence at the boundaries of language. Faced with the fact that Being ultimately withdraws from language, the speakers in the late poems seek a different mode of understanding, one wherein "commitment to an anti-creative plainness [paradoxically acts] as a vital and liberating element" (Kennedy 99). This liberation is characterised by Stevens as an awakening in the poem "Study of Images I" (*CPP* 395–6):

> This Italian symbol, this Southern landscape, is like
> A waking, as in images we awake,
> Within the very object that we seek,
> Participants of its being. It is, we are.

These quoted lines draw together many of the concerns of the late poems by juxtaposing participation against separation. Just as our sense of the world is enriched through our participation in the unfolding of Being which language provides, the world insists on its difference from us. This is clearly emphasised by the heavy caesuras in the fourth line I have quoted, which not only highlight the repetition of Being, but also point towards the complete otherness inherent in the ontological difference between Being and beings. This evanescence leads a reader like C. K. Doreski to suggest that Stevens' late poetry is defined by "relinquishment" (34), and Ziarek (1990) to conclude that Stevens' language emphasises the evasive nature of linguistic signifiers. In contrast to these readings, I argue that the vanishing of Being precipitates poetic appropriation. Indeed, Doreski and Ziarek's interpretations of the poetry simply cannot be sustained by a cursory glance at the poem following "Study of Images I"—aptly called "Study of Images II" (*CPP* 396)—which ends with images that preponderantly suggest union and belonging:

> As if, as if, as if the disparate halves
> Of things were waiting in a betrothal known
> To none, awaiting espousal to the sound
> Of right joining, a music of ideas, the burning
> And breeding and bearing birth of harmony,
> The final relation, the marriage of the rest.

In the reading I have been pursuing thus far, the "right joining" of "the final relation" not only defines the human being's poetic stance in the clearing of Being signalled by the appropriative event but also crystallises an important theme running throughout Stevens' poetry—the joy and difficulty inherent in a heightened imaginative sensibility towards reality.

As Benjamin Hagen notes in an essay about the ageing Stevens, the late poetry enacts austere and forbidding confrontations between the mortal self and what lies beyond the ken of mortal thought[2]. Rather than precipitating a senescent sterility and interminable stasis, Stevens continually suggests ways in which the self can grow into a new appropriation of this otherness, however minimal the resulting satisfactions. As Hagen writes, even though reality becomes something increasingly unknowable and ungraspable, "one cannot distance oneself from its movements but enter into them, grow near them, and become-other with them through the powers not of distance but of proximity" (398). It is this constant approach to the ground of Being which both presences and absences that brings the event of appropriation into its ownmost, and grounds the human being in the clearing of Being. The poverty of the world denuded of poetic richness becomes the occasion for the poetry of "the outlines of being and its expressings, the syllables of its law" (*CPP* 365). The romance of the imagination gives way to the clarified vision of old age, in which Stevens is able to convey his lifelong meditations on poetry, place and truth as revelation:

> And the poverty of dirt, the thing upon his breast,
> The hating woman, the meaningless place,
> Become a single being, sure and true. (*CPP* 388)|

It is thus in the contemplation of the inhuman that Stevens' late poems find ironic fulfilment. To write the poem of reality is to evoke a perception of "the earth again, // Cleared of its stiff and stubborn, man-locked set" (*CPP* 423). Nowhere is this desire more clearly expressed in *The Auroras of Autumn* than the eponymous poem (*CPP* 355–63) which paradoxically seeks to return the reader's perception to a state of innocence through the thinking of annihilation and absence. Canto I begins by describing the ethereal auroras to resemble the serpent, itself a reminder of the Fall and how we have been exiled from primal innocence. However, Stevens mines this image for its potential associations with rebirth: just as the serpent sheds its skin and transforms its appearance, the poem re-energises our collective perceptions. However, this perception of the serpent cannot be anything else but transient—the whiteness of the auroras "grows less vivid" and the "long lines of it grow longer, emptier". Images of absence accumulate, as the deserted cabin in Canto II finds an aerial correlative in the "frigid brilliances" of the auroras which transform and change without any human meaning. Nature's blind imperatives are brutally reflected in the cycles of life and death, the microcosm of the human family first evoked in Canto III corresponding to the macrocosmic view of Being delineated thus far. The encroachment of the wind into their house, forcefully depicted as "knock[ing] like a rifle-butt against their door", hearkens back to Stevens' use of the "sound of the wind" in the poem "The Snow Man", but with a crucial difference: this wind now seems to gather everything into its vortex of nothingness. Once again, the limits of the imagination are tested, with the father of the poem representing the figure of the artist who starts by "leap[ing] from heaven to heaven more rapidly" but now ends up "sit[ting] in quiet and green-a-day". His former delusions about the efficacy of his art are unmasked by the stark rhetorical question which ends Canto IV: "What company,/In masks, can choir it with the naked wind?". Indeed, the father is shown to be nothing more than a failed Prospero who "fetches pageants out of air,/Scenes of the theatre, vistas and blocks of woods/And curtains like a naïve pretence of sleep". As his art fails to enchant, Stevens underscores the tragic divide between poetry and reality: the "loud, disordered mooch" of linguistic trumpets cannot bring order to a Lear-like deluge, and the musicians playing these instruments are themselves faux-artists who only succeed at "dubbing a tragedy".

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[2] Stevens' temperament towards the end of his life, and the extent to which he found religious comfort in the Catholic faith in his last days, remains a interesting question. As attested to by Hale Anderson Jr., Stevens "was the most capable in knowing how to die" (Brazeau 292). This opinion of Stevens as being unreservedly stoical is modified slightly by the account given by Rev. Arthur Hanley, who recounts Stevens' baptism a few days before his death, saying that the poet commented afterwards that he was "in the fold" in as un-ironical a fashion as possible: "It was a real steady reaction" (Brazeau 295). However, Hanley concedes that Stevens remained "more of a poet" (Brazeau 295) than somebody willingly acquiescent in the doctrines of the church, and it would be going against much of the spirit of the poems to read a religious piety into them.

