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"The Quest for the Fiction of an Absolute": The Mystic's Movement from Ancient Sacrifice to Supreme Fiction in Wallace Stevens

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Abstract

It may very well be impossible, as J. Hillis Miller asserts, "to find a single systematic theory of poetry and life in Stevens" (Miller 1969: 259). Some of the prevailing critical views of Stevens' work characterize him as an "atheist" (Pearce 1961: 415) whose work affirms "the firm dignity of the merely natural man" (Bloom 1963: 76). Jacek Gutorow argues that Steven's "interest in Nietzsche coincided with [...] his insistence on ideas of nobility and heroism," pursuing a poetic "vision [that] might be called Nietzschean" (Gutorow 2012: 88, 89). David Jarraway writes about a Stevens figured as a proto-deconstructionist, avowing "Steven's insistence on dismantling the logocentric models of belief" (Jarraway 1993: 311) in "An Ordinary Evening in New Haven," while later noting that "[t]he question of belief is arguably a major preoccupation throughout much of Wallace Stevens' work" (Jarraway 2002: 193). William Franke contends that Stevens' poems "illustrate ways in which language, by negating itself, opens a much vaster and more imponderable realm" even as the works "model and enact [his] ambiguous and finally undecidable relation with religion" (Franke 2017). A useful counterpoint to these readings is provided by Janet McCann in her claim (speaking of the post-1940 period of Stevens' life) that "God preoccupied him for the rest of his career." For McCann, Stevens' poetry "considers God as change, God as the glorified self, God as a Zen-like presence in absence, and God as imagination" (McCann 1995: 2). It is this latter idea that informs what follows, as Wallace Stevens' poems "Sunday Morning" and "Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction" reveal a mystical preoccupation akin to the Perennial Philosophy, through an effort to put Art into the empty space of "God."

Keywords: Mysticism, Poetry, Art, God, Absence, Fiction

1. Introduction

In the latter half of his life, God, or something in its place, drips from nearly every stroke of Wallace Steven's pen. But the God over which Stevens expends so much poetic energy, especially in his "Adagia" from *Opus Posthumous*, is no longer figured as the Judeo-Christian deity of his Protestant youth; rather, it is a nearly-constant presence (even a presence-as-absence) in Stevens' poetry. From his breakthrough poem "Sunday Morning" (first published in 1915), to his later-period work "Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction" (first published in 1942), this absent-but-present figure emerges as Stevens' central preoccupation, while his search for the "absolute," central," and "essential" poem functions as a life-long attempt to answer the pensive question of the latter work: What am I to believe?[1]

[1] What Didier Maleuvre calls "the nineteenth-century religion of art" (Maleuvre 2006: 302)—a project that was pursued in different ways (both "moral" and "amoral") by Matthew Arnold, John Ruskin, Walter Pater, Théophile Gautier, Oscar Wilde, and many others—may well have failed because "Art cannot resign itself to silence" (Maleuvre 2006: 303) and "makes us love this life" (Maleuvre 2006: 304) rather than pointing us beyond this world. But for Stevens, whose mysticism is less *apophatic* (contra the excellent work of Franke 2017) than *this-worldy*, art is all we have to put into the empty space, the only

The provisional answers Stevens tenders in his later poetry owe much to the tropes of mysticism, or what Aldous Huxley dubbed the Perennial Philosophy.[2] For Huxley, this is a "metaphysic that recognizes a divine Reality substantial to the world of things and lives and minds" as well as a "psychology that finds in the soul something similar to, or even identical with, divine Reality," and an "ethic that places man's final end in the knowledge of the immanent and transcendent Ground of all being" (Huxley 1947: 1). Considered from this point of view, Stevens was something akin to a poetic mystic, an Al-Hallaj,[3] a Meister Eckhart,[4] though where Stevens differs most importantly from such figures is his birth into a time and place no longer able to believe easily. However, such figures as those mentioned above never believe easily. Where Stevens most closely resembles such figures may be seen in his poetic struggle, in his assertion that, "It is the belief and not the god that counts" (Stevens 1957 p. 162). This can be seen through a close analysis of two poems: "Sunday Morning," and "Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction."

2. Sunday Morning

Stevens' "Sunday Morning" represents a struggle with the loss of belief in the Christian idea of God. Here, perhaps, David Jarraway's idea of a deconstructionist Stevens can be seen most clearly. Whereas the search, in "An Ordinary Evening," of Professor Eucalyptus for "god in the rainy cloud" (Stevens 1990: 339), and "God in the object itself" (Stevens 1990: 340), and the insistence—early in "Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction"—on "perceiving the idea" which is "Washed in the remotest cleanliness of a heaven / That has expelled us and our images" (Stevens 1990: 207) certainly lend themselves to being read as attempts to dismantle logocentric models of belief, "Sunday Morning" presents the loss and/or emptying of the Christian idea of God in terms that do not require a familiarity with poststructuralist theory to grasp.

The poem begins with a woman (a female consciousness present in many of Stevens' poems, one that often seems to function as a kind of anima figure[5]) luxuriating in "complacencies of the peignor, and late / Coffee and oranges in a sunny chair," while "the green freedom of a cockatoo" mingles with the coffee and oranges "to dissipate / The holy hush of ancient sacrifice"; her luxury is tinged with a pensive quality, however, as she "feels the dark / Encroachment of that old catastrophe" and passes with "dreaming feet / Over the seas, to silent Palestine, / Dominion of the blood and sepulchre" (Stevens 1990: 5). The failure, or refusal, of the woman to attend church on a Sunday morning, but to instead stay home and enjoy the ordinary, yet somehow transcendent pleasures of an ordinary, yet somehow transcendent morning signals a break with the God of Palestine; the dreaming return "to silent Palestine" manifests the internal struggle over such a break.

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presence we have with which to fill the absence, the only path we can follow in order to seek for the answers about existence that we crave, but may never find.

[2] Huxley follows Leibniz's expansive 17th-century use of the earlier (and more limited) term first published by Agostino Steuco in his book *De Perenni Philosophia* of 1540.

[3] Disowned by his fellow Sufis, "including 'Amr al-Makkī, who had warned him that [his mystical] experiences should not be divulged to the uninitiated," the Persian poet and mystic Al Hallaj, whose "fiery preaching of divine love won him a broad popular following" (Knysh 1999: 73) was exiled from Bhagdad, then finally executed in 922 CE (309 AH). His most controversial *šaṭḥ* (شطح) *anā l-Ḥaqq* (أنا الحق) "I am The Truth," or "I am the Divine Reality" asserted an identity between humanity and the divine that was a crucial factor in the official hostility that led to his execution (Knysh 1999: 74-78).

