



The Philosophical Significance of a Poem (On Wallace Stevens)

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# XI\*—THE PHILOSOPHICAL SIGNIFICANCE OF A POEM

(On Wallace Stevens)

by Simon Critchley

Perhaps it is of more value to infuriate  
philosophers than to go along with them

(Wallace Stevens)

## I

What is the relation between our words and the world to which those words seem to refer? What is the relation between our thoughts and the things which those thoughts might be said to be about?

Such is perhaps the central question of philosophy, that can be redescribed in different ways depending on what historical moment one chooses to address and what theoretical paradigm one chooses to pose that question within. For the Pre-Socratic Parmenides, it is the question of the sameness between thought and Being, or between thinking and that which is; for Plato, it is the correspondence between the intellect and the forms; for Aquinas, it is the *adaequatio* between the intellect and things; for Descartes and post-Cartesian philosophy, it becomes the basic question of modern epistemology: namely, what is the relation between the subject and the objects that appear to the subject, or again what is the relation between our mental representations and that which they are intended to represent, or again what is the relation between our conscious intentions and the objects of those intentions?

Such is also the basic question of truth insofar as the latter supposes a sameness, homoiosis, adequation or correspondence between thought and that which thought is about, an identity between two terms of a relation, the inner and the outer. The basic advance of Kantian and neo-Kantian epistemologies is that they do

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not suppose, as is supposed by both Plato and Descartes in quite different ways, that in order for knowledge to be possible there must be a correspondence between thoughts or mental representations and things in themselves, whether the realm of forms, the metaphysical realities of the soul, God and material substance, or simply a belief in the radical independence of reality from the mind, what Wilfrid Sellars calls the Myth of the Given. Rather that which is true is that which is *taken* to be true, i.e. that which appears to a subject. Now, that which so appears might indeed refer to a thing in itself, but we can never be in a position to *know* this fact independently of how that fact *appears* to us. Thus, on a Kantian picture, the realm of sensibility is our access to a world that is indeed real for us, but that world is always already shot through with conceptual content, it is articulated as such through the categories of the understanding and is dependent upon the spontaneity of the subject. This is why 'The transcendental idealist is, therefore, an empirical realist'.<sup>1</sup>

Heidegger's thinking begins from a critical deepening of this Kantian picture. According to Heidegger, Kantian epistemology is based upon an unquestioned philosophy of the subject understood as consciousness and a founding subject/object dualism, which rests upon a false ontology of what he calls the present-at-hand (*Vorhandenheit*). Roughly and readily, the present-at-hand is the theoretical or representational attitude towards objects that has allowed human beings to pass over the phenomenon of the world as the practical and meaningful context of our everyday existence. Thus, for Heidegger, the traditional problems of epistemology—say, the problem of scepticism, whether concerning other minds or the external world—are pseudo-problems generated by an unquestioned traditional ontology of subjectivity that stands in need of what Heidegger calls *Destruktion*. But although Heidegger criticizes traditional philosophical formulations of the relation between words and world, or thought and things, he still works with a concept of truth reformulated as *aletheia* (unconcealment), which supposes at least the question of the relation of the inner and the outer, even when the terms of subject and object have been transposed into Dasein and World or *Mensch* and *Sein*.<sup>2</sup>

1. *Critique of Pure Reason*, A371.

In this paper, however, I want to try and show how poetry and specifically the reading of a particular poem might illuminate this persistent philosophical problem in interesting and perhaps unforeseen ways. The poem I have chosen for this purpose is by the American poet Wallace Stevens (1879–1955), entitled 'The Idea of Order at Key West', written in 1934 and included in Stevens's second collection of poems, *Ideas of Order* (1936). My modest aim in this paper is to show how this classical philosophical problem is transposed poetically in order to illuminate the possible philosophical significance of poetry. In Wallace Stevens's vocabulary, that I will explain presently, the relation between words and world or thought and things is redescribed as the relation between *imagination* and *reality*. Literary *cognoscenti* will realise that this is hardly a neutral choice of a poetic subject, for Stevens is certainly the most philosophically self-conscious and, in my view, philosophically most profound of modern poets, and 'The Idea of Order' is widely considered to be one of his finest poems. Although Stevens did attempt to write philosophy (with, it must be said, mixed results),<sup>3</sup> the reason why poetry rather than philosophy

2. For a powerful defence of Heidegger's critique of epistemology, that is particularly interesting on the socio-political consequences of the epistemological construal of the self as disengaged and punctual, see Charles Taylor 'Overcoming Epistemology', in *After Philosophy. End or Transformation?*, eds. K. Baynes, J. Bohman & T. McCarthy (MIT Press, Cambridge Mass., 1987), pp. 464–88. Taylor writes,

What you get underlying our representations of the world—the kind of things we formulate, for instance, in declarative sentences—is not further representations but rather a certain grasp of the world that we have as agents in it. This shows the whole epistemological construal of knowledge to be mistaken. (p. 477)

To my mind, although Heidegger is not mentioned by name, a similar deepening of the Kantian epistemological picture is presented by John McDowell in *Mind and World* (Harvard University Press, Cambridge Mass., 1994). McDowell borrows Aristotle's notion of second nature and Hegel's notion of *Bildung* in order to try and escape the traditional predicament of philosophy, namely the epistemological construal of how to relate thought to things and mind to world. McDowell implicitly borrows at least four Heideggerian themes (via Gadamer's account of them in *Truth and Method*): (i) the unintelligibility of scepticism (p. 113), which recalls the argument of Paragraph 44 of *Being and Time* (trans. J. Macquarrie & E. Robinson, [Blackwell, Oxford, 1962], p. 271–2); (ii) the attempt to construe experience as 'openness to the world' which recalls Heidegger's notions of *Offenheit* and *Lichtung*; (iii) the idea that human life in the world is structured environmentally (p. 115), which recalls Heidegger's idea that *Welt* is first and foremost an *Umwelt*; and (iv) the claim that language is the repository of tradition (p. 126), which recalls Heidegger's ideas about historicity.