It is at this point that the exhaustion of the imagination turns into a regeneration, as the destruction of the "named thing" opens the portal to poetic discovery. In Stevens' dialectical understanding, the imagination must paradoxically envision its own end in order for it to remain open to a new sense of reality. This is the logic behind his otherwise puzzling statement that "the absence of the imagination had/Itself to be imagined" (*CPP* 428), and the turning point of the present poem. In other words, by stopping to "imagine winter" in summery conditions, the imagination ceases its erstwhile imperious representational grip on reality, and instead remains radically open to that which grants and clears the opening (of

Being). In this way, the second half of the poem completes the promise offered in the first canto by allowing the reader to recontextualise the auroras with a proper perspective. The auroras now appear “like a thing of ether that exists/Almost as predicate”. The auroras exceed both presence and absence, refusing to be objectified on the level of grammatical description. Indeed, what is now evoked and brought into appearance is Being, as conveyed by the construction “It is”. At the climax of authentic poetic vision, Being is nothing else than presencing, and language achieves its utmost timbre as Showing: “But it exists,/It exists, it is visible, it is, it is”. The organ of poetic sight is thus also returned to a state of “innocence”, signalling a new “partak[ing]” in reality which opens authentic possibilities for the human being to dwell in “the time and place” of the clearing Being effects. For Heidegger and Stevens, it is language which gathers and grounds the human being’s relationship to beings, placing him or her in “a whole” in which existence can be spatialised and temporalised. Scholars who persist in reading Stevens’ late poems as texts of impoverishment and failure completely neglect to consider the significance of newness to these poems, a newness which cannot simply be reduced to an awareness of the coming of spring after autumn and winter. Rather, the determination to tarry within the proximity of nothingness and absence, even to the point of imagining the dissolution of language and meaning, is the prelude to abiding in the fullness of poetic presence. In this way, the poem scripts death into its hermeneutic space—if Maurice Blanchot is right in arguing that writing is nothing else than the writing of the disaster, Stevens dramatises how destruction is integral to insight.

The Achievement of Vision in “An Ordinary Evening in New Haven”

It is no understatement to add that Stevens understood that this insight is an insight which is hard-won. Writing about his well-known poem “An Ordinary Evening in New Haven” (*CPP* 397–417), Stevens implies that the process of poem-making parallels a phenomenological reduction to perceiving the thing itself. In a 1949 letter to Bernard Heringman, Stevens states that “[his] interest is to try to get as close to the ordinary, the commonplace and the ugly as it is possible for a poet to get. It is not a question of grim reality but of plain reality. The object is of course to purge oneself of anything false” (*L* 636–37). This urge towards the plainness of vision unencumbered by images finds its force in Canto I of the poem, the first tercet stating that “the eye’s plain version is a thing apart,/The vulgate of experience”. The theological metaphor employed maps the sacredness of poetic insight onto the facticity of the quotidian, positioning “ordinariness” as a hermeneutic text which needs to be translated by poetic language. As part of “the never-ending meditation”, this text is however “difficult” to read, as Stevens emphasises that things appear not only separate from us but also as “words, lines, not meanings”. The line “appearances of what appearances” suitably uses tautology to imply how the will to interpret reality runs up against its natural limit.

As with the earlier poem “Notes Towards A Supreme Fiction”, Stevens uses the Platonic motifs of shadows and light in order to suggest that poetry does not lead us away from truth, but instead allows phenomenal reality to emerge all the more strongly, in the space of a difficult apperception of it. Throughout the poem, Stevens reiterates this difficulty of standing in the truth of reality without the consolations of the empurpling imagination: Canto IV begins with the statement that “the plainness of plain things is a savagery”, and it takes a sobering effort of will to “purge” the self of all imaginative evasions, indexed in the poem through the often-quoted phrase “the intricate evasions of as”. If, for Stevens, the mythical gods and the Christian deity are poetic projections of human fears and desires, the supreme fiction does take the place of religious belief through the awesome creative potentialities of the imagination. In this late phase, Stevens assigns an austere scope to poetry—it enables us to be in the world without illusion. Poetry reconciles us to the world of diminishment and finitude, allowing us to accept that which in essence is unknowable.

However, Stevens consistently emphasises that our “intensest rendezvous” (*CPP* 444) with reality is never complete, for we constantly voyage towards new apprehensions of imaginative truths. Canto VI underscores that “reality is the beginning not the end”. Indeed, the canto juxtaposes images of freshness and newness—“the infant A”, “naked Alpha”—against images of decrepitude to suggest how our perception of the world always “continues to begin”, enunciating a Bergsonian modality of time as continuous *durée* as against Christian eschatology which culminates in an otherworldly apocalypse. Canto IX forms the most explicit statement of what may be called Stevens’ “secular theology”, beginning with the observation “we keep coming back and coming back/To the real”. This compulsion to repeat might open the poem to a psychoanalytical reading which emphasises the link between trajectory of desire, repetition and the necessarily failed encounter with the Lacanian Real. However, in contrast to psychoanalytic lack, I argue that Stevens does envision a pleasing accord between the self and the world of presence. In other words, reality does come into being in language. Stevens emphasises this when he states that "we seek//the poem of pure reality, untouched/By trope or deviation". As Stevens states in the poem "The Rock" (*CPP* 445–7), the poem "is the cure of the ground" by purging perception of all illusion. Plainness is therapeutic, for it lets otherness manifest as otherness without accepting to reduce it to an egological construct. It is thus at this extreme point of otherness and absence that the object is most itself "by being purely what it is".

In the late poetry, Stevens crystallises the most difficult understanding of what it is to be, not through linguistic colonialisation of the object but by rendering a poetic vision of Heideggerian releasement. For Heidegger and Stevens, the opening of Being is something completely *other* to thought: language cannot encapsulate it, but instead inculcates an existential attitude of comportment towards the event. It is this attitude which then defines appropriation, for appropriation cannot be defined by subjective manipulation of ontic beings. Instead, appropriation grounds the human being in the open totality of Being by opening up thought to what which exceeds it. Appropriation thus combines the two tropes of grounding and voyaging which Stevens' late poetry often evinces. Stevens aptly sketches moments of appropriation in Canto IV as such: "A matching and mating of surprised accords,/A responding to a diviner opposite". The human being is "transposed" by existent dwelling not in an objective space which he or she can subjectively control, but in the clearing effected by the thoughtful appropriation of Being. This response towards otherness not only demonstrates how the human being lives within language as the house of Being but also highlights how poetry affords us the interpretive space to construct "capable" meanings "in the midst of foreignness".

In this way, "An Ordinary Evening in New Haven" constructs both a theory of life and a theory of poetry through suggesting how the two are inseparable: "This endlessly elaborating poem/Displays the theory of poetry,/As the life of poetry". Canto XII presents the most explicit linking of language and presence as such:

> The poem is the cry of its occasion,
> Part of the res itself and not about it.
> The poet speaks the poem as it is …

By being nothing less than the fact of language insisting on its presence, Stevens emphasises that the poem lives entirely in the moment of its utterance. Poetry exceeds representational deferral due to its enunciating the force of the present. This presencing ensures that poetic relations between the human being and world will forever be renewed in “a fresh spiritual”, expressing the opening of Being in language through the perpetuity of new insight. By appropriating the human being to the world, poetry performs a crucial gathering, portrayed by Stevens as a clearing. This epiphanic moment is delineated at the end of the canto, where the poet presents an ecstatic vision of how “the self,/The town, the weather, in a casual litter,/Together” coalesce through what language allows to come into phenomenological vision. Poetry therefore grounds the human being in the exquisite apprehension of the “actual landscape with its actual horns”, resulting in “an essential integrity” which allows the self to understand how it en-owns the world by being given over to it. This Heideggerian concept of the relations between the human subject and space by described by Brendan Mahoney as such:

> [What manifests] is a world in which there is an absence of the rigid divisions between things, in which things are themselves and more than themselves, and in which thought finds that instead of being separate from things, it belongs to them. (230)