[4] Meister Eckhart, the 13th-14th-century German mystic and theologian, who declared the necessity for a believer to leave God for God ["got dur got làze"] (Eckhart 1857:310), died in 1328, while a case against him was being pursued by Pope John XXII at Avignon. On March 27, 1329, the pope issued a bull, *In agro dominico*, in which many of Eckhart's teachings were condemned as heretical.

[5] *Anima* (from the Latin for wind, breath, or the vital principle), is often associated with Carl Jung's concept of the complementary aspects of human consciousness (*anima-animus*). For Jung, the anima is something that transcends dogmatic definitions, a life-energy that cannot be limited: "<<Anima>> heißt doch Seele und bezeichnet etwas sehr Wunderbares und Unsterbliches. Dem war aber nicht immer so. Man darf nicht vergessen, dass diese Art Seele eine dogmatische Vorstellung ist, welche den Zweck hat, etwas unheimlich Selbsttätiges und Lebendiges zu bannen und einzufangen" [Anima means soul and indicates something wonderful and undying. But this was not always so. One should not forget that this kind of soul is a dogmatic representation, which has the purpose of captivating and ensnaring something self-sustaining and alive] (Jung 1976: 35). Unless otherwise noted, all translations in this essay are my own.

The second section portrays the argument with a second, probably masculine voice (a figure that may be seen as a kind of animus figure, as both anima and animus, feminine and masculine voices in the poem may be seen as different aspects of a single consciousness) that asks, "Why should she give her bounty to the dead? / What is divinity if it can come / Only in silent shadows and dreams?" (Stevens 1990: 5) Indeed, what good is a divinity that is only an image? If the divine cannot answer the demand of Thomas, if Christ will not or cannot show "in his hands the mark of the nails,"[6] then "what is divinity?" Instead of embracing such a cipher of divinity, she should embrace herself: "Divinity must live within herself: / Passions of rain, or moods in falling snow [...] / All pleasures and all pains" (Stevens 1990: 5).

> The third section moves on to a kind of abridged history of Western notions of the divine:
> Jove in the clouds had his inhuman birth
> […]
> He moved among us [...]
> Until our blood, commingling, virginal
> With heaven, brought such requital to desire
> The very hinds discerned it, in a star.
> (Stevens 1990: 6)

Moving from Greece to Palestine, from the many gods of polytheism to the One God of monotheism, in two sentences, the poem then asks whether our blood will fail:

> Shall our blood fail? Or shall it come to be
> The blood of paradise? And shall the earth
> Seem all of paradise that we shall know?
> (Stevens 1990: 6)

What, asks the poem, will happen once we leave the God of Palestine just as we once left the gods of Olympus? Shall our blood fail? Shall our "fiction of an absolute" wither away and we prove unable to replace or reconceive it? Or shall our blood "come to be the blood of paradise?" Shall we move into the central position to which we have previously assigned our gods? If the answer to this latter question is yes, then

> The sky will be much friendlier then than now,
> A part of labor and a part of pain,
> And next in glory to enduring love,
> Not this dividing and indifferent blue.
> (Stevens 1990: 6)

The sky will no longer divide, but join heaven and earth, becoming fully our own as the microcosm and macrocosm are united in us as ours becomes "the blood of paradise."

The fourth section returns to the feminine perspective as questions of impermanence disturb the perhaps too-idyllic and too-romantic notions of apotheosis of the previous section. "When the birds are gone, and their warm fields / return no more, where, then, is paradise?" (Stevens 1990: 6) The masculine voice responds with assurances of a permanence that transcends the personal:

> There is no haunt of prophecy,
> Nor any old chimera of the grave,
> [...] nor cloudy Palm
> Remote on heaven's hill, that has endured
> As April's green endures; or will endure.
> (Stevens 1990: 6)

No religious or metaphysical idea has lasted, or will last, as long as the cycles of April's annual greening of the earth; no haunt of prophecy or chimera of the grave or cloudy Palm (all of which are, or can easily be read as, Judeo-Christian images) will last as long as the ordinary yet transcendent reality of the earth itself.

[6] "ἐν ταῖς χερσὶν αὐτοῦ τὸν τύπον τῶν ἥλων" (John 20:25). Greek Biblical text is quoted from *The Greek New Testament* (Aland 2014).

This fails to comfort the feminine voice, however, as the fifth section professes "The need of some imperishable bliss" (Stevens 1990: 6). The masculine response is a praise of death: "Death is the mother of beauty; hence from her, / Alone, shall come fulfillment to our dreams / And our desires" (Stevens 1990: 7). Death may strew "the leaves / Of sure obliteration on our paths," but it also "makes the willow shiver in the sun / For maidens" and "causes boys to pile new plums and pears" before the maidens who "taste / And stray impassioned in the littering leaves" (Stevens 1990: 7). Death and desire are intimately related; Eros and Thanatos together weave the tapestry of transience and impermanence that is the cycle of life. Death clears away the withering remnants of the old and, through desire, provides the replacement in the new in a continuous cycle that is ultimately the cause of all beauty and all ugliness, all pleasure and all pain, all life.

The cycle of change, the whirling wheel of ripening fruition and decay, is shown as necessary by the portrayal of stasis in the poem's sixth section. "Is there no change of death in paradise?" asks the masculine voice. "Does ripe fruit never fall?" The image of "rivers like our own that seek for seas / They never find, the same receding shores / That never touch with inarticulate pang" (Stevens 1990: 7) presents death as a consummation devoutly to be wished, a return to the ultimate mother Death, "Within whose burning bosom we devise / Our earthly mothers waiting, sleeplessly" (Stevens 1990: 7).

This idea of death as a return, a reunion, is one of our most common religious/mystical ideas. Christianity gives us the figure of Lazarus in the bosom of Abraham,[7] a clear symbol of the return of offspring to its source; Taoism, in the famous story of Chuang Tzu's reaction to the death of his wife, gives us a picture of the return of form to formlessness, of birth transformed into death like the rotation of seasons;[8] the *Bhagavad Gita* shows us death as a man abandoning a worn-out suit of clothes in preparation for acquiring a new one;[9] the Upanishadic connection of Atman (roughly, the individual divine within) with Brahman (roughly, the divine totality) figures an entire cosmos constructed on the principle of periodic return.[10] B.J. Leggett puts this notion of return in the context of Nietzsche's idea of eternal recurrence. Calling the view of the poem's sixth section a "sarcastic view of immortality" (Leggett 1992: 110), Leggett compares this section of "Sunday Morning" to the *Vom Freien Tode* (Of Free Death) section of *Also Sprach Zarathustra*, with its proclamation, *Stirb zur rechten Zeit!* (Die at the right time!). Holding on stubbornly to the withering manifestations of individual life simply will not do: "Far too many live and far too long they hang on their branches. I wish a storm would come and shake all this worm-eaten rot from the tree!"[11] It is precisely the concern of the masculine voice in section six to affirm death as an agent of necessary change, a storm that shakes the worm-eaten rot from the tree, returning that rot to the earth from whence it came.