3. See in particular his disappointingly associative 1951 University of Chicago lecture, 'A Collect of Philosophy', in *Opus Posthumous* (revised, enlarged and corrected edition, edited by Milton J. Bates [Faber, London, 1989], pp. 267–80. [Hereafter OP.] For an intriguing insight into Stevens's uncertainty about how to finish the published version of this lecture (he wrote three separate endings for it), see Peter A. Brazeau, "'A Collect of Philosophy': The Difficulty of Finding What Would Suffice", in *Wallace Stevens. A Celebration*, eds. F. Doggett & R. Buttel (Princeton University Press, Princeton, 1980), pp. 46–56.

is the medium in which Stevens chooses to express his philosophical thoughts can perhaps be linked to Stevens self-conscious attachment to the aesthetic ambitions of romanticism. That is to say, the belief that art is the best medium for attaining the fundamental ground of life and that the problems of modernity can be addressed and even reconciled through the creation of a critically self-conscious artwork, what Friedrich Schlegel saw as the great novel of the modern world.<sup>4</sup>

## II

I would like to begin by reading the whole poem and then work through it seriatim, stanza by stanza.

She sang beyond the genius of the sea.  
The water never formed to mind or voice,  
Like a body wholly body, fluttering  
Its empty sleeves; and yet its mimic motion  
Made constant cry, caused constantly a cry,  
That was not ours although we understood,  
Inhuman, of the veritable ocean.

The sea was not a mask. No more was she.  
The song and the water were not medleyed sound  
Even if what she sang was what she heard,  
Since what she sang was uttered word by word.  
It may be that in all her phrases stirred  
The grinding water and the gasping wind;  
But it was she and not the sea that we heard.

For she was the maker of the song she sang.  
The ever-hooded, tragic-gestured sea  
Was merely a place by which she walked to sing.  
Whose spirit is this? we said, because we knew  
It was the spirit that we sought and knew  
That we should ask this often as she sang.

4. Stevens's debt to romanticism has been extensively documented, but two major secondary sources can be noted. First, Harold Bloom's impressive, if idiosyncratic, *Wallace Stevens. The Poems of Our Climate* (Cornell University Press, Ithaca, 1977), which traces Stevens's poetics back to their American roots in Emerson and Whitman. Second, Helen Vendler's rich, detailed and persuasive book, *On Extended Wings. Wallace Stevens' Longer Poems* (Harvard University Press, Cambridge Mass., 1969), which links Stevens back to romantic precursors, notably Keats. In this regard, see also Vendler's 'Stevens and Keats' 'To Autumn"', in *Wallace Stevens. A Celebration*, op.cit. pp. 171-95. Vendler does not simply claim Stevens as a romantic, but rather, and rightly, sees his poetry and poetics as a rather pensive and uncertain debate with the ambitions of that tradition.

If it was only the dark voice of the sea  
 That rose, or even coloured by many waves;  
 If it was only the outer voice of sky  
 And cloud, of the sunken coral water-walled,  
 However clear, it would have been deep air,  
 The heaving speech of air, a summer sound  
 Repeated in a summer without end  
 And sound alone. But it was more than that, More  
 even than her voice, and ours, among  
 The meaningless plungings of water and the wind,  
 Theatrical distances, bronze shadows heaped  
 On high horizons, mountainous atmospheres  
 Of sky and sea.

It was her voice that made  
 The sky acutest at its vanishing.  
 She measured to the hour its solitude.  
 She was the single artificer of the world  
 In which she sang. And when she sang, the sea,  
 Whatever self it had, became the self  
 That was her song, for she was the maker. Then we,  
 As we beheld her striding there alone,  
 Knew that there never was a world for her  
 Except the one she sang and, singing, made.

Ramon Fernandez, tell me, if you know,  
 Why, when the singing ended and we turned  
 Toward the town, tell why the glassy lights,  
 The lights in the fishing boats at anchor there,  
 As the night descended, tilting in the air,  
 Mastered the night and portioned out the sea,  
 Fixing emblazoned zones and fiery poles,  
 Arranging, deepening, enchanting night.

Oh! Blessed rage for order, pale Ramon,  
 The maker's rage to order words of the sea,  
 Words of the fragrant portals, dimly-starred,  
 And of ourselves and of our origins,  
 In ghostlier demarcations, keener sounds.<sup>5</sup>

The poem's title, 'The Idea of Order at Key West' seems rather flat and unprepossessing, and Stevens's titles are more often than not ironically at odds with the ensuing poem, maintaining a deliberately oblique relation to the content. The location is the

5. Wallace Stevens, *Collected Poems* (Faber, London, 1955), pp. 128–30. Hereafter CP.

Florida Keys, where Stevens spent many vacations, which also seems to explain the Hispanic figure of Ramon Fernandez, although I will return to this. We might note that the title places in conjunction the universal (*the*, not *an*, idea of order) and the particular (Key West). Of course, such a conjunction of the universal and the particular rehearses the classical doctrine of the function of the artwork, where the latter is the specific, particular and sensuous manifestation of some general state of affairs: where, for Plato, beauty is the bridge between the sensuous and the supersensuous, for Kant, beauty is a symbol for morality, and, for Hegel, art is a semblance of truth. Thus, the very title of the poem indicates that the subject matter of the poem will be a basic problem in philosophical aesthetics, namely how the universal appears or can be presented at a particular place and time.

Turning briefly to the prosody of the poem, the formal rhetorical devices through which the content is articulated, the metre of the poem is a rough iambic pentameter, the rhythm of classical blank verse in English poetry—‘She *sang* beyond the *genius* of the *sea*’. As elsewhere in Stevens, there is an insistent use of enjambement and repetition in and across lines that lends an almost incantatory, sing-song, overlapping effect to the verse. An example from ‘The Idea of Order’: ‘...it would have been deep *air*,/The heaving speech of *air*, a *summer sound*/Repeated in a *summer* without end/And *sound* alone’. Two more examples of the same technique from later poems: in ‘Angel Surrounded by Paysans’, ‘...Rise liquidly in liquid lingerings... An apparition apparelled in/Apparels of such lightest look...’;<sup>6</sup> and ‘An Ordinary Evening in New Haven’, ‘Wreathed round and round the round wreath of autumn’.<sup>7</sup> The effect here is close to that of melody in music, and some critics have, with some justification, been led to compare Stevens’s poetry to musical tone poems, although such an interpretation tends to deprecate the discursive philosophical ambitions of Stevens’s poetry.<sup>8</sup>

There is no detectable formal rhyme scheme in ‘The Idea of Order’, and Stevens was not terribly strict in his observance of form. The rhymes are very, perhaps overly, heavy in some places

6. CP p. 497.

7. CP p. 486.

8. A good example of such an interpretation, which makes interesting remarks about ‘The Idea of Order at Key West’, is John Hollander’s ‘The Sound of the Music of Music and Sound’, in *Wallace Stevens. A Celebration*, op.cit. pp. 235–55.