What Mahoney misses, however, is the dialectical play between familiarity and foreignness, and between presence and absence, which both Heidegger and Stevens see as fundamental to this apprehension. To perceive truly and to stand in the truth of that perception is difficult, for it requires a mind of winter and an understanding of how the language we speak comes to us from poetic moments of “rightness” which immerses the self in a field of affective openness towards Being. The will to approach reality clearly and to seek for a poetry which can express this plain unadorned truth necessitates a paradoxical gesture, one which sees reality “grimly” but speaks of it “in paradisal parlance new”. Stevens pursues this despair through the figure of Professor Eucalyptus, the name itself suggesting an incongruity between exotic abundance and the desolations of the time and weather. Just as the figure of the dying philosopher in Rome becomes a stand-in for the poet at the end of his life, Eucalyptus comes to represent the perceiver who is determined to look at reality “with an eye that does not look/ Beyond the object”. What he encounters are images of deprivation, as represented by "the shadow of bare rock" and "the dominant blank". The poet must countenance the blankness of reality and the abyss of meaning; writing is surrendering signification to the anonymity of Being which pulsates in the space of the poem.

However, the poem once again seizes upon this absence as creative opening. The dialectic between emptiness and plenitude is evinced in Canto XX, which sketches out a renewed poetic agenda for Eucalyptus. By having "evaded clouds and men", he is left with "a naked being with a naked will//And everything to make". In this most extreme poem of autumn, Stevens dares to imagine a poem created out of nullity, in which finally "as and is are one". Poetic language must be freed from representation in order for it to open up a thinking of Being beyond the confines of metaphysics. Stevens needs to write the poems of autumn and winter so that the movement of Being into language can be clearly seen at last. In this way, the reader and poet draw near to "ponderable source of each imponderable", which in my reading is precisely Being—that which gives thought, but which cannot be contained by thought. Stevens thus seeks "the alternate romanza" fashioned "out of the surfaces, the windows, the walls,/The bricks grown brittle in time's poverty". Just as Eliot shores up fragments against civilisational ruin, and Yeats turns to the tatters and shards of spiritual truth after the desertion of grand poetic vision, Stevens must fashion an "interior" out of the ravages of the "same exterior". By hearkening towards the silence which lies at the heart of Being, Stevens' poetry is able to carve out a space in which we belong by virtue of our thoughtful circumspection of that which cannot be brought to ordinary speech. Being-in-the-world is thus both our tragedy and our fulfilment. Gyorgyi Voros phrases this sentiment of Stevens as such:

> [The self] need not try so hard; he no longer has to decide. He is part of the cry of the leaves that do not transcend themselves; he is a participant in the phenomenal, natural world by virtue of being a human being. It is his nature and his inheritance. In this poverty lies his fulfilment. It is because of this realization that the late poems of Wallace Stevens move more and more toward Nature's own silence. (142)

It is through this that the late poems invite the reader to participate in "possible" ways of dwelling in the mystery of an unthematisable world which stubbornly insists on its ungraspable presence.

In a Heideggerian way, Stevens envisions the "emptiness" of the sky which has been cleared of clouds and men to be "a clearing" and "a readiness for first bells". Stevens' use of Heidegger's tropes of disclosure and outpouring signals the poetic presentation of the event of appropriation. Indeed, there is no clearer instance in Stevens' poetic oeuvre which delineates the openness of Being and a hearkening of the human being to the presencing of language as it emerges in the form of the sounding of bells, which later intensifies into "a rumpling of blazons". I would also contend that there are few moments in modern poetry which provide the reader with such a glimpse of the poetic event. As with the other late poems, the fullness of a presence which exceeds representation (re)sounds after the space of the poem has been cleared and the purity of poetic sight cleansed of all inauthenticity. In this way, "An Ordinary Evening in New Haven" continues Stevens' aesthetic project of restoring our belief in the phenomenal world, and demonstrates what Stevens means when he states that poetry comes to fill in the place left by the death of religious conviction. Reading Stevens with Heidegger not only helps us to see how poetic language is inextricably bound with the opening of the event but also makes it clear why both poet and philosopher argue that Being can never be something either ontological or theological. Despite Stevens' putative deathbed conversion to Catholicism, his poetic scepticism results in him wrenching the poetic event free from ontotheological connotations:

> A knowing that something certain had been proposed,
> Which, without the statue, would be new,
> An escape from repetition, a happening
> In space and the self, that touched them both at once. (Canto XXIV)

Poetry abides in the mystery of the opening of Being—the passive construction of the first quoted line, coupled with the lack of definition as to the source of the "knowing" and "happening" *outside of the event of occurrence*, helps consolidate the sense that this event comes from the outside and the Other. The metaphorical resonance of "touch" designates the co-appropriation of the self and Being which bypasses domination and mastery. For Stevens, it is this event that guarantees the truth of the poetic imagination. Stevens emphasises this through the permeability of reality with fiction: in Canto XXV, the speaker notices how "what was real turned into something most unreal", and in Canto XXVIII, he states that "real and unreal are two in one". If the imagination must continually absorb reality into its sphere through abstraction, it must not result in a mimetic copy of reality which chains the self in its theatre of representations. Instead, the imagination is itself appropriated by reality and what a poetic sense of the world reveals. Indeed, poetry is ultimately a statement of the relationship between the human being and his or her world, offering us ways of seeing and existing amidst both the brightness of summer and the cold fluctuations of the autumnal auroras: "the theory/Of poetry is the theory of life". This is why for Heidegger and Stevens, poetry can never be confined to the realm of academic discourse and aesthetics. Both see poetry as "*poesis*", or a making which brings an entire world into presence. The transition to a more abstract language in the late poetry thus makes this presence obtrude all the more strongly; this is what Leggett senses when he writes that Stevens' last poems turn towards the philosophical by trying to countenance "something named "presence" to the apprehension of reality" ("Stevens' late poetry" 68).

The Rock and Poetic (Dis)Illusion: Barrenness as New Romance

Ultimately, Stevens' logic works both ways: if the "barrenness that appears is an exposing", the exposing is also by the same token a barrenness. As seen elsewhere in Stevens' oeuvre, presence is never anything solid and lasting. Just as Being and Nothing are inextricably linked in the understanding that finds "Nothing that is not there and the nothing that is" (*CPP* 8), Stevens ends the poem with a *Tempest*-like dissolution of "the visibility of thought", leaving the reader with "the less legible meanings of sound, the little reds/Not often realized". The final canto serves to drive home the point that we only ever approach "the edgings and inchings of final form", underscoring how Being presences in the phenomenal world only by insisting on its radical difference from ontic beings. Consonant with all other modes of dialectical tension which structure this great poem, Stevens adds one more contrast, that of living in the fullness of poetic revelation whilst adopting the Keatsian mode of negative capability which emphasises doubt and uncertainty to be integral parts of human sensibility. The last tercet of the poem dispels the notion that reality "is a solid"; instead, "it may be a shade that traverses/A dust, a force that traverses a shade". This ambiguous image not only alludes to the fear of annihilation which Eliot memorably foregrounded as being the central component of the European psyche but also piles insubstantiality upon insubstantiality. Non-localisable and ungraspable, reality *is* the Deleuzian difference which intensifies with the advent of each iteration of it. If reality retreats behind a veil and is nothing but the veil which dissimulates, then poetry only ever succeeds in approaching it asymptotically. The poems in *The Rock* thus constitute Stevens' final attempt to understand what reality is through building paths which send language and thinking on their ways to Being.