The final two sections of "Sunday Morning" seem to suggest two different replacements for the Christianity that has been by now rejected. Section seven describes a pagan scene, "a ring of men" chanting "in orgy on a summer morn" (Stevens 1990: 7). These men are "boisterous" in their "devotion to the sun, / Not as a god, but as a god might be, / Naked among them, like a savage source" (Stevens 1990: 7). Here the notion of divinity—or that which stands in the place thereof—as a source is explicit.

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[7] "Εγένετο δὲ ἀποθανεῖν τὸν πτωχὸν καὶ ἀπενεχθῆναι αὐτὸν ὑπὸ τῶν ἀγγέλων εἰς τὸν κόλπον Ἀβραάμ" (Luke 16:22). [And it happened that the poor man died, and was carried by the angels into the bosom of Abraham.] On the relation of the Abraham and Lazarus story to the notion of death and a gathering to Abraham's bosom as a return to a place of origin, see Geiger 1868: 196-201, Derrett 1970: 78-99, and Yoder 2019.

[8] "In the beginning, we lack not life only, but form. Not form only, but spirit. We are blent in the one great featureless, indistinguishable mass. Then a time came when the mass evolved spirit, spirit evolved form, form evolved life. And now life in its turn has evolved death. For not nature only but man's being has its seasons, its sequence of spring and autumn, summer and winter. If some one is tired and has gone to lie down, we do not pursue him with shouting and bawling. She whom I have lost has lain down to sleep for a while in the Great Inner Room. To break in upon her rest with the noise of lamentation would but show that I knew nothing of nature's Sovereign Law" (Birch 1965: 82).

[9] "वासांसि जीर्णानि यथा विहाय / नवानि गृह्णाति नरोऽपराणि / तथा शरीराणि विहाय जीर्णा / न्यन्यानि संयाति नवानि देही" (Besant, 1905: 33, II.22). [As worn-out garments are shed / and a person puts on other, new ones, / so worn-out bodies are cast off / and new ones are entered by the embodied soul.]

[10] See the discussion of the *Chandogya Upanishad*'s repeated formula तत्त्वमसि or *tat tvam asi* in note 22.

[11] "Viel zu viele leben und viel zu lange hängen sie an ihren Ästen. Möchte ein Sturm kommen, der all dies Faule und Wurmfreßne vom Baume schüttelt!" (Nietzsche 1988: 77).

The chant of these men, boisterous in devotion to their "savage source" (or that which acts like a savage source—recall that for Stevens, "It is the belief and not the god that counts") "shall be a chant of paradise, / Out of their blood, returning to the sky" (Stevens 1990: 7-8). These images recall the questions of the poem's third section: "Shall our blood fail? Or shall it come to be / the blood of paradise? And shall the earth / Seem all of paradise that we shall know?" The chant of these men is "out of their blood," and it returns "to the sky." These images mix with later images of the transience of life to form a complete picture of the cycle of birth-death-birth:

> They shall know well the heavenly fellowship
> Of men that perish and of summer morn.
> And whence they came and wither they shall go
> The dew upon their feet shall manifest.
> (Stevens 1990: 8)

The images of a "summer morn," and of "dew" are images of ephemerality: James 4:14 compares human life to "a breath that appears for a little while and then vanishes";[12] Psalm 110:3 speaks of youth like "dew" that comes from the "womb of the morning."[13] The image of males can itself serve as a symbol of ephemerality; masculinity is often figured as transient in relation to the permanence that is figured by femininity. The union of βίος (*bios*—the Greek term for the "Masculine" principle of that individual life which begins and ends) with ζωή (*zōē* —the Greek term for the "Feminine" principle of regeneration and the life principle which has no death) is reflected in numerous Bronze Age myths of the union of Goddess and God/Son-Lover.[14] The dying god motif found in the myths of Adonis, Attis, Tammuz/Dumuzi portrays the masculine half of a god/goddess pair as that which undergoes (and embodies) the birth-death-birth cycle; in contrast, the feminine half figures the permanent principle of life that infuses the individual manifestations of that life.

This section offers a sense of mystical union, a sense of what Lucien Levy-Bruhl called *participation mystique*[15] in "the heavenly fellowship" and in the men's ability, through their chant, to
enter, voice by voice,

> The windy lake wherein their lord delights,
> The trees, like serafin, and echoing hills,
> That choir among themselves long afterward.
> (Stevens 1990: 8)

The ephemeral males of section seven have entered (or perhaps have always existed in, since the chant comes "out of their blood") a state "where man and the world, man and group, ego and unconscious are intermingled" (Neumann 1968: 378). The participation of these men in their environment, in "the windy lake wherein their lord delights" is not merely mystical; it is concrete as well. The combination of concrete and abstract, of actual and mystical union of all with all represents, I believe, an early formulation in Stevens' poetic search for the "fiction of an absolute," an "absolute," central," and "essential" poem, and the "central" mind.

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[12] "ποία ἡ ζωὴ ὑμῶν ἀτμὶς γάρ ἐστε ἡ πρὸς ὀλίγον φαινομένη ἔπειτα καὶ ἀφανιζομένη" [What is your life? A breath that appears for a little, and then vanishes].

[13] "מֵרֶחֶם מִשְׁחָר לְךָ טַל יַלְדֻתֶיךָ׃" [From the womb of the morning you have the dew of your youth]. Hebrew Biblical text is quoted from *Biblia Hebraica Stuttgartensia* (Rudolph and Elliger 1983).

[14] These terms have recently been associated with Giorgio Agamben's biopolitical theory of sovereignty, outlined in *Homo Sacer. Il potere sovrano e la vita nuda*, where he writes of "l'intreccio di *zoe* e *bios* che sembra definire il destino politico dell'occidente" (Agamben 1995: 210) [the interweaving of *zoe* and *bios* that seemingly defines the political destiny of the West]. Agamben roots his discussion of these terms in Greek politics of the 4th century BCE, where the laws distinguished *zoe* ("bare life" or mere bodies) from *bios* ("qualified life" or citizens). In this reading, Agamben takes the more expansive term, *zoe*, and renders it dependent on (and inferior to) the less expansive term, *bios*. In my view, Agamben's definitions of *bios* and *zoe* are too cramped, strait-jacketed into the political realm while leaving them unable to carry their previously larger meanings.