(see the endwords of the second stanza: heard, word, stirred, word) and rather light in others. Rhyme is often produced through straight repetition of endwords, most often 'sea' and 'she' (the former appears 16 times in the poem and the latter 9), but also 'know', 'sing' and 'sang'. The stanza structure is not uniform, with two 7 line stanzas at the beginning and then a series of 6, 13, 10 and 8 line stanzas and a 5 line coda, which functions like an *envoi*, a parting word to send us on our way. We might also note the heavy, luxurious use of alliteration throughout the poem. This is evident in the first line, 'She sang beyond the genius of the sea', and even more forcefully later in the same stanza, '...and yet its *mimic motion/made* constant cry, caused constantly a cry.' And in the second stanza, 'the sea was not a *mask* no more was she' and 'the grinding water and the gasping wind'. Many of these rhetorical effects are carried by repeated, amassing 'c', 's' and 'w' sounds, for example, 'sunken coral water-walled'. To some extent, the problem with the prosodic or rhetorical dimension of the poem is that it is so luxurious that it risks obscuring the quite precise argument of the poem. It is to this argument that I would now like to turn.

### III

We might begin by looking for the subject of poem, indicated with the pronoun 'she'. Who is 'she'? 'She' is referred to only by third person pronouns and Stevens gives absolutely no physical description of 'her'. All we are told is that she walked beside the sea and that they 'beheld her striding there alone'. We might contrast the lack of physical description of 'she' with the abundant descriptions of the sea, which is characteristic of a general lack of human physicality in Stevens's poetry. In the *Adagia*, he writes, 'Life is an affair of people not of places. But for me life is an affair of places and that is the trouble'.<sup>9</sup> Stevens tends to subordinate the hermeneutic question of other persons to the epistemological question of how the mind hooks up with the world. So, once again, who is 'she'? Is 'she' a woman? Is 'she' even human? Is 'she' an

9. OP 185. The question of how other people are figured in Stevens's poetry has been interestingly pursued in a couple of places. See Gerald Bruns, 'Stevens without Epistemology', in *Wallace Stevens. The Poetics of Modernism*, ed. A. Gelpi (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1985), pp. 24–40; and Krzysztof Ziarek, 'The Other Notation. Stevens and the Supreme Fiction of Poetry', in *Inflected Language: Toward a Hermeneutic of Nearness* (State University of New York Press, Albany, 1994), pp. 103–32.



angel? Stevens, inspired by a still-life by Tal Coat he bought in 1949, but also by Rilke's *Duino Elegies*, referred to a figure that he called 'the necessary angel', introduced in 'Angel Surrounded by Paysans', and which provided the title for his only collection of critical essays in 1951. The angelic protagonist says, 'I am the necessary angel of earth/Since, in my sight, you see the earth again,/Cleared of its stiff and stubborn, man-locked set,/And, in my hearing, you hear its tragic drone...'.<sup>10</sup> So, 'she' is perhaps a necessary angel, half-human, half-divine, a messenger mediating between gods and mortals. Or again, 'she' could be a Siren figure, captivating mariners from afar and drawing them to their death on the rocks. Or 'she' could be a mythological figure, like the figure of a muse, the traditional source of poetic inspiration invoked at the beginning of an epic poem, 'Sing me, goddess'. In the poem itself, 'she' is referred to as a 'spirit' or, more precisely, as embodying or representing a 'spirit', 'Whose spirit is this? we said...'. But what or who is a spirit? This seems far from philosophy. She is also referred to as 'the single artificer of the world', which sounds god-like, like the demi-urge who creates the universe in Plato's *Timaeus*, although the world she creates is always qualified as being only her world, 'a world for her'.

As for the other *dramatis personae*, what is most obvious is that the whole incident is being reported by someone else, who is observing 'she', or, more accurately, observed 'she' at some point in the (recent?) past. The past tense is used throughout the poem ('she sang... we knew... she heard') until the beginning of the penultimate stanza. At that point, 'Ramon Fernandez, tell me...', as between the octave and the sestet in a Petrarchan sonnet, the poem suddenly turns about and switches to the present tense. At which point, the identity of the 'we' that appeared in the third and fourth stanzas becomes clear. There would seem to be three characters in the staging of the poem: 'she' and 'we'; that is, 'pale Ramon' and the poetic voice or protagonist, to which we might naively ascribe the proper name 'Wallace Stevens'. The protagonist is speaking to Ramon Fernandez about an experience they shared, and this speech takes place outside the events being described in the poem. Thus, the plot of the poem would seem to go something like the following: that 'we' or they heard 'her' voice

10. CP p. 496-97.

(hearing is the dominant sense in the poem) and now the poetic voice is trying to express to his interlocutor, in the form of a question (but without a question mark, 'Ramon Fernandez, tell me'), the significance of the experience. 'The Idea of Order' is therefore both a work of memory, mother of the muses (of 'she') and a 'Conversation Poem' in the Coleridgean style. Of course, a feature of Coleridge's Conversation Poems is that the interlocutor does not answer back (indeed, famously, in the case of 'Frost at Midnight' the poem is addressed to the Coleridge's infant son, Hartley, who cannot answer back). The poem is, as Stevens puts in a title, a 'Continual Conversation with a Silent Man'.<sup>11</sup> This perhaps explains why we do not get to hear how the pale and rather two-dimensional Ramon would respond to the questions addressed to him. As to the identity of Ramon Fernandez, Stevens insists that he simply made up the name, 'I used two everyday names. As I might have expected, they turned out to be an actual name'.<sup>12</sup> This claim is rendered slightly dubious by the fact that Ramon Fernandez was actually a French literary critic whom, according to Bloom, Stevens had certainly read.<sup>13</sup>