The trope of journeying is central to the poem "Prologues to What is Possible" (*CPP* 437–9), with the title already gesturing towards a new happening which has yet to enter into poetry. It employs the conceit of an unnamed traveller being alone in "a boat carried forward by waves" towards the absolute unknown in order to present a sought-for romance with reality. The traveller senses his inseparability from the vessel and destination—"he belonged to the far-foreign departure of his vessel/and was part of it"—himself one more figure in Stevens' aesthetic gallery of voyagers who arrive at their journey's end only through their complete immersion in the environment, wherein they find their authentic mode of being. What this late poem adds to Stevens' topos of travel is the sense of foreignness and unknowability which precipitates the journey. The traveller is thus "lured on by a syllable/without any meaning" towards an inconceivable "point of central arrival" which promises both transfiguration and annihilation. Just as Kafka's unnamed character forever remains at the threshold of the law without ever entering into it, there can be no linguistic and symbolic access to the mystery of Being as it withdraws, or indeed presences as complete absence. There is no comparison between the "likeness" of the traveller "and things beyond resemblance": in *The Rock*, poetic language trembles before the "stale grandeur of annihilation" (*CPP* 430) which nevertheless holds out for us some form of significance we must belong to. In this way, nihilation stimulates desire—even in the depths of winter, Stevens' imagination is stimulated by the never-ceasing quest to appropriate Being and, by doing so, find itself again. The almost-negligible-yet-awesome effort to give "a name and privilege" to the strangeness of experience not only reaffirms the nobility of the poetic imagination but also allows "the whole vocabulary of the South" to come into presence and, in so doing, "creates a fresh universe out of nothingness". The effort to say the unsayable thus brings the unknowable into the fullness of shining. If the environment evoked at the end of the poem is inextricably linked to the language of its being, the trope of the voyage achieves its proper significance: the poem is the pathway towards Being.

Stevens' last poems position language as a thoughtful response to that which lies outside of language. The poem "The Course of a Particular" (*CPP* 460) begins with the devastations of winter only to attune the reader's sensibilities to the cry of the leaves which emerge. If the poem "The Snow Man" self-consciously probes the limits of empathetic identification and the pathetic fallacy, this poem denies all anthropomorphic linkages between the observer and his or her environment. The cry of the leaves "is a busy cry, concerning someone else": Stevens insists that there is an absolute "resistance" involved in our attempts to understand this cry as though it had a transcendental meaning apart from the occasion of its happening. Indeed, the fourth tercet of the poem proceeds by way of negation, as Stevens highlights that the cry is neither theological nor mythological: "It is not a cry of divine attention,/Nor the smoke-drift of puffed-out heroes". If the cry remains refractory to all signification and finally "concerns no one at all", all language can do is to point towards how it is ceaselessly given over to the Other, and the otherness of the event. This aesthetic of diminishment is the animating force behind the last poems. The poem "Final Soliloquy of the Interior Paramour" (*CPP* 444) makes this clear in its illustration of the drive towards unity. The second tercet envisions an intense "rendezvous" between the self and the world that the human being fashions "out of all the indifferences". As reality presences in all its unknowability, the self responds by "feel[ing] the obscurity of an order" which defines the poetic act. If Stevens had been interested throughout his life in thinking through how poetry creates ideas of order that expressed the aesthetic accord between the self and his or her world, the last poems bring this vision into utmost clarity. The word "dwelling", which contains the interpretive crux of the poem, further underscores the Heideggerian understanding of existential grounding in the proximity (and distance) of the opening of Being.

This longed-for unity is explored in the poem "The World as Meditation" (*CPP* 441–2), Stevens' most explicit use of Homeric mythology. Written from the perspective of Penelope, who is waiting at Ithaca for Ulysses to return home, Stevens evokes her feelings of longing, impatience and hope to dramatise an ecstatic hearkening towards a moment of complete unity. Indeed, insofar as Penelope is on the inside—"the world in/which she dwells"—and Ulysses is sojourning on the outside, she represents the Stevensian self who awaits transformation by the "mere savage presence" that Ulysses symbolises. This self is so much en-owned to and given over to that which "kept coming constantly so near" that her desire is of one pitch with “the warmth of the sun” and the “trees” that endure the deprivations of winter only to come alive again at the prospect of renewal. The poem vividly realises the Heideggerian drama of poetic dwelling as a “task” that allows language to open up the space for a “deep-founded sheltering”. Stevens highlights this in the last stanza of the poem as Penelope’s wish for her husband is bound up with her “repeating his name with its patient syllables”: the approaching of Ulysses cannot be separated from the poetic projection of this longed-for union. Stevens thereby folds out his appropriation of Homer (along with the myth’s familiar themes of *nostos*, loyalty and the achievement of a deeply felt satisfaction) into an illustration of the non-metaphysical movement of the creative imagination as it continually renews itself on the basis of “an essential exercise/In an inhuman meditation”: this search is at once abstractive (from the humanistic) as it is reconciliatory. As with the paradoxical thrust underpinning many of these later poems, the creativity generated out of diminishment (“Or was it only the warmth of the sun”) betokens a complete immersion in an environment which opens itself to poetic appropriation in the same measure as it absences itself from conceptual frameworks.

Throughout the poem, Stevens insists that the Heideggerian theme of “being at home yet also of seeking home” (Cook 296) cannot be predicated upon a complete synchronicity between imaginative concepts and reality. The almost-oxymoronic depiction of presence as “mere savage” not only points to the bare fact of presence but also indicates how this fact exceeds all signification in its savagery and its radical difference from the domestic hearth wherein Penelope resides. This dissonance is carried to its highest pitch in the paradoxical statement that Ulysses “was Ulysses and it was not”—this not only allegorises the distance and difference between Ulysses as “poetic construct” and Ulysses as presence outside of language, but also points to the fact that it is in the difference between imagination and reality that poetic language tries constantly to bridge. In Penelope’s “composing” of a self “barbarous” enough to meet her husband on his terms, Stevens suggests how the self is made aesthetically ready for his or her appropriation of and by reality, which necessarily inheres in the distension of awaiting and interval. Stevens’ late vision of what the poetic imagination can achieve fleshes out what has been a constant throughout his oeuvre: the imagination opens the self out towards the world by matching internal visionary intensity with the revelatory force that comes from the outside. If the last poems seem to suggest a dimming of this intensity, this dynamic remains unchanged. What poetry now does is to ready the self for the advent of the event of Being, which comes from the outside and insists on its sheer otherness. This otherness implies that poetic dwelling in the openness of Being precipitates in affective moments of strangeness in which language constantly exceeds metaphysical and conceptual reduction. If Ulysses is *at once* what he is and what he is not (and if the landscape in "The Snow Man" contains everything that is and is not), then poetry steps away from Being in order to open up a primordial relationship with it: as Steven Davis writes *apropos* of Heideggerian thinking, "what we must keep in mind is that even in our most familiar and seemingly canny dealings with the earth there is something uncanny—about those dealings, about us—so much so that even the thought about the path of a thinking, poeticizing building becomes in a worthy sense questionable" (180). As the earlier poem also demonstrates, poetic appropriation positions the perceiver as a perceiver of nothing: it is the effort to think *out of* (this phrase implying "difference from" as well as "springing forth from") the ontological difference between presence and absence, being and non-being, that poetry can substitute a seeming which is "not too closely the double of our lives" and "intenser than any actual life could be" (*CPP* 301). This receptivity is for Stevens an active acceptance of necessity and an affirmation that we stand in the midst of an opening which grants our lives needful definition, and not a sign of failure which critics like Critchley read into the last poems.