[15] *Participation mystique* is the mechanism Levy-Bruhl identified as one which posits a connection between the natural and the supernatural, the individual and the collective, the life form and its environment, the localized event and a larger reality. For example, Levy-Bruhl analyzes the connection between a people and its leader through the phenomenon of *participation mystique*: "le bien-être de la tribu, sa prospérité, son existence même dépendent, toujours en vertu d'une participation mystique, de l'état de ses chefs, vivants ou morts" [the well-being of the tribe, its prosperity, its very existence, depends, always by virtue of a mystical participation, on the state of its leaders, living or dead] (Levy-Bruhl 1951: 56).

The poem's eighth and final section retreats somewhat from this sense of closure. Images of Palestine and Jesus return, though in a context that denies them any symbolic, transcendent power. "The tomb in Palestine / Is not the porch of spirits" but merely "the grave of Jesus" (Stevens 1990: 8), the grave of a man like any other, like the ephemeral men of the previous section. We live collectively as part of a lasting cycle from which we are unable, as individuals, to escape:

> 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.
> (Stevens 1990: 8)

The sense of being on an island, of being unsponsored, of being unable to escape, is in direct contradiction to the sense of mystical and actual participation of all with all described by the previous section. From this sense of isolation, the poem moves on to a final summation of the birth-death-birth cycle:

> Sweet berries ripen in the wilderness;
> And, in the isolation of the sky,
> At evening, casual flocks of pigeons make
> Ambiguous undulations as they sink,
> Downward to darkness, on extended wings.
> (Stevens 1990: 8)

"Isolation" and images of evening, downward motion, and darkness work together to complete "Sunday Morning" and its rejection of the Christian concept of divinity with its "holy hush of ancient sacrifice." The poem's ending seems even to repudiate the "natural" model of divinity of the "ring of men [...] on a summer morn." The "green freedom of a cockatoo" of the poem's beginning has been transformed into the "Ambiguous undulations" of pigeons "as they sink, / Downward to darkness."

What is repudiated by "Sunday Morning" seems clear enough; the question of what, if anything, this poem affirms is not so clear. Is this, as Leggett claims, a Nietzschean affirmation of death, of Dying at the right time? If this poem is considered in isolation, perhaps the most convincing answer to this question is "yes." Considering "Sunday Morning" in the context of a later poem like "Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction" suggests a more complicated answer. "Sunday Morning" appears, in this context, as a brushfire, a destruction that serves but as the prelude to a new creation, the death that leads to new life, new possibilities. The death is not of that which is fertile, fecund, and active, but of that which is withered and no longer serviceable (the sense in which both Nietzsche's *Stirb zur rechten Zeit!* and his infamous *Gott tot ist!* can perhaps be best understood); the celebration, the affirmation in "Sunday Morning" is of death as an agent of change and renewal, and the death of God is the death of a particular idea of God, but the affirmation is unsettled, replete with images of darkness and isolation.

3. Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction

"Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction" moves beyond a struggle with the idea of the Christian God and enters the realm of the attempt "to give art the position of religion" (McCann 1995: 93). Stevens himself considered that his was an attempt to "create something as valid as the idea of God has been" (Stevens, 1967: 435), and the three sections of this poem (It Must be Abstract, It Must Change, and It Must Give Pleasure) frequently display the strains of their sublime ambitions.

3.1 "It Must Be Abstract"

The prologue, serving almost as an epic invocation to the muse, is titled "To Henry Church," though it seems to make more sense if considered as an address to the as-yet unformulated "Supreme Fiction." The pairing of opposites in the prologue gives a clue as to its mythical/metaphysical nature: extremity and wisdom, day and night, single, certain truth and living changingness, and finally, vivid transparence all have the quality of paradoxical oppositions designed to lead the mind beyond the ordinary constraints of rational thought.

This leads into the first section, "It Must Be Abstract," which begins with an exhortation to an "ephebe,"[16] here, a pupil or apprentice, to "Begin [...] by perceiving the idea / Of this invention, this invented world," to "become an ignorant man again / And see the sun again with an ignorant eye" (Stevens 1990: 207). As Milton J. Bates notes, this is not a call to abandon thought altogether: "[w]hen the master urges the ephebe to become an 'ignorant man' in canto I, he does not imply that anyone can dispense altogether with thought" (Bates 2002: 51). But it is only through this rather Zen-like unlearning, a this-worldly version of Platonic anamnesis, that the ephebe may see "clearly in the idea." This seeing depends on "the premise that the apprehension of the real requires a supreme act of the imagination, a *supreme fiction*" (Leggett 2002: 69).

The ephebe is then told to discount the possibility of a creator, of "an inventing mind," or a "voluminous master" while taking careful note of "How clean the sun is when seen in its idea, / Washed in the remotest cleanliness of a heaven / That has expelled us and our images" (Stevens 1990: 207). This stripping of characteristics, this expelling of images in order to see "clearly in the idea" is the sense of Meister Eckhart's famous dictum, "The highest and final thing that a man may leave is this: that he leaves God for God" (Eckhart 1857: 310).[17] It is only through being willing to discard god, that Man may come to God; similarly, it is only through being "Washed in the remotest cleanliness of a heaven / That has expelled us and our images" that we can see the sun in its idea, in its purest essence. The expelling of images is followed by the death of god: "The death of one god is the death of all" (Stevens 1990: 207); however, the god, Phoebus, was nothing more than "a name for something that never could be named," a symbol merely pointing to that which can never be finally and absolutely labeled and categorized. The inability to fix the transcendent with permanent names, names that capture, names that perfectly describe and encapsulate, does not, however, imply the end of naming:

> There was a project for the sun and is.
> There is a project for the sun. The sun
> Must bear no name, gold flourisher, but be
> In the difficulty of what it is to be.
> (Stevens 1990: 208)

In naming what "Must bear no name," the narrator hits precisely on the "difficulty" involved in trying to see "clearly in the idea," in trying to leave the image for the idea, in trying to leave God for God.[18]

The second canto of this section moves on to a consideration of "the first idea," to a search for which we are moved by "the celestial ennui of apartments." Returning to a first idea makes use of the idea of cycles seen throughout "Sunday Morning," while the opposition of "celestial" and "apartments" turns on the idea of the simultaneity of the actual and the mystical, immanent and the transcendent suggested by the "ring of men" from that poem's seventh section. The "desire" of the priest and the philosopher-both figures of the poet for Stevens, for whom "The poet is the priest of the invisible" (Stevens 1957 p. 169) is linked to the "ancient cycle" of desire "to have what is not," like "the desire at the end of winter" (Stevens 1990: 208).