So, there are at least three characters in the staging of the poem, although we must add a fourth to this list, namely the sea itself. I take it that the near homophony and full rhyme of 'sea' and 'she' are not simply fortuitous. In a sense, it is the whole point, because the sea is a name for the *real* in Stevens's poetics. I will turn to the question of the meaning of the real presently, or rather its possible double meaning, but let's just note for the moment that the real or reality is one of the two master-words of Stevens's poetics. So, the sea is the name for the real in Stevens's schema, and the real has a voice, 'the dark voice of the sea'. Indeed, the sea has a 'genius', but it is 'meaningless' and Stevens writes of 'The meaningless plungings of water and the wind', whereas the voice of 'she' is meaning-giving or bestows meaning upon meaninglessness. Now,

11. CP p. 359.

12. Quoted in Joseph Riddel *The Clairvoyant Eye. The Poetry and Poetics of Wallace Stevens* (Louisiana State University Press, Baton Rouge, 1965), p. 117.

13. Bloom interprets the figure of Ramon Fernandez as an 'anti-romantic' interlocutor whom Stevens is trying to persuade in the poem; see Bloom, *Wallace Stevens. The Poems of Our Climate*, op.cit. p. 96. Joseph Riddel takes Stevens at his word and believes that he did not know that Fernandez was a literary critic, but then goes on to give an extremely imaginative reading of the poem with reference to some of Fernandez's writings; see Riddel, *The Clairvoyant Eye*, op.cit. p. 117-20.

if the 'sea' is the name for the real, then 'she' is the name for the other master-word in Stevens's poetics, the *imagination*. Imagination is the work of the poet and the drama of the poem is this dialectic between sea and she, between reality and the imagination, of the relation between *two forms of genius*. Genius would appear to be double for Stevens. In the first edition of the *Adagia* (the organization of these fragments is slightly different in the second edition of *Opus Posthumous*), in the space of two pages, Stevens offers up the governing contradiction of his work: on the one hand, he writes 'There is nothing greater than reality. In this predicament we have to accept reality itself as the only genius.' On the other hand, 'Imagination is the only genius'.<sup>14</sup> Now, how can both reality and imagination be the *only* genius? They cannot. This is a contradiction, which, of course, is an abomination in philosophy, as we all agree. And yet, perhaps, as I shall now try to show, poetry is the exploration of this philosophical abomination.

#### IV

Permit me a small digression here on the two master-words of Stevens's poetics, imagination and reality. In one of his *Athenaeum* fragments, the early German romantic thinker Friedrich Schlegel writes, 'No poetry, no reality'.<sup>15</sup> We should keep this in mind when reading Stevens, particularly as he places himself very self-consciously within a romantic tradition of poetry and thinking, with its vast premise that art is the medium for attaining the fundamental ground of human life and that the world might be transformed in and through a great artwork. So, no poetry, no reality: that is, our experience of the real is dependent upon the work of the poetic imagination. Imagination is obviously a vast topic in philosophy after Kant, and it cannot be dealt with in detail here, save to say that imagination is that activity or, better, power of forming concepts beyond those derived from external objects. Understood in this sense, the imagination is a power over external objects, or the transformation of the external into the internal through the work of creation, creation that is given sensuous form

14. See *Opus Posthumous*, Edited with an Introduction, by Samuel French Morse (Faber, London, 1957), pp. 177 & 179 and compare OP pp. 201 & 204. See also NA p. 139, where Stevens writes, 'Imagination is the only genius'.

15. Friedrich Schlegel, *Philosophical Fragments*, trans. Peter Firchow (University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 1991), p. 70.

and is therefore rendered external in the work of art. I take it that this is what Hegel means when he speaks of art being born of the spirit and then reborn in being aesthetically regarded.<sup>16</sup>

If there is no reality without poetry, then following what we noted at the end of the previous section, the inversion of this Schlegelian remark would also seem to be true for Stevens, i.e. 'No reality, no poetry'. For Stevens, the poet must not lead us away from the real, where the solitary work of the imagination would result in fantasy or fancy.<sup>17</sup> That is, the imagination must not detach itself from reality, but rather *adhere* to reality. As Stevens puts it, 'The real is only the base. But it is the base.'<sup>18</sup> So, the real is the base, it is the basis from which poetry begins, the *materia poetica*, the matter of poetry, but it is *only* the base. One might say that reality is the necessary but not the sufficient condition for poetry, but it is *absolutely* necessary.

This has an important philosophical consequence that has been nicely discussed in a recent essay by Sebastian Gardner.<sup>19</sup> Stevens's philosophical position, if we might put it in that way, cannot be assimilated to anti-realism, i.e. the belief that there is no (or there is no reference to) a subject-independent reality prior to language or discourse, which is an extremely fashionable and hegemonic view in the humanities because of the influence of Saussurean linguistics and the linguistic turn in Heidegger and the later Wittgenstein.<sup>20</sup> If

16. Hegel, *Introductory Lectures on Aesthetics*, trans. B. Bosanquet (Penguin, Harmondsworth, 1993), p. 4.

17. In this way, the Coleridgean distinction between imagination and fancy might be redrawn in the following way: the poetic imagination must adhere to reality, whereas fancy works without reference to reality.

18. OP p. 187. On the importance of reality in Stevens's poetics, see Alan Golding, 'The "Community of Elements" in Wallace Stevens and Louis Zukofsky', *Wallace Stevens. The Poetics of Modernism*, op.cit. p. 124.

19. See Sebastian Gardner, 'Wallace Stevens and Metaphysics: The Plain Sense of Things', in *European Journal of Philosophy*, Vol 2, No.3 (1994), pp. 322-44.