Stevens' last poetic reductions can be linked to the "method" of Heideggerian destruction of metaphysical tradition in that both techniques allow a cleansing of vision through which the "thingliness" of objects can stand out again. For Heidegger, the question about the being of a thing is a basic question of philosophy, one which metaphysics has forgotten to ask. Heidegger's critique of the concept of the thing in Scholastic and modern philosophy works to bring about a clearing through which the thing can stand out in the mystery of its being. No longer to be defined as "the present-at-hand (*vorhanden*) bearer of properties present-at-hand on it" (*WIT* 35), the thing is not an inert object which merely stands indifferently in the midst of the world. Instead, Heidegger argues that the thing performs a gathering-together of the world, earth, human beings and gods: it is an expression of the fourfold which opens up the realm of beings. The thing never arrives to us independently of the world;

the thing first makes our sense of the world possible and intelligible. Philosophy and poetry thus restore our perception to the inexhaustibility of the object as understood phenomenologically by first clearing away all that is inessential. Language allows the thing-ness of the thing to (re) sound and reverberate. In essence, the last poems explore how “the only way to write a poem of reality … is to slip out of the fun house of [the] constructed speaker or self and the linguistic structures that support it” (Harper 36) by returning to the thing itself. The poem “The Rock” (*CPP* 445–7) starts by foregrounding the reduction not only of the landscape but also of language: the houses the speaker sees “are rigid in rigid emptiness”, and “the words spoken [about the surroundings]/Were not and are not”. Going so far as to negate “the sounds of the guitar” which formed the basis of aesthetic synthesis in his earlier poem “The Man with the Blue Guitar”, Stevens is engaged with an extreme testing of poetic vision in these minimal conditions. Once space has been cleared, the “nothingness” which results “contained a métier” which allows “a birth of sight”. The unsymbolisable symbol of the rock thereby stands out as thing in itself. Stevens’ pointed use of the phrase “like a blindness/cleaned” to describe this pared-down vision emphasises this achieved purity of (in)sight which beholds “the blooming and the musk” gathered together by the rock as “a particular of being, that gross universe”. Stevens appropriately puns on the word “gross” to suggest both a totality which opens up and how the rock stands out without unnecessary adornment.

It was thus necessary for language to undergo a reduction in order for it to be en-owned to the thing as thing. Stevens posits this reduction as a “cure” of both the ground of Being and of the perceiver, for proper phenomenological seeing strives to get at the phenomenon as pure presence unencumbered by the interpretive lenses of an inadequate philosophical tradition. In a Heideggerian fashion, this cleansed perception not only allows the rock to come into being as it is but also bears witness to how it gathers together the human being and the world, placing him or her in deep communion with the environment:

> The rock is the stern particular of the air,
> The mirror of the planets, one by one,
> But through man’s eye, their silent rhapsodist,
> Turquoise the rock, at odious evening bright
> With redness that sticks fast to evil dreams;
> The difficult rightness of half-risen day.

The thing apportions space, being the "strength and measure" of the whole wherein the human being dwells. I find no other way to understand the significance of Stevens' use of the word "cure" to the poem outside of this Heideggerian reduction and how Stevens thinks of the performative function of language in the late poems. To be cured of poetry as poetry is the necessary prelude to thinking about how language can reconcile us to deprivation and death. The paradoxical transcendence of this austere aesthetic is seen in the poem "Note on Moonlight" (*CPP* 449–50), which begins by offering nothing more than "the mere objectiveness of things". The perception of plainness modulates into disclosure and discovery, as the speaker senses "an inherent life" teeming "in spite of the mere objectiveness of things". In the imagination of the late Stevens, to see is to belong, and this "being there together is enough" (*CPP* 444). In addition, to celebrate the poverty of the imagination in its encounter with mere Being is not to espouse an ironic mode of poeticising which disavows its ineluctable defeat; it is to remain true to the wellsprings of poetic insight and its never-ceasing romance with the world.

"The Artificer of the World" Singing "a Foreign Song": Stevens and Heidegger's Challenge to Poetic Thinking

It has been my argument throughout this book that Stevens always stayed true to his investments in the scope of poetry and its inherent nobility. His moving tribute to his mentor George Santayana titled "To an Old Philosopher in Rome" (*CPP* 432–4) functions both as an elegy for the dying philosopher and a displaced portrait of himself. The poem brings together most of the important poetic themes which obsessed Stevens throughout his life. Positioning Santayana, who on the "threshold" between life and death confronts the receding of meaning into the abyss ("Of men growing small in the distances of space"), Stevens confronts his own anxieties about mortality being the absolute cessation of insight. The intellectual temptation to assuage the fear of death by contemplating "that more merciful Rome/Beyond" is rejected through grounding "the spirit's greatest reach" in "the human end". If there is a metaphysical sphere which lies "beyond the eye", the poem persists in the awareness that the two perspectives of the earthly and otherworldly can only be merged "in the make of the mind". Stevens argues that the utmost reach of the philosopher's vision, which is consonant with the poet, resides in "the afflatus", or inspiration to be had, in "ruin" and in "poverty's speech". Just as poetry and philosophy both articulate the hard-won truth of Being which cannot shy away from death, pain and suffering, Stevens solicits Santayana to "be orator but with an *accurate* tongue/And *without eloquence*" (emphasis mine). For Stevens, the truth of poetry and the imagination must finally be enunciated without false rhetoric. It is in this way that the poet and philosopher can claim to channel a collective wisdom which everybody else can affirm: "so that each of us/Beholds himself in you, and hears his voice in yours".

Amidst the broken scaffoldings of Santayana's last days, Stevens still presents the sustaining force of the external world as such:

> The sounds drift in. The buildings are remembered.
> The life of the city never lets go, nor do you
> Ever want it to. It is part of the life in your room.