The third canto figures the poem as a re-creation and the poet as the creator:

> The poem refreshes life so that we share,
> For a moment, the first idea … It satisfies
> Belief in an immaculate beginning
> And sends us, winged by an unconscious will,
> To an immaculate end.
> (Stevens 1990: 208)

The refreshing of life, accomplished here by the poem, is the function served by death in "Sunday Morning." The image of being winged to an immaculate end recalls the pigeons of the earlier poem, sinking "Downward to darkness, on extended wings" (Stevens 1990: 8).

[16] A young Greek male between eighteen and twenty years of age concerned primarily with garrison duty.
[17] "Daz hœhste unde daz nêhste, daz der mensche gelàzen mac, daz ist, daz er got dur got làze" (Eckhart 1857:310, ll. 34–35).
[18] As William Franke notes, in order to understand Stevens, and the relation of his work to a thinker like Eckhart, we must begin "by perceiving the inventedness of all our names, that is, of all our concepts and of the language they require in order to be expressed. We have no word that can give us reality itself, least of all the reality of God as God-self rather than as constructed by our conceptions and inventions" (Franke 2017).

The poem returns us, like death, to some kind of source; here the return is to a "first idea," and the wings that power our poetic flight are those of the unconscious, bringing us to a sense of unity and connection as we are pierced by "Life's nonsense […] with strange relation" (Stevens 1990: 209). Is this strange relation akin to the *participation mystique* of the ephemeral males of "Sunday Morning"?

The fourth canto suggests that the answer to the above question is "yes." "The first idea was not our own. Adam / In Eden was the father of Descartes / And Eve made the air the mirror of herself, / Of her sons and daughters" (Stevens 1990: 209). The "first idea" is an idea common to the human species, a clear suggestion of the Jungian notion of a collective unconscious.[19] The claim that "Adam [...] was the father of Descartes" puts the "first idea" into a different position; from this perspective, it appears that the "first idea" is consciousness, the cogito or "I think" of Descartes' "I think, therefore I am."[20] These two positions appear irreconcilable, one maintaining collectivity and the other maintaining individuality and separateness. This is another version, however, of the tension between mystical and actual, transcendent and immanent that runs through "Sunday Morning," and much of Stevens' other work. It reflects the tension of opposites that ran through the prologue, the invocation to the current poem. It is the tension from which the new is forged. This tension of opposites is part of Stevens' method of poetry and conception of the poet as (not-entirely-willing) mystic: "The poet who wishes to contemplate the good in the midst of confusion is like the mystic who wishes to contemplate God in the midst of evil. There can be no thought of escape" (Stevens 1957 p. 225).

The "muddy centre before we breathed," and the "myth before the myth began" are further suggestions of a collective unconscious that is "Venerable and articulate and complete." The coming to consciousness is the coming to the awareness "that we live in a place / That is not our own and, much more, not ourselves" that the narrator describes as the place from which "the poem springs" (Stevens 1990: 210). The poem, representative of our attempt to make meaning, does not allow us to, in the manner of Eve, make "air the mirror" of ourselves. The air is that place in which "Abysmal instruments make [...] pips / Of the sweeping meanings" we add to the world. This is the "heaven / That has expelled us and our images."

This "first idea" works its way through the remaining stanzas of the "It Must Be Abstract" section, changing guises and forms: appearing in the manifestly un-abstract lion, elephant, and bear of the fifth canto; the "blooded" abstraction of the "mere weather" and the "giant of weather" in the sixth canto. In the seventh canto, "the giant" is presented as "A thinker of the first idea" (Stevens 1990: 212), and in the eighth canto we read that "The first idea is an imagined thing" (Stevens 1990: 213). What is this imagined thing, this first idea? In "Final Soliloquy of an Interior Paramour" we read "We say God and the imagination are one" (Stevens 1990: 368).

[19] For the English-language reader, the most cogent descriptions of Jung's concept of the unconscious may be found in *Two Essays on Analytical Psychology*. Collected Works, vol. 7, pars. 202-295, *The Structure and Dynamics of the Psyche*. Collected Works, vol. 8, pars. 263-342, and *The Archetypes and the Collective Unconscious*. Collected Works, vol. 9.i., pars. 1-147 and 489-524. Grossly reduced to the barest essentials, Jung divides the unconscious into two categories, the personal and the collective. The personal unconscious is the level of experiences which are repressed as incompatible with the activities and attitudes of the conscious ego, or are "forgotten" because they seemed unimportant at the time of the experiences in question. These experiences, memories, sensations, thoughts, feelings may be described as those which definitely occur on the individual level but which are too weak to remain long at the level of the conscious ego. These experiences may tend to group together in clusters which Jung refers to as complexes (Jung, not Freud, is the source of this now-familiar term). Jung originally thought, following Freud, that these complexes were the results of childhood trauma. Later he began to suspect that these formations may originate out of, or be influenced by, something much deeper than the individual experiences of childhood. From this starting point he came eventually to the concept of the collective unconscious. The collective unconscious is, according to Jung, the repository of the primal experience of the species. The primordial images of the human experience and imagination (Jung's original term was *Urbilden*, original or primordial pictures or images, which he later changed to the now-familiar term *archetypes*—Jung explains the origin of this term in his *The Archetypes and the Collective Unconscious*, par. 5) are stored here from humanity's ancestral past. This concept has come in for its share of criticism, from psychologists with a non-Jungian orientation as well as from biologists, and is more or less ignored by feminist and poststructuralist literary critics whose intellectual frameworks lead them to focus on the rather more libidinous emphasis featured in Freud's model of the psyche.

[20] *Cogito ergo sum*, or *Je pense, donc je suis*. The French version appears first, in *Discours de la Méthode* (1637) with the Latin appearing later in *Meditationes de Prima Philosophia* (1641).

If God and the imagination can be taken to be identifiable one with the other in Stevens, what then, is the "imagined thing," the "first thought" but the coming to consciousness of God? And what then, is the coming to consciousness of God, but the coming to consciousness of Humanity, the coming to consciousness of the Poet? "God is in me or else is not at all (does not exist)" writes Stevens (Stevens 1957 p. 172).

The poem retreats from this Romantic precipice in the ninth canto:

The romantic intoning, the declaimed clairvoyance
Are parts of apotheosis, appropriate
And of its nature, the idiom thereof.
[...] But apotheosis is not
The origin of the major man. He comes
[...] from reason.
(Stevens 1990: 214)

The unity of Man and God is put back on the shelf; reason, not mysticism, is the origin of "the major man." Thus, the pendulum swings, for now, in favor of the actual over the mystical, the immanent over the transcendent.