20. Influential examples of this anti-realism can be seen in Bloom's and Riddel's interpretations of Stevens. Riddel reads Stevens's poetry as an 'act of the mind', where mental activity seems to be understood in entirely solipsistic terms without reference to reality; cf. *The Clairvoyant Eye*, op.cit. p. 15. However, Riddel's anti-realism is evidenced more forthrightly in the seemingly Nietzschean exuberance of a later essay, 'Metaphoric Staging: Stevens' Beginning Again of the "End of the Book"' (in *Wallace Stevens. A Celebration*, op.cit. pp. 308-338). In this essay, reality is reduced to being the effect of language and the latter is understood in terms of Nietzsche's mobile army of tropes, figures, metaphors and metonymies. For Riddel, Stevens's poetry exhibits the tropological quality of the real that reduces 'things as they are' to 'a chain of fictions' (p. 335). Bloom's anti-realism can be seen in microcosm in his interpretation of 'The Idea of Order at Key West', where the concept of order is understood in entirely solipsistic terms as the Schopenhauerian reduction of the world to an idea and the latter to consciousness. For Bloom, like Riddel, the poem is entirely an act of the mind without reference to reality that Bloom ingeniously traces to the Emersonian and Whitmanian traditions of American romanticism; cf. *Wallace Stevens. The Poems of Our Climate*, op.cit. pp. 92-105.

Stevens were a straightforward anti-realist or linguistic idealist, then the only category in his poetics would be the imagination. But it is not, and his work begins from a certain, in Gardner's words, oppressive or contracted sense of the real—realism without a human face—and attempts to put in its place a transformed sense of the real, the real mediated through the creative power of imagination—realism with a human face. Regardless of the independent veracity of the thesis of realism, which I am not in a position to decide in this paper, Stevens is not an anti-realist. However, this does not entail that he is a transcendental or metaphysical realist, in the sense that all human activity is epiphenomenal to a subject-independent material realm. Such would be the contracted world, free from the cognitive, aesthetic and moral values that give colour and texture to the world we inhabit. Stevens would seem to believe that the real can be apprehended under different aspects or categories (the contracted, the transfigured) and that, simply stated, a poeticized, imaginatively transformed reality is both preferable to an inhuman, contracted and oppressive sense of reality and gives a truer picture of the relation humans entertain with the world. Obviously, the real philosophical issue here concerns the validity of the different aspects under which reality is apprehended in Stevens's poetry. With some justification, Gardner seeks to link Stevens's imaginatively transfigured sense of the real with Kant's thesis on transcendental idealism, that is, a world that is real *for us* (and hence consistent with empirical realism), but which has been produced in accordance with the categories of the understanding, whose source lies in the transcendental or productive imagination, where 'Synthesis in general... is the mere result of the power of imagination'.<sup>21</sup>

However, I believe that it might also be helpful to make a connection here with Heidegger's critique of the realism/anti-realism debate in Paragraph 43 of *Sein und Zeit*.<sup>22</sup> Heidegger criticizes both realism and anti-realism for having an inadequate ontology of the real, where the question of the 'reality' of the external world gets raised without any previous clarification of the phenomenon of world as that existential context that is significant

21. Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, B 103.

22. See *Being and Time*, trans. J. Macquarrie & E. Robinson (Blackwell, Oxford, 1962), pp. 244–56.

and most familiar to us. As Stevens writes, 'Realism is a corruption of reality'.<sup>23</sup> Indeed, it might be possible to understand the different aspects under which the real is apprehended in Stevens with reference to Heidegger's categories of the ready-to-hand and the present-at-hand. Thus, the contracted or oppressive sense of the real prior to the work of the human imagination would correspond to the theoreticist, naturalistic stance of the present-at-hand, whereas the *inauthentic* experience of the everyday would correspond to the ready-to-hand, a subject-dependent but pre-reflective experience of the world that can be reflectively transfigured in an *authentic* experience of the everyday, where the everyday is grasped *as such*. Despite the undoubted radicality of Kant's Copernican turn, particularly for Heidegger on the issue of the schematism where the linking of intuitions to concepts takes place upon the horizon of temporality, Kant ultimately shrinks back from his deepest philosophical insights and, according to Heidegger, uncritically takes over a Cartesian conception of the subject, a theoreticist account of the relation to objectivity and an Aristotelian conception of time understood in terms of the primacy of the present.<sup>24</sup> To my mind, Stevens advocates a *phenomenological* sense of the real as that pre-theoretical meaningful context for our practical involvement with things, as that habitable world that is real for us and within whose worldhood we inhere. Such a world is obviously threatened by the impoverished sense of the real common in naturalistic world-views, but it is also by-passed by the theoreticism of transcendental idealism and any neo-Kantian reworking of epistemology. Perhaps such a sense of the world is even threatened by the inelegant prose style of *Being and Time*. Stevens's working assumption, which he owes once again to romanticism, is that the world is phenomenologically disclosed or reflectively transfigured *as* a habitable world not in philosophy but through the mediation of an artwork, '...poetically, man dwells...'.

23. OP p. 192. For an interesting Heidegger-inspired reading of Stevens, see Gerald Bruns 'Stevens Without Epistemology', in *Wallace Stevens and the Poetics of Modernism*, op.cit. pp. 24–40.

24. See *Being and Time*, op.cit. pp. 44–46.

## V

In Stevens's terms, poetry negotiates a dialectic between reality and the imagination, where the imagination must adhere to reality in order for the poet's words to make any sense and to have any vitality. In the *Adagia*, Stevens writes, 'Eventually an imaginary world is entirely without interest'.<sup>25</sup> But the imagination must also *resist* (Stevens's word<sup>26</sup>) the pressure of reality, it must respond to what Stevens calls in *The Necessary Angel*, 'the leaden time' in which we find ourselves, what both Heidegger (following Hölderlin) and Wittgenstein, in surprisingly similar registers, refer to as the darkness or dearth (*Dürftigkeit*) of these times, as times not particularly hospitable to philosophy or poetry.<sup>27</sup> And here one finds, as in the early German romantics and Nietzsche, a theory of poetic creation insistently linked to a philosophy of history and a critique of culture, a culture of nihilism.<sup>28</sup>

Poetry returns us to reality, to what Stevens calls 'The Plain Sense of Things', to the plainness of the ordinary. And yet, poetry returns us to the ordinary as something extraordinary, strange and uncanny, as something transfigured through the power of imagination. In poetry we return to reality through the mediation of the imagination. That is to say, and here our problems begin, the reality to which the poet returns us is the real rendered *unreal* through imagination. As Stevens suggest hypothetically, 'If it should be true that reality exists/In the mind... it follows that/Real and unreal are two in one'.<sup>29</sup>

It is this dialectic between reality and imagination which is regarded by the poetic voice and 'pale Ramon', from a distance,

25. OP p. 200.

26. NA p. 27.

27. See NA p. 63. For the references to Wittgenstein and Heidegger, see the Preface to *Philosophical Investigations*, trans. G.E.M. Anscombe (Blackwell, Oxford, 1958), p. viii; and 'What are Poets for?' in *Poetry, Language, Thought* (Harper, New York, 1971), pp. 91–142.