The sounds of the world permeate consciousness; subjectivity can never be divorced from the world or gaze upon it as a disinterested spectator. As Santayana's life ebbs away, Stevens counters this diminishment with the enlarging of his visual and auditory senses: the philosopher craves nothing more than the "peculiar chords/And reverberations" of the sounds drifting into his room, and the climax of the poem dramatises a space in which "ever visible thing [is] enlarged and yet/No more than a bed, a chair and moving nuns". The perfect marriage between poetic and philosophical endeavours is probed in the last stanza of the poem, where Stevens comes closest to writing a final epitaph to Santayana. In lines that describe not only Santayana but also Stevens and the consonance between poetry and philosophy, the poet writes that the "design of all [the thinker's words] takes form/And frame from thinking and is realised".

By reading Heidegger and Stevens together and tracing how Stevens' commitment to poetry is undergirded by a philosophical understanding of consciousness and language, I do not suggest that Stevens' poetry can be claustrophobically "framed" by Heidegger's thinking, or that Stevens can displace Hölderlin and Rilke as the poet who validates every one of the philosopher's theories. Rather, I have been arguing that both Heidegger and Stevens exceed the framing of whatever might be considered to be "philosophy" or "poetry". Both philosopher and poet provide us with ways of thinking about language that does productive violence to the frames which divide "subject" from "object", "thought" and "experience", "consciousness" and "world", "thinking" and "feeling", and "presence" and "absence". The explosion of these artificial frames enable us not to use these well-worn concepts as objective categories through which to reductively explain away the fundamental sense of our involvement in the world, but to see how reconceptualising these concepts deepen our intellectual and spiritual pathways towards Being as *the* event which opens the possibility for all engagement with reality.

Ereignis or appropriation has been an important concern of mine in the course of this book, for it not only designates what seems to me to be the most crucial movement of/in language which links Heidegger and Stevens but also underscores how thinking about poetry and philosophy should work—not as an imposition of models of thought or rhetorical tropes on the fluidity of language, but as an unreserved giving over to the paths which reflection clears and which the aesthetic encounter with the poem uncovers. Such a mode of thinking and poeticising stays within the unfolding of the event, not in order to subject it to a totalising circumspection, but to grow into its wisdom. This chapter has focused on the late poems of Stevens in order to emphasise the poet's impassioned thinking of how poetry can provide us with hope despite "finitude [which] reasserts itself as an absolute limit" (Lehman 309). This way of reading the poetry aligns me with Altieri's approach to Stevens, which sees poetry as engendering important modes of aspectual-seeing allowing the reader to construct personal meanings expressing his or her engagement with reality. However, I differ from Altieri when he claims the last poems "heal the breach … between copulative verbs [i.e. 'is'] establishing stable predicates and verbs elaborating momentary equivalences produced by particular states of mind" (*Wallace Stevens* 207).

In my reading, what the last poems foreground is precisely the ex-centricity of Being (as emphasised by the repeated construction "It is") and the absolute divide between the poetry of Being and the poetry about Being. By focusing the reader's attention so starkly on the emergence and withdrawal of Being as an event of language, Stevens' last poems appropriate his poetic oeuvre by bringing the earlier poems into their own. The outlines of the supreme fiction are equally to be sought in "Notes Towards A Supreme Fiction" as in "Not Ideas About the Thing But the Thing Itself" (*CPP* 451–2): the imagination needs to wrestle continually with describing “the sun [which] was coming from the outside” shorn of all meaning besides the ones that both appropriate and distance ourselves from the abyssal source of poetic inspiration itself, and the crafting of “a new knowledge of reality” sustains musings about the relationship between metaphor, being and cognition which define the major dramas of the imagination in Stevens since Crispin (whose voyage is suitably recalled in the alliterative force of the line “A chorister whose c preceded the choir”). In short, the ever-present and never-resolved play between plenitude and absence provide the reader with a structural framework with which to (re) read the linguistic experiments of the early as well as the late poetry. The powerful “new sense of self” (Prothro 358) arrived at in Stevens’ late poetry ultimately ensures that interpretation as *Ereignis* can carry on after the death of the author, as the poems continually seek new readers who enter into the space of thinking they hollow out, and emerge by channelling the energies of language outwards into a sense of the world at once deeply personal and communally resonant.

CHAPTER 8

Conclusion: The Task of the Heideggerian Critic and the Adventure of Poetry's Being

INTRODUCTION: A POETIC SUMMING-UP AND AN INDETERMINACY

The publication of *The Collected Poems of Wallace Stevens* on October 1, 1954, by Alfred A. Knopf had the poetic weight of a summing-up and a gathering for its author. In a letter to Peter H. Lee just two days before the collection's release, Stevens writes that he feels "a certain amount of interest [in his 75th birthday which fell on October 2] because it at least marks the beginning of the last quarter" (*L* 846). Reading into the letter, Stevens' thoughts of the completion of a poetic oeuvre are intriguingly mixed with the implied intimations of a fresh start into defining what had always concerned him throughout his writing. However, his last letters also demonstrate how he had become increasingly circumspect on definite statements about the theoretical coherence of his poetic constructs and fictions. As he states to Archibald MacLeish on November 29, 1954:

> There are several things that are of the utmost interest to me from which I have had to turn away and if I had been able to reconcile myself to the necessity of doing this, it is all the easier to reconcile myself to the necessity of passing up the present opportunity. One of these things is to try to find out whether it is possible to formulate a theory of poetry that would make poetry a significant contribution to humanity of such a nature and scope

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> that it could be established as a normal, vital field of study for all comers. Someone else will have to do the job. (*L* 853)

One might sympathise with the critic Robert Pack, who noted in an earlier draft of an essay published in 1955 that Stevens' poetry does not really lead anywhere (*L* 863). Stevens' disavowal of systematicity might putatively negate the force of his poetic intervention through the recognition of the necessary abstraction which lies behind poetic tropes. In a vision pared down to modes of imaginative engagements which disclaim their status as existential truths, Stevens' poetry ultimately puts in suspension the categories of "reality" and the "imagination" through highlighting their inevitable fictionality. This self-reflexivity has implications for a critical reading of Stevens which aims to understand poetic speech as reflecting a deep understanding of the material conditions of existence.

For critics who follow Perloff in highlighting the lack of historical grounding in the poet's linguistic performances, Stevens' abstractions place him in a detached world of discourse which cannot reconcile poetic insight with ontological questions. Two recent articles in the *Wallace Stevens Journal* make this point: Matt Miller's comparison between Stevens and Whitman concludes that the former's "search for an abstract fiction that would help redeem life for him and his audience led him to mostly 'leave all out' in terms of the details of lived experience" (47), and Carra Glatt's reading of Stevens' various poetic personae emphasises how they realise their existence within the poems only to be "imaginative surrogates whose role is to create rather than to be" (20). In other words, Stevens' allegories about the imagination's role in accommodating us to reality are not so much allegories about this reconciliation as they are allegories about the imagination's (failed) encounters with itself. My conclusion will respond to this through a reading of Stevens' last poems which were written the last two years of his life, 1954–1955. I aim to demonstrate how Stevens' tendencies towards self-conscious abstractions signify a critical awareness about the limits of epistemological and indeed, poetic knowledge. If Stevens shies away from definite and absolutist statements about poetry as Supreme Fiction, this does not so much condemn his entire poetic enterprise as it brings out a theme I have been pursuing thus far in my reading of him: the lack of a representational ground in language. Poetic appropriation is thus defined both by an attentive openness to that which lies beyond linguistic presentation and gives poetry its unique ontological measure and by a reticence about any totalising statements involving poetry's mode of knowing.