The tenth and final canto of this section swings the pendulum right back again:

The major abstraction is the idea of man
And major man is its exponent, abler
In the abstract than in his singular.
More fecund as principle than particle,
[...] part,
Though an heroic part, of the commonal.
The major abstraction is the commonal.
(Stevens 1990: 215)

The emphasis here is on the general over the particular, the "idea of man" rather than the "exponent," the type or representative, "major man." The "idea" of man is to be seen clearly in the commonality of man; to expel images of individual men and to see the idea of collective Man is analogous to Eckhart's leaving of god for God; this is the lesson of Death, "the mother of beauty" in "Sunday Morning." From this vantage point, Man, as an abstraction, is the "first idea."

3.2 "It Must Change"

The second section, "It Must Change," deals with the themes of the undesirability of stasis and the necessity of change that were dealt with earlier in "Sunday Morning." Images of budding sexuality, fecundity and fruition, are juxtaposed with images of the worn-out, the withering, the decaying. "Italian girls [with] jonquils in their hair" (Stevens 1990: 216) are watched by an "old seraph" (Stevens 1990: 215), at once an angel-symbol of the "worn-out" Christian religion—and a fossil shell. The narrator speaks of "the distaste we feel for this withered scene" (Stevens 1990: 215). The second canto gives us the ridiculous image of a President ordaining the bee to be immortal, attempting, through the highest measure of human power and authority, to make permanent that which is ephemeral, while the third canto considers the classic dilemma of life and art—Art is long, and our life is short[21]—in its treatment of "The great statue of the General Du Puy" (Stevens 1990: 217). The "permanence" of the "inhuman bronze" of the statue "made the General a bit absurd," but in the end, "Nothing had happened because nothing had changed [and] the General was rubbish in the end" (Stevens 1990: 218). Permanence is not the human lot; change is, in the cycle of development, decay, and death.

The fourth canto returns to the theme of opposites. "Two things of opposite natures seem to depend / On one another [...] / This is the origin of change" (Stevens 1990: 218). Change resulting from a meeting of opposites is at the root of Taoism:

[21] "Die Kunst ist lang! Und kurz ist unser Leben" (Goethe. 1990: 106, ll. 558–59). Goethe here reverses the ancient emphasis of Hippocrates of Cos (460–370 BCE): "Ὁ βίος βραχύς, ἡ δὲ τέχνη μακρή" (Hippocrates, 1931: 98). [Life is short, and art is long.]

Tao produced the One.
The One produced the two.
The two produced the three.
And the three produced the ten thousand things.
(Lao Tzu 1963: 176)

It is also at the root of the hermetic tradition of alchemy, in which the figure of Mercurius, the divine androgyne who both unites and is united, serves as a figuration for the One and the Many; and it is deeply ingrained in the dualism that the Judeo-Christian tradition inherited from Persian Zoroastrianism. The dependence of "Two things of opposite natures / On one another" is a basic mystical and mythical idea; Stevens' frequent use of this idea lends him easily to being interpreted as part of this tradition. Later lines in this canto reinforce this interpretation:

The partaker partakes of that which changes him.
The child that touches takes character from the thing,
The body, it touches. The captain and his men
Are one and the sea and the sailor are one.
(Stevens 1990: 219)

Clearer statements of the *participation mystique* are not easily to be found in Stevens or even in the writings of Eckhart. These lines are in the territory of the famous formulation of the *Chandogya Upanishad*: तत्त्वमसि, *tat tvam asi*, that thou art.[22]

The fifth canto returns at once to a consideration of particularity; this back and forth movement between the transcendent and the immanent, between the general and the particular, is typical of Stevens' approach throughout this poem. "On a blue island in a sky-wide water" (Stevens 1990: 219) a dead planter's house has fallen. This island image recalls the island image and the images of isolation to which "Sunday Morning" returned after its own ecstatic flirtation with the *participation mystique*.

The sixth canto returns the pendulum, but this time in a mocking and derisive manner. The sparrow invites an egotistic kind of participation, saying "Be thou me [...] to the crackled blade" (Stevens 1990: 220). The "bloody wren," the "felon jay," and the "jug-throated robin" all echo this call, filling the scene with an "idiot minstrelsy" (Stevens 1990: 220). Even this sound, this idiot minstrelsy is subject to the law of change, however: "It is / A sound like any other. It will end."

Canto seven reaffirms the rejection of the Christian myth outlined in "Sunday Morning": We have not the need of any paradise, / We have not the need of any seducing hymn" (Stevens 1990: 221). The problem here, however, is much like that of the naming that which must remain unnamed from the poem's first section: what is a poem if not a kind of seducing hymn? The poem-as-seducing-hymn idea is reinforced through the rest of this canto by the use of images of "lilacs," "easy passion," and "ever-ready love." The motif of chanting is revisited in the figure of the "ignorant man, / Who chants by book, in the heat of the scholar, who writes / The book, hot for another accessible bliss" (Stevens 1990: 221). The specifically sexual context of the chanting here provides an interesting for comparison to the chanting of the "ring of men" in "Sunday Morning." There, the men "chant in orgy on a summer morn" (Stevens 1990: 8), while here the chanting is in the context of being "hot for another accessible bliss." Bliss is placed in the context of the interdependence of "Two things of opposite natures" (Stevens 1990: 218), as the figures here given are the "ignorant man" and "the scholar," and Bliss is, in at least one of its aspects, specifically sexualized, figured as the meeting of "two lovers / That walk away as one in the greenest body" (Stevens 1990: 218).

[22] "स य एषोऽणिमैतदात्म्यमिदँ सर्वं तत्सत्यँ स आत्मा तत्त्वमसि श्वेतकेतो" (Olivelle 1998: 252). [That which is the subtlest essence is the true Self of everything. That is the Truth. That is the Atman (Self). That *you* are, Svetaketu.] The formula तत्त्वमसि or *tat tvam asi* appears nine times, at 6.8.7, 6.9.4, 6.10.3, 6.11.3, 6.12.3, 6.13.3, 6.14.3, 6.15.3, and 6.16.3.