28. Incidentally, this aspect of Stevens's work is entirely absent from Gardner's essay, which, if it has a fault, takes an overly categorial approach to Stevens's poetry. One might ask: what is the socio-historical actuality or context for Stevens's poetry? What account of modernity does it suppose and resist? If, as Gardner agrees, Stevens's poetry stands squarely within the tradition of romanticism (op.cit. p. 323), then what is the latter if not the historical self-consciousness of nihilism, the moment when God dies and truth becomes a work of creation and not a task of discovery?

29. 'An Ordinary Evening in New Haven' CP p. 485.

as spectators in a theatre, perhaps what Hegel would see as the phenomenological 'we' observing the shapes of Spirit. They are not directly involved in this drama but are onlookers upon it, which they regard from the disinterested standpoint of reflection and judgement. They are therefore distanced from the work of creation, reflecting on the dialectic between reality and imagination, between the sea and she, that constitutes the artwork. But this reflection is itself carried out in another artwork, another work of poetic creation that is the poem itself. Perhaps this is what Stevens means when he writes that 'the theory of poetry is the life of poetry'.<sup>30</sup> If 'she' is the genius of imagination and the 'sea' is the genius of reality, then what, it might be asked, is the genius of the poem itself, the poem that stages the dialectic of imagination and reality from the standpoint of reflection? Is this poetry or what Schlegel would call 'the poetry of poetry' or 'transcendental poetry'? If the theory of poetry is the life of poetry, and if, as Stevens casually appends, '...the theory/Of poetry is the theory of life,' then is poetry always already poetics? For Stevens at least, the answer would seem to be affirmative.

## VI

I would now like to analyze this dialectic as it unfolds in 'The Idea of Order' itself, for it is here that matters start to get interesting. Our general question or query here might be described in the following terms: if in order to be vital poetry must adhere to reality, then how does it do this in the imagination, which is precisely not real? How can the unreal adhere to the real in producing something unreal, a fiction, a poem? Can fictions be true?

**Stanza one.** The poem begins by claiming that she sang *beyond* the genius of the sea. That is, her voice and her genius—that of the imagination—is not that of the sea. As stated above, the imagination is a power that goes beyond external objects. However, it is granted from the outset that the sea, like she, also has a voice and a genius. But the genius of the sea—of the real—is quite distinct from that of she. The sea does not form to the mind or voice of the poet, it is a 'body wholly body' outside of the formative, meaning-bestowing power of she.

30. OP p. 202.



**Stanza two.** And yet, this relation between the sea and she is complicated for two reasons, because of what we might call a double mimesis at work:

(i) In the final lines of stanza one, the sea produces a 'mimic motion', it has its own voice that is alike or analogous to the voice of she. It is a cry, but it is not a cry like ours, although we can somehow understand it, we can hear the true or 'veritable' ocean.

(ii) And yet, in stanza two, it is clear that she also mimics the voice of the sea, 'what she sang was what she heard', and in her phrases, in the sound of her voice, we hear an imitation of the sea, 'the grinding water and the gasping wind'.

But despite this double mimesis—the sea imitates she, she imitates the sea—despite the fact that both the sea and she seem to be masks for each other, reflecting each other's voices, Stevens insists that 'The song and the water were not medleyed sound'. That is, they are not a medley, a *melée*, a mixture of heterogeneous elements. Stevens insists, 'it was she and not the sea that we heard'.

**Stanza three.** The conclusion of stanza two is reinforced in the opening three lines of the third stanza, 'For she was the maker of the song she sang./The ever-hooded, tragic gestured sea/Was merely a place by which she walked to sing.' In the fourth line, however, the mood of the poem changes. A question is raised: 'whose spirit is this?', a question raised by 'we', the poetic voice and pale Ramon who are watching her sing. With this question, we move from description to interrogation, from poetry to poetics.

**Stanza four.** These lines explore responses to the above question. One possible response is rejected in terms familiar from stanza one; that is, if it was only 'the dark voice of the sea' or 'the outer voice of sky' whose spirit was exemplified by 'she', then, Stevens adds, 'It would have been deep air,/The heaving speech of air, a summer sound/Repeated in a summer without end/And sound alone'. Thus, if it was only the voice of the sea that spoke through she, then this would have been the sound of summer. As can be seen in a poem like 'Credences of Summer', in Stevens's symbolic calendar of the seasons, summer is the time 'when the mind lays by its trouble', with 'spring's infuriations over and a long way/To the first autumnal inhalations...'<sup>31</sup> We might define summer with Frank

31. CP p. 372.

Kermode as '...the season of the physical paradise, the full human satisfaction', or with Gardner as '...the world apprehended in the full blaze of what Stevens calls imagination'.<sup>32</sup> Such a full satisfaction would be the assimilation of reality into the imagination in a moment of complete transport and delight, the epiphanal realization of happiness, the romantic reconciliation of art and life through the poetic imagination.