Journeys Inwards and Outwards: Stevens' Last Poems and the Adventure Towards …

The critique of the epistemological mode appears to dominate the poems written before Stevens' death. These last poems reveal a concern with language's ability to poeticise "a fresh name" (*CPP* 474) which paradoxically lies beyond all naming. The dominant trope underlying these poems is a turning towards "reality" which is also a turning away from epistemological and metaphysical paradigms. "The Region November" (*CPP* 472–3) posits an unknowable sense in Nature that presences as "a revelation not yet intended". The encounter between consciousness and the inhuman language of the trees which insist on "saying and saying" results in a bare countenancing of an otherness in the centre of Being which nihilates all attempts at transcendence in a manner not unlike the famous conclusion to Ernest Hemingway's story "A Clean Well-Lighted Place":

> It is like a critic of God, the world
> And human nature, pensively seated
> On the waste throne of his own wilderness.

If Stevens had earlier placed his faith in a Supreme Fiction which could invigorate an encounter with reality by providing a non-metaphysical idea of Firstness, this poem places that possibility in abeyance through the depiction of an ontological alterity which exists as pure abstraction. Language encounters its own pure limit, which is turned into a critical awareness of the conditions of its representational force. This is performatively enacted in the last stanza of the poem, with its meaningless repetitions of "deeplier, deeplier, loudlier, loudlier" putatively claiming to frame the sounds of external reality within its aural edifice, only to demonstrate how imaginative language swallows its own tail. Indeed, the poem deconstructs poetry's claim for imaginative truth: the metaphorical similarity-in-dissimilarity conveyed by the simile comparing nature to "a critic of God" does not result in an increase of hermeneutical richness as Paul Ricoeur argues, but instead demonstrates a scepticism towards an epistemological position which could be instantiated outside of metaphoricity. As Derrida demonstrates *apropos* of the systematicity of metaphor which destabilises the boundaries between denotative and connotative language, "the apparently most exterior referent … does not completely escape the general law of metaphoric value as soon as it intervenes (as it always does) in the process of axiological and semantic value" (*Margins of Philosophy* 218). Stevens' last poems seem to be poems about poetry's undoing; they probe the imagination's own rhetorical insufficiency.

However, I argue that Stevens inducts the reader into an alternative awareness of the philosophical potentialities of poetic discourse. Heidegger's notion of the ontological difference becomes crucial to the functioning of this discourse, because Stevens attunes us to the poetic use of language which insists on how words remain different from themselves. In doing so, poetic language opens us up to a proximal relationship with Being as it presences in its difference from ontic beings. Poetry exposes us to the death of metaphysical meaning in order to reconstitute a thoughtful orientation towards the world. In other words, the poem is split between the language about Being and the language of Being (the double genitive being operative here). Langdon Hammer advances an intriguing claim about the differences between the "virtual poem" and the "actual poem" as applied to Stevens. For Hammer, the "actual poem" is a representational instantiation of the "virtual poem" which lies beyond words and thus remains "indecipherable and fugitive" (181). Hammer reads Stevens' self-conscious use of the signifier "words" in the poem "The Idea of Order at Key West" as indicative of such a divide: "In the one case, words function as representation; in the other, they function as indexical signs, which are part of … what they signify" (188). Stevens' poems about representational insufficiency thereby demonstrate his longing for a poetry of ultimate "reality" while being aware that words inevitably tell *of* reality. The self-conscious presentation of language's insufficiency becomes the crucial prologue to an attentive releasement towards that which lies beyond speech. The poem thereby speaks not through representational and metaphysical concepts, but by appropriating us into an event of meaning-making.

This dynamic is suitably explored in the short poem "July Mountain" (*CPP* 476), wherein Stevens foregrounds a poetic dwelling of the human being in an objectively disenchanted universe without eschatology or teleology. Insofar as the poem purports to offer a "world picture", it is a fragmented cosmos consisting of "patches and pitches". As with his earlier poems, this epistemology of fragmentation opens up the more essential question of habitable space opened up by a phenomenological thinking attuned to the unfolding of an exteriorised sense which we nevertheless dwell in. The poem's turn towards the aesthetic dimensions of existence (we live "in things said well in music,/On the piano, and in speech") is once again crucially premised upon what art gathers up as inceptual event. In the logic of the poem, the poetic act occurs in the space between the temporality of reading and a world constituted through the openness which reading throws us into. As immersion in the world the work of art opens, the philosophical significance of poetry made be sought in the reorientation of ontological paradigms reading demands. This paradigm delineates what Stevens finds most valuable in the imagination—that it brings beings into language and to become sayable, even though they arrive "without human meaning" and "without human feeling" (*CPP* 476). This is why, for Stevens, "an always incipient cosmos" is dependent upon the perceiver having no "final thoughts"—the poem's own abysmal grounding is the aesthetic correlative to the human being's proximal appropriation of Being which lies beyond metaphysics. The poem suitably concludes with a performative event of clearing and gathering which become coterminous with the moment of non-metaphysical presence—just as the poem self-reflexively charts its own concerns with the unfolding of perception (as metaphorically outlined in the act of "climb[ing] a mountain"), it pays attention to how language marks a fundamental openness that allows imagination to expand and encompass a totality of environment and existentiality ("Vermont throws itself together").

The poem "Local Objects" (*CPP* 473–4) similarly eschews the falsities of grand metaphysical claims in favour of "objects not present as a matter of course/On the dark side of the heavens or the bright". The poetic intelligence presented here does not yearn for a nostalgic embracement of "the most precious objects of home" which would entrench the subject in its outworn philosophical and poetic constructs. Instead, the poetic intelligence can still construct a habitation within the poetic word by fixing its (in)sight upon the bare presencing of objects:

> He knew that he was a spirit without a foyer,
> And that, in this knowledge, local objects become
> More precious than the most precious objects of home.

That this knowledge can only be negatively reflected in the conceptual framework laid out by poetic language accounts for Stevens' ironic formulations of poetry's limitations. By acknowledging the imagination's failure to ultimately present "reality" *as it is*, Stevens shifts the focus of poetic language away from imposing imaginative order towards its ability to create and sustain a context of relationality in which the human being is orientated towards the freshness of perceptual vision. *Ereignis* designates nothing less than the fact that phenomenological *Da-sein* finds its vision (as a statement of its being-in-the world) both enhanced and disorientated through poetry:

> The few things, the objects of insight, the integrations
> Of feeling, the things that came of their own accord,
> Because he desired without quite knowing what.