The eighth canto brings a bride, Nanzia Nunzio, "Alone and like a vestal long-prepared" (Stevens 1990: 222) to confront Ozymandias, the famous figure of mortal hubris from Shelley. Ozymandias may also serve here a symbol of the ultimate human poetic ambition, perhaps a figure for the "absolute," central," and "essential" poem; thus, in stripping naked, and asking Ozymandias to "Speak to me that, which spoken, will array me / In its own only precious ornament" (Stevens 1990: 222), and in asking to be set on "the spirit's diamond coronal" (Stevens 1990: 222), Nanzia Nunzio is asking for direct access to Truth, a transparent-to-the-transcendent gateway to the "first idea." Ozymandias' response, "the bride / Is never naked. A fictive covering / Weaves always glistening from the heart and mind" (Stevens 1990: 222), declares the impossibility of such direct access. "A fictive covering" always interposes itself between subject and object, weaved "from the heart and mind" of the subjective consciousness. The fiction of an absolute is as close as we can approach to an absolute in this formulation.

Canto nine considers the movement of the poem between the particular and the general, the immanent and the transcendent:

> The poem goes from the poet's gibberish to
> The gibberish of the vulgate and back again.
> Does it move to and fro or is it of both
> At once?
> (Stevens 1990: 222-23)

The poet, the creator-figure, the shadowy god-figure, is elided, evading us, "as in a senseless element" (Stevens 1990: 223). The poet seeks to find the transcendent in the immanent, the general in the particular, trying "by a peculiar speech to speak / The peculiar potency of the general" (Stevens 1990: 223). In playing on the senses of "peculiar" as particular and strange or uncanny, these lines play on the mystical relation of one and many, of concrete and abstract. The "peculiar speech" of the poet takes on an incantatory quality, becomes chant-like, recalling once again the "ring of men" of "Sunday Morning," with their "chant of paradise, / Out of their blood, returning to the sky" (Stevens 1990: 7-8). Viewed in this context, "The peculiar potency of the general" is a numinous, "divine" potency, another figure for the absolute.

The necessity of the cycle of change, whether formulated as the birth-death-birth cycle of "Sunday Morning," or as the concrete-abstract-concrete cycle implicit in "Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction," is reaffirmed in the tenth canto. "The freshness of transformation is / The freshness of a world. It is our own, / It is ourselves, the freshness of ourselves" (Stevens 1990: 224). Images of "a will to change," and a "volatile world, too constant to be denied," play on the themes of permanence-in-impermanence and of the interplay of opposites; the constancy of volatility is the second principle of the Supreme Fiction, It Must Change. If it does not change, it will, like the notions of divinity described in the third section of "Sunday Morning," die, and its blood will "fail" as it ossifies.

3.3 "It Must Give Pleasure"

The third section, "It Must Give Pleasure," begins, as does "Sunday Morning," with a dismissal of Christianity. Singing at "exact, accustomed times," wearing the "mane of a multitude," and exulting with its "great throat," is a "facile exercise" (Stevens 1990: 224). The real trick, "the difficultest rigor," is to catch from the "Irrational moment its unreasoning" (Stevens 1990: 225). The argument here is for private experience freed from the constraints of a rational approach to "the image of what we see" (Stevens 1990: 225). This freedom, this release from rationally ordered vision dependent upon pre-existing concepts, constructs, and conceptions, is the impetus behind the Genesis-like opening: "Begin, ephebe, by perceiving the idea" in order to "become an ignorant man again / And see the sun again with an ignorant eye / And see it clearly in the idea of it" (Stevens 1990: 207). Becoming ignorant again is figured as an anamnesis, an un-forgetting of an unconscious "knowledge" outside the realm of rational, conscious constructs. Here again is Eckhart's leaving of god for God, figured as a leaving of concepts for something closer to "the image of what we see." Even here, however, we are prevented from achieving the kind of transparency to transcendence for which Nanzia Nunzio seeks: the "fictive covering" is present in the perception of the image of what we see. The filter of subjectivity interposes itself at every turn.

This third section continues its play of opposing forces, introducing in the second canto a "blue woman," arguably a goddess- or muse-figure, who stands apart from images of fecundity and sexuality: "sexual blossoms," "summer, growing fragrant in the night" (Stevens 1990: 225).

The third canto merges the Christian and classical Pagan deities of "Sunday Morning," giving us the "ancient forehead hung with heavy hair" (Stevens 1990: 226), combining Christ and Orpheus in the figure of a "dead shepherd who brought tremendous chords from hell / And bade the sheep carouse" (Stevens 1990: 227). This raises, only to once again discard, traditional images of divinity, traditional Supreme Fictions that no longer serve their function because they have not changed. Like General Du Puy and his bronze statue, "Nothing had happened because nothing had changed [...] [and] the General [read Christ/Jove/name of deity here] was rubbish in the end" (Stevens 1990: 218).

The pairing of opposites continues in cantos four through six, as we move from the "mystic marriage" of a "great captain and the maiden Bawda" (a Nietzschean pairing of Apollo and Dionysus, with the captain being loved as "the sun" and Bawda-Bawd/Bawdy-serving as a chthonic earth-figure) to the pairing of Canon Aspirin and his sister. The sister is described as a simple soul, satisfied and uncomplicated, "rejecting dreams," and demanding of sleep "Only the unmuddled self of sleep" (Stevens 1990: 228) for her children. The Canon has a mystic experience of the most profound type, experiencing a "nothingness [...] a point / Beyond which thought could not progress as thought" (Stevens 1990: 229). This experience to the point where "He had to choose," and what he chooses is not exclusion, not the particular, the immanent, the local, but inclusion, the general, the transcendent, the universal, "the whole, / The complicate, the amassing harmony" (Stevens 1990: 229). In going beyond the point at which rationality, thought, must stop, the Canon succeeds, perhaps, where Nanzia Nunzio (and by extension, we the readers) could not. The Canon goes beyond the "fictive covering / [...] always glistening from the heart and mind" (Stevens 1990: 222), that prevents a transparent access to "the whole."

The sixth canto gives us a clue, perhaps, to how the Canon succeeds—by discovering rather than imposing, by including everything (in the sense of somehow managing to experience the whole all at once, taking in at once the entire Kantian sensuous manifold from which Nanzia Nunzio and the rest of us must bracket a manageable portion) rather than excluding anything: "To impose is not /To discover," but "to discover," and "Not to impose, not to have reasoned at all," no matter how difficult that may prove to be, "is possible, possible, possible. It must be possible" (Stevens 1990: 230). The desperate longing in the repeated "possible" is the longing to find "the real," to be stripped of every fiction except "The fiction of an absolute" (Stevens 1990: 230). But how to find the real, how to find, to discover rather than impose, the fiction (in the sense of a thing made) of an absolute? This is again the paradox of naming the unnamable, of claiming that "We have not the need of any seducing hymn" (Stevens 1990: 221), a poem that is a kind of seducing hymn. This paradox is itself the center of a poem that seeks a center, a fiction of an absolute.