By contrast, winter is the season of hard reality, of the world contracted into the absence of imagination, where the human subject is powerless before an oppressive, violent and indifferent reality. Gardner interestingly evokes this world of winter as the contracted world of metaphysical realism.<sup>33</sup> Parenthetically, what I find missing from Gardner's account is any consideration of the seasons of autumn and particularly early spring, which, I would claim, are the definitive seasons of Stevens's later poems. Examples are legion and too numerous to cite, although I refer the reader to a number of poems from *The Rock*, notably 'The Plain Sense of Things', 'Lebensweisheitspielerei', 'The Green Plant', 'Vacancy in the Park', 'Not Ideas About the Thing But the Thing Itself', each of which takes place either in late autumn or early spring, particularly March, 'At the earliest ending of winter,/In March, a scrawny cry from outside/ Seemed like a sound in his mind'.<sup>34</sup> What is interesting about the seasons of late autumn and early spring is that they are a denial of both the worlds of winter and summer, both contraction and transfiguration. These transitional seasons permit a more minimal, impoverished but perhaps credible transfiguration of the everyday, where the relation between imagination and reality takes place in the tension between contraction and transfiguration. It is, I believe, in terms of such a minimal transfiguration that Stevens envisages a return to what he calls 'the plain sense of things'.<sup>35</sup>

Returning to stanza four, the spirit under discussion is not understood in terms of the season of summer. On the contrary, Stevens adds, '...it was more than that/More even than her voice,

32. See Frank Kermode, *Wallace Stevens* (Faber, London, 1960), p. 32; Gardner, 'Wallace Stevens and Metaphysics', *op.cit.* p. 327.

33. *Ibid.*, p. 326.

34. CP p. 534.

35. I discuss this claim in more detail in 'Unworking Romanticism', *Very Little...Almost Nothing* (Routledge, London and New York, forthcoming).

and ours...'. Thus, it is indeed her voice that we hear and not 'the heaving speech of air', but, to put it awkwardly, her voice is more than her voice. That is, it is a voice that projects itself out '...among/ The meaningless plungings of water'. Her voice is out there among things, making a world for itself, producing the idea of order that constitutes a world for it. This point becomes clearer in stanza five.

**Stanza five.** The voice is here described as 'the single artificer of the world', a god-like maker of the world through words, words that can affect even the contours of the sky and sea, where 'Whatever self it had, became the self/ That was her song...'. But how is the concept of self to be understood here? The self of 'she' is not some punctual or disengaged self divorced from the objective world in its subjective representations. Rather it is a self that is out there among things, a self that does not constitute a world out of the pictures projected in the cabinet of consciousness, but rather a self defined through the creative power of the imagination produced in relation to a world that is real for it. To my mind, this is close to what Heidegger means by *Dasein*, a self that finds itself out there among and alongside things and persons, an *ecstatic* self, what McDowell refers to less ecstatically as 'an openness to the world'. A couple of Stevens's poetic formulae might help us here: in the Preface to *The Necessary Angel*, Stevens writes that poetry '...is an illumination of a surface, *the movement of a self in the rock*'.<sup>36</sup> Or again, from the very late poem 'The Planet on the Table', where Stevens writes using the voice of the protagonist Ariel:

His self and the sun were one  
And his poems, although makings of his self,  
Were no less makings of the sun.

It was not important that they survive.  
What mattered was that they should bear  
Some lineament or character,  
Some affluence, if only half-perceived,  
In the poverty of their words,  
Of the planet of which they were part.<sup>37</sup>

To summarise our reading so far, we might conclude that the spirit that was sought by the 'we' of the poem is that world-building

36. NA p. viii, my emphasis.

37. CP p. 532–33.

creative power of imagination that makes a world in words, through poetry. World-experience is word-experience. But the genius of imagination only produces its world in a dialectical relation to reality, which is the base and its own genius. Hence Stevens's philosophical position cannot be assimilated to linguistic idealism or anti-realism. The order of human meaning is produced by being always already out there among the 'meaningless plungings' of things, without which there would be no material for creation, no *materia poetica*—'makings of his self' are 'makings of the sun'. As Stevens succinctly puts it, the task of poetry is 'To touch with the imagination in respect to reality'.<sup>38</sup>

## VII

Looking back now to the title of Stevens's poem, it is clear that the world-building power of poetic creation provides us with the idea of order. Poetry is an ideational ordering of reality in language through the work of the imagination. Poetry is the process of 'Arranging, deepening and enchanting' the world, where enchanting should here be understood literally, as both singing the world into existence and transfiguring it almost magically, the incantation of the world under the spell of imagination, a world spelled out through words, but still a world for us.

In this sense, poetry is a kind of magic, a transfiguration of the world in words which produces an idea of order, even if this order is fictional. Not that it is *only* fictional, for Stevens's deeper philosophical point would seem to be that the only possible ordering of reality is fictional. In this sense, the orderings of reality offered by religion, science, art, psychoanalysis, para-psychology, astrology or whatever are all fictions (not that they are fictions of equal value, which they clearly are not, because they must adhere to reality). The task of poetry, then, is two-fold:

(i) Poetry permits us to see fiction as fiction, to see the fictionality or contingency of the world. The world is what you make of it,<sup>39</sup> its fact is a *factum*: a deed, an act, an artifice. Such is the *critical* task of poetry, which we might think of in Kantian terms as

38. OP p. 195.

39. CP p. 513.

analogous to the Copernican Turn. This is perhaps what Stevens has in mind when he writes in the *Adagia*,

The final belief is to believe in a fiction, which you know to be a fiction, there being nothing else. The exquisite truth is to know that it is a fiction and that you believe it willingly.<sup>40</sup>

Thus, on the one hand, poetry can bring us to this exquisite truth, namely that fiction is the truth of truth, a view that leads neither to an anti-realism, linguistic idealism, relativism or even cynicism. I would claim, rather grandly, that the critical function of poetry is the acceptance of existence in a world without God, that is, without transcendent or cognitive guarantees for our values, which of course leads not to the suspension of the question of value but rather to its exacerbation. The critical negation of a transcendent or dogmatic source for value does not lead to its denial, rather it puts value on the agenda. Having no other ground upon which to stand, we fall back on the power of imagination. It is in this sense that I understand Stevens's quasi-Feuerbachian syllogism, later partially taken up in the important late poem 'Final Soliloquy of the Interior Paramour', that

1. God and the imagination are one.
2. The thing imagined is the imager

The second equals the thing imagined and the imager are one. Hence, I suppose, the imager is God.<sup>41</sup>