That these "integrations of feeling" almost defeat the questing imagination signifies an en-ownment, the outlines of which this book has sketched and followed throughout Stevens' poetry. As Gabrielle Starr argues, "the poem offers both a kind of 'being there' in the place it depicts and a self-conscious imaging—the doubling of perception and *poiesis*. However, this doubling … gives the possibility of a new kind of being *here*—aware of having been oneself shifted [and] moved, by poetry" (170). This metaphor of movement is given concrete embodiment in Stevens' constant portrayal of seekers throughout his poetry, not only with respect to the emotional and spiritual disquiet many of his speakers feel but also in the figures of Crispin in the early poetry and the archetypal wanderer Ulysses in the poem "The Sail of Ulysses" (*OP* 126–31). This ever-renewed romance between perceiver and environment not only gives voice to a poetic vision which sees "mind and … world [giving] form and substance to one another" (Spurr 83), but emphasises how poetic appropriation transpires as linguistic event, and not a predetermined transaction between a detached consciousness and an objectively known world. The event is therefore an adventure towards what language opens up. Stevens' rejection of a spiritual realm which can grant validation for the imperfections of earthly existence further implies that the poetic event that refreshes and renews perceptive truth cannot come from a different realm of Being. Instead, language interrupts its drive-towards-completion from within in order to suggest modes of ontological relationality which exceed the subject-object dichotomy. This might explain Stevens' intentional negations: if the ordinary concept of "reality" is abstracted as poetic signifier, this suggests a necessary opening-out of language that de-sediments metaphysical oppositions in order to give voice to the appropriative space of the poetic event. As the philosopher Slavoj Žižek argues, poetry manifests language's truth not by a facile depiction of utopia, but by allowing linguistic signifiers to "twist and turn against" (201) themselves. This ecstatic stance towards reality as poetic projection happily ensures that the Supreme Fiction, as representative of the imagination's continued quest to appropriate vital fictions, will always remain contingently open to an ever-changing and indeed, undecidable reality.

Reading as (Dis)Appropriation: Hamacher, Stevens and the "Poetry" of Poetry

For Stevens, the act of reading cannot be separated from the act of perception: both remain sensitive to what language presences and opens up. What implications does this have for the experience of reading, not as bringing to bear a pre-established sense of order to the text, but as being appropriated by the event of the poem? In his essay on Paul de Man's reading of Rosseau, the philosopher Werner Hamacher critically probes the issue of a "science of literature", arguing for the position that there can be no uncomplicated and unambiguous field demarcated by the literary speech act. As literary texts self-consciously examine the possibilities and limits of their very ontological medium, "no text offers a ground for a positive knowledge that would not already be set to withdraw from all presentation—even from a negative presentation, the exposition of its withdrawal" (185). The text therefore offers nothing more (and indeed nothing less) than the groundless nature of its images and ideas. Stevens' lifelong engagements with the poetic imagination's approach to reality are allegorised in these last poems, the philosophical point being that "reality" and the "imagination" cannot be terms which are objectively hypostasised and reified *prior* to the appropriative proximity which is opened up by poetry. Hamacher emphasises this point as follows:

> Because self and other are first constituted by language—and indeed by imparting language and by the partitioning of language—reading is never an intersubjective process in which two or more already constituted subjects could come to an understanding on the basis of a common and, for its most part, already constituted language. (206)

As Derrida puts it elsewhere, the literary text ceaselessly interrupts the transparency of its signification in order to open up interpretation by giving reading its chance. This risk of nonsense and hermeneutic loss is paradoxically the enormous responsibility of reading as a response towards alterity and otherness. Stevens' poetry provides us with a philosophical way to think about the impulse-towards-meaning, not as metaphysical construction, but as en-ownment. Heidegger's arguments about how *Ereignis* enters into philosophical thinking as a crucial way to rethink *Da-sein*'s ontological domination over Being requires that we shift our ideological positions from conceptual imposition to that of an attentive openness towards gentler and more participatory modes of being-with things and people in our environments. For Stevens, this paradigm shift is deeply related to perceptual vitality: the more poetry deepens our imaginative vision, the more we can accommodate ourselves to existential finitude and the burdens of the past. Reading a poem is therefore entering into a dialogue with language as openness: what the poem establishes is just as important as what it uncovers and fails to disclose. If Stevens can be read in a Heideggerian way, I have demonstrated throughout this book that this is because Stevens is a poet who sensitises his readers to the ways in which poetry not only brings worlds in focus, but also places us in confrontation with what escapes objective mastery. In summary, poetry displaces us by drawing us into a non-metaphysical proximity with the world as opened up by Being: reading is a hearkening towards a promise of meaning which emerges as much from a consciousness fully immersing itself in the colour of *Harmonium* as from the inscrutability of the palm at the end of the mind.

A Missed Encounter and a Possible Reckoning: Stevens on Heidegger

A final look at Stevens' scant references to Heidegger in his letters may prove revealing, and allow me to extend some speculations beyond the scope of this book. Writing to Peter H. Lee in June 1954, Stevens almost exhorts Lee to provide more information about the philosopher:

> You will remember that I told you that Heidegger lives in Fribourg. If you attend any of his lectures, or even see him, tell me about him because it will help to make him real. At the moment he is a myth, like so many things in philosophy. (*L* 839)

Lest this enthusiasm on Stevens' part be passed off as an inconsequential remark, Stevens writes again to Lee three months later with renewed questioning, his tone arguably suggesting the desire for an encounter which never was to be:

> What are your own plans? Are you returning to Fribourg or have you returned? Have you been able to see or hear Heidegger? Does he lecture in French or German? (*L* 846)

I find it at least intriguing that Heidegger is the last philosopher Stevens turns to before his death, and that these references come two years after the death of George Santayana, whose philosophical theories and friendship had been a major influence upon the poet of "Sunday Morning". Despite the mistakes Stevens makes about Heidegger's nationality (thinking he was a Swiss philosopher) and the nature of his work, these questions from Stevens sound to me like a yearning for an evental encounter between poetry and philosophy which I hope this book has fleshed out and elaborated upon. Faced with declining health and the impending shadow of mortality in those years, Stevens' enquiries may perhaps be read (in consonance with his last poems) as the desire for a new way of thinking about the theoretical weight of poetry[1], which was in the last analysis for Stevens a way of existential affirmation. Despite the lack of biographical detail behind any lasting acquaintance between Stevens and Heidegger's work, I hope that this work has demonstrated how Heidegger's thinking of *Ereignis* as the event of appropriation emerges not only as a relevant philosophical mode of thinking about/in poetry but also as the performative enactment which underlies Stevens' aesthetic achievements.

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[1] This sentiment is further implied, I argue, in Stevens' desire for a copy of Heidegger's work on Hölderlin. See his 1952 letter to Paule Vidal: "Heidegger … has written a little work dealing with the poetry of the German poet, Hölderlin … I am extremely eager to have a copy of this, particularly if there is a French translation" (*L* 758).

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