

WALLACE STEVENS: A STUDY IN VESPERAL POETICS

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*Doch was sagte dir einst Zarathustra? Daß die Dichter zuviel lügen? – Aber auch Zarathustra ist ein Dichter. Glaubst du nun, daß er hier die Wahrheit redete? Warum glaubst du das?*¹

1. To Wallace Stevens the poetics of that specific moment called “evening” is a metapoetics. The terms of this metapoetics are what I intend to focus on in this paper, taking my cue from a paragraph in *The Necessary Angel* where Stevens invites his reader to think of an old poet very much like himself at the time when he wrote “An Ordinary Evening in New Haven,” who sees the world without tropes, yet analogically. Analogy, as Stevens understands it, is distinct from and reaches beyond image-making. Since “every image is a restatement of the subject of the image in terms of an attitude” (CPP 721), the poetic imagination does not simply provide visual equivalents of abstract ideas, as is for instance the case in allegory. Its defining feature is the ability to *reiterate* prior formulations, which leads Stevens to define the “man-hero” as “he that of repetition is most master” (CP 350). “The thing stated and the restatement have constituted an analogy” (CPP 722), Stevens writes. Analogy, therefore, is to be conceived of as variation rather than metaphorical leap, and while Stevens insists on using the word “transcendence” (CPP 722) to describe what results from the poet’s analogical activity, this analogon, being exclusively verbal and iterative, points toward no prior or ulterior transcending principle: it is the world as we know it—simply made more “livable” (CPP 722).

2. As restatement and transcendence are interchangeable terms, so are poetry and analogy, both of them equally apt renamings of that “clarified reality” apprehended by the poet in New Haven, like an old man “returning from Nowhere to his village and to everything there that is tangible and visible, which he has come to cherish and wants to be near” (CPP 722). Yet although Stevens’ difficult poem frequently borrows the form of philosophical discourse, we

1 F. Nietzsche, *Also sprach Zarathustra*: I, 272.

should not approach it hoping for some kind of revelation as to what this “reality” may entail. It is much rather to be envisaged as a study in the art of variation where the truth of desire *poses* as philosophical truth, and where the only identified “philosopher” who finally makes an appearance in the very last of the sequence’s thirty one cantos, emblematically does not write metaphysical treatises, but practices “scales on his piano” (554).

3. Given the extraordinary opacity of the poem as a whole the reference to the “vulgate of experience” in the opening lines is quite misleading. While the vulgate was a translation intended to make the Bible “a larger poem for a larger audience” (15), the hermeticism of Stevens’ meditation is proportional to the size of “the question that is a giant himself” which Stevens aims to answer throughout the rest of the sequence: “Of what is this house composed if not of the sun?”—or, to adopt a later formulation: how does the world become part of “the spirit's alchemicana” (157)?
4. The dichotomy of plain and esoteric speech splits the moment of evening down the middle. Evening, therefore, is not a time of gathering and synthesis: it is only a fragment of a “never-ending meditation” (4) whose terms, while often borrowed from philosophical discourse, hardly veil the fact that the questions raised by Stevens are primarily poetic. The vulgate, after all, was a translation, i.e. a verbal artifact, and the manner in which the poem’s premise is qualified matters as much as the qualification itself:

The eye's plain version is a thing apart,

The vulgate of experience. Of this,

A few words, an and yet, and yet, and yet— (1-3)

5. Stevens could have used any number of nouns borrowed from the lexicon of philosophical inquiry to characterize the (not-so-)“few words” that follow. Instead, he opts for the oddly clumsy wording: “an and yet, and yet, and yet—,” a rather laborious way of expressing one’s reservations, though an intriguing transformation of the old rhetorical figure of *correctio* which may be seen as programmatic of the poem as a whole. Despite the aphoristic tone frequently adopted throughout “An Ordinary Evening in New Haven,” this introductory gesture suggests that no matter how authoritative and final some of the truths asserted in the poem may sound (such as: “The plainness of plain things is savagery” [55] or: “The oldest-newest day is the newest alone” [274]), those are at best provisional, and subject

to a revisionary “as if.” Moreover, by solidifying into a substantive the phrase “and yet,” which symbolizes the pliability of thought in the making, Stevens programmatically foregrounds a tension between essentialization and process that will remain unresolved until the end, and which shapes the first canto. “The question that is a giant himself” is a heavily allegorized abstraction. The “second giant [who] kills the first” points to redoubling as a force which pulls the poem away from “dark things without a double,” away from fixities and identities. Indeed what makes houses “difficult objects” is that they are “dilapidate/ Appearances of [...] appearances,” imaginings of imaginings of “reality” which seems to indefinitely recede behind the duplicated grammatical structures that are one of the poem’s recurring features, as witnesses the plethora of double genitives: “the movement of the colors of the mind” (24); “Custodians of the glory of the scene” (104); “their miraculous,/ Conceptions of new mornings of new worlds” (122-3); “the soft/ Touch and trouble of the touch of the actual hand” (269-70).

6. In “Among School Children” Yeats famously concluded: “O body swayed to music, O brightening glance,/ How can we know the dancer from the dance?” Stevens expands on this matrix in the lines:

Suppose these houses are composed of ourselves,

So that they become an impalpable town, full of

Impalpable bells, transparencies of sound, (19-21)

[...]

Confused illuminations and sonorities,

So much ourselves, we cannot tell apart

The idea and the bearer-being of the idea. (34-6)

7. The moment of encounter