(ii) However, the second task of poetry is to give '...to life the supreme fictions without which we are unable to conceive of it'.<sup>42</sup> Beyond the critical function described above, we might describe this as the *therapeutic* task of poetry. To put it bluntly, poetry is 'one of the enlargements of life'.<sup>43</sup> One of Stevens's most telling remarks, I believe, is the following: 'After one has abandoned a belief in god, poetry is that essence which takes its place as life's redemption.'<sup>44</sup> Poetry offers a possible form of redemption, a redemption that brings us back to the fictionality of the world as fictional, and which saves the sense of the world for us (and it goes

40. OP p. 189.

41. OP p. 202 & CP p. 524.

42. NA p. 31.

43. NA p. viii.

44. OP p. 185.

without saying that *only* the world is saved: the realm of appearance, semblance and visibility). In Kermode's words, poetry enables us to continue 'living without God and finding it good, because of the survival of the power (i.e. the imagination) that once made him suffice'. At this point, we might begin to consider what is arguably Stevens's most important, ambitious and difficult poem, 'Notes toward a Supreme Fiction'. Emphasis should be put here on the fact that these are only *notes* toward this fiction, and that Stevens does not offer the latter to us whole and ready made, 'it is possible, possible, possible'.<sup>45</sup> Yet, and here's the paradox once again, what Stevens's poetry offers us is not an anti-realist celebration of the fictionality of the fictional, but rather notes toward a *supreme* fiction. That is, a fiction that would be true and in which we might believe. In the *Adagia*, this is what Stevens calls, 'The exquisite environment of fact. The final poem will be the poem of fact in the language of fact'. But, he concludes with a singular dialectical twist of meaning with which we have become familiar, '...it will be a poem of fact not realized before'.<sup>46</sup> Thus, to write the supreme fiction, the supreme unreality, is paradoxically 'To find the real,/To be stripped of every fiction except one,/ the fiction of an absolute...'.<sup>47</sup> The supreme fiction is the fiction of a *factum*. It is in such a fiction that we can believe, that we can take to be true.

**Stanza six.** With the above in mind, we have already responded to the question posed in the penultimate stanza of 'The Idea of Order'. In response to the question as to why the lights of the fishing boats master the night and portion out the sea, that is to say, why there is an order, we can reply that it cannot be otherwise, we cannot but impose an imaginative order upon reality, we cannot but give to experience the fictions without which we would be unable to conceive of it. The two-fold task of poetry, however, is to write the supreme fiction, the poem that would critically reveal the fictionality of the fictional and therapeutically produce this fiction as a *factum*, 'the exquisite environment of fact'.

45. CP p. 404. As some commentators have pointed out, Stevens writes 'a poetry of notes': cf. Ziarek, *Inflected Language*, op.cit. p. 129 & Riddel 'Metaphoric Staging', in *Wallace Stevens. A Celebration*, op.cit. p. 317-18.

46. OP p. 190.

47. CP p. 404.

**Stanza seven.** Moving to the poem's envoi, this is why Stevens speaks of a 'Blessed rage for order', noting the antithetical conjunction of a religious vocabulary of benediction, blessing and blood (from Old English *bloedsian*, from *blod*), with the language of violence and rabid madness, with the possible suggestion of *orage* and the stormy sea. On my reading, in these final lines it is a question of a non-religious consecration of the world in words, a sanctifying of experience that renders the real holy without turning us away from this world to another. In the opening lines of 'An Ordinary Evening in New Haven', this is what Stevens calls 'The vulgate of experience', thereby suggesting both the redemption of the ordinary and the rendering ordinary of all claims to redemption, a vulgarization, 'The eye's plain version'.<sup>48</sup> But such a vulgar redemption is an irreducibly violent act, it is, 'The maker's rage to order words of the sea', the violence of the imagination resisting the pressure of reality, transfiguring the world into words, '...of ourselves and our origins'.

## VIII

By way of conclusion, I would like to return to my above remarks on the critical and therapeutic tasks of poetry and insert a note of caution. As I said above, Stevens's conception of the task of poetry clearly situates him within the high tradition of early romanticism, the tradition that identifies 'imagination as metaphysics' in distinction from the 'bad' romanticism that, for Stevens, risks falling into sentimentality and mere wish-fulfilment.<sup>49</sup> With regard to the critical task of poetry, romanticism might be defined as the historical self-consciousness of the death of God and the incredibility of a non-human order of truth. Truth is something made rather than found, it is a work of creation, of genius, of imagination, although for Stevens it must adhere to reality. Passing to the therapeutic task of poetry, in romanticism the burden of responding to the question of the meaning of life passes from the sphere of the religious to the aesthetic. Obviously, the vast question here, and one thinks of Kierkegaard, is to what extent the aesthetic is capable of giving a satisfying response to the question of the

48. CP p. 465.

49. NA p. 138-39.

meaning of life. Having critically discredited the traditional claims of religion, can art become a therapy for religious desire? My view, which I discuss at length elsewhere with particular reference to Hegel's, Lukacs's and Carl Schmitt's critiques of romanticism, is that it cannot.<sup>50</sup> What I see as the tragic quality of modernity resides in the fact that the form of our questions about the meaning and value of human life is still religious, but that we find the claims of religion increasingly incredible and hence move our faith elsewhere, into the aesthetic, the philosophical, the economic, or the political, without any of these spheres being able to provide the kind of response we require. Thus, therapy does not silence the critical voice, and, moreover, such a silence would not be therapeutic: after such knowledge, what forgiveness? But this does not mean that romanticism is redundant or uninteresting, it rather means rather that we have to expect less from the imagination and accustom ourselves to more minimal transfigurations of reality, smaller victories. Now, this is precisely what I see taking place in Stevens's very last poems. But that is another story for a separate occasion.<sup>51</sup>

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50. See 'Unworking Romanticism', op.cit.

51. For an interesting reading of Stevens's later poems, focusing on the theme of 'decreation', see Roy Harvey Pearce, 'Toward Decreation: Stevens and the 'Theory of Poetry'', in *Wallace Stevens. A Celebration*, op.cit. pp. 286–307. But perhaps the best reading of the later poems remains Helen Vendler's *On Extended Wings*, in particular her reading of 'An Ordinary Evening in New Haven' in terms of a return to the ordinary (op.cit. pp. 269–308).