The question of the eighth canto, "What am I to believe?" (Stevens 1990: 230), leads the way back from the heightened mysticism of the previous cantos toward a renewed consideration of the particular, the immanent, the local. Men and birds are considered in their activities, in their "Mere repetitions," and these repetitions (as well the repeating figures, the men and birds themselves) are each considered as "A thing final in itself and, therefore, good: / One of the vast repetitions final in / Themselves and, therefore, good" (Stevens 1990: 232). The poem comes to a Nietzschean affirmation of recurrence with its "merely going round is a final good," and its suggestion that the "man-hero" is "he that of repetition is most master" (Stevens 1990: 232).

The tenth canto, in the figure of the "Fat girl, terrestrial," finds its way back to the discovery of the fiction of an absolute. The Fat girl, whom the narrator claims should be named "flatly" with no waste of words, holding her to herself, becomes "the soft-footed phantom, the irrational / Distortion" (Stevens 1990: 232-33). There, the poem seems to find an answer to the question of belief, and it is an idea that has been weaved through the poem's own discourse from the beginning: "the more than rational distortion, / The fiction that results from feeling" (Stevens 1990: 233) is the key. The willingness to exist in a state of negative capability—to accept that sometimes what we are seeking is not that which reason will impose but that which the "irrational," or the unconscious, may discover—can bring us to that "fiction of an absolute" that will, in and for its time, prove a workable narrative. Here again, however, the theme of constant change returns: "Pleased that the irrational is rational," the narrator says "I shall call you by name, my green, my fluent mundo. / You will have stopped revolving except in crystal" (Stevens 1990: 233). The "Fat girl, terrestrial," the earth as Gaia, as goddess, as female figuration of permanence in impermanence is presented in an image of fixed motion, of revolving stasis. The "fiction of an absolute" may be figured in much the same way, as a fluid fixity, as a fiction that must be continually changed, adapted, reshaped and reformed to serve the needs of each new generation, each new "ring of men" (and women).

The poem concludes with an image of unity and conflict, "a war between the mind / And sky" (Stevens 1990: 233). This war "never ends," yet the two warring parties are united:

> The two are one.
> They are a plural, a right and left, a pair,
> Two parallels that meet if only in
> The meeting of their shadows.
> (Stevens 1990: 233)

The fictive hero becomes real, and the soldier in this war of mind and sky "gladly [...] dies" with "proper words," or "lives on the bread of faithful speech" (Stevens 1990: 234).

4. Conclusion

What, after the journey through these poems, can be understood in this ending? Our "proper words," our "bread of faithful speech," are the sustaining fictions with which we live or because of which we die. In his attempt "to give art the position of religion," Stevens attempts to discover, through art, through "proper words," a new supreme fiction of the kind that the worn-out Christianity and the long-dead paganism of both "Sunday Morning" and "Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction" describe. Art, as both a set of objects and as an activity that, if given the opportunity, raises us out of ourselves for tantalizingly brief, yet intensely felt and long-remembered moments, reminds us that we are somehow part of something greater than ourselves—even if that something is illusory and mythical. Art is the concrete expression of the myths—the Supreme Fictions—we must have in order to continue with our fragmented existence. Art is of necessity an attempted expression of the transcendent—even so-called "realist" art, focusing as it does on the particular and the local, raises the viewer/reader/hearer out of his or her narrow and individual frame of reference, providing, for a brief moment, contact with that which is Other. Art may not do something so simple as merely "hold, as 'twere, the mirror up to nature" (Shakespeare 2002, *Hamlet* 3.2.22: 1367), but it does "return to the wisdom of nature, […] a wisdom no longer composed of theories, but which is one thing, a whole, not making unity from variety, but rather creating variety from unity" (Plotinus 1984: 252, 254).[23] Art "gives us an immediate presence or presentation of ontological meaning. It reveals in a more concentrated or intense way what ordinary life reveals in its expressive aspects" (Falck 1989: 122). As William Franke notes, art—and the realm of the Humanities more generally

> does not aim to give us just another capability for manipulating the world after our own designs, so as to make it conform yet more conveniently to our wishes or "objectives": it aims to give us another world, in fact, infinite worlds. Rather than striving to achieve preconceived objectives, we advance toward human intelligence through an intensely energetic letting be, and in doing so we ourselves are changed. (Franke 2015: 6)

It is through just such "an intensely energetic letting be" that Stevens approaches a "Poetry [that] is a means of redemption" (Stevens 1957 p. 160), and through which Stevens seeks a new "fiction of an absolute," pursuing (to adapt Pascal) a reason that reason does not know,[24] though a poetry that attempts to transcend its own isolation, put its readers in touch with all that is Other, without and within, and fill the empty space(s) of an absent divine. This may, in fact, be the entire *raison d'etre* of all forms of literature, to put us in touch with all that is other without us, and within us:

> The success or failure of individuals to connect with a larger whole, the success or failure to connect the self with the Other without or within, *these* have been perennial problems in literature—and in life. Our literatures have portrayed our attempts, and have been our attempts, to transcend—through a connection to that which is Other—our differing states of fragmentation, isolation, and overdetermination by forces beyond our understanding and control. (Bryson 2019: 36)

But even while arguing that his project of moving art into the place of traditional religion resonates with mystic themes, it is important to acknowledge that Stevens' work exceeds the rational boundaries that any analysis (the present analysis included) can attempt to impose.

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[23] "ὁ τεχνίτης πάλιν αὖ εἰς σοφίαν φυσικὴν ἔρχεται, […] οὐκέτι συντεθεῖσαν ἐκ θεωρημάτων, ἀλλ᾽ ὅλην ἕν τι, οὐ τὴν συγκειμένην ἐκ πολλῶν εἰς ἕν, ἀλλὰ μᾶλλον ἀναλυομένην εἰς πλῆθος ἐξ ἑνός" (Plotinus, 1984: 252, 254 lines 5–9).

[24] "Le coeur a ses raisons que la raison ne connaît point" (Pascal 1904: 201, *Pensée* 277). [The heart has reasons that reason does not know.]

If it is impossible "to find a single systematic theory of poetry and life in Stevens," perhaps that is because a single systematic theory was precisely what he tried to avoid. Stevens' path is one of *unlearning* in order to *learn*: "Begin, ephebe, by perceiving the idea / [...] / You must become an ignorant man again." While it is in some sense a contradictory project to try to rationally understand a mystic even as a mystic, our guiding light may be "the more than rational distortion, / The fiction that results from feeling" (Stevens 1990: 233), the realization that the choice is not "a choice / Between, but of" (Stevens 1990: 229), a choice to "include the things / That in each other are included, the whole, / The complicate, the amassing harmony" (Stevens 1990: 229).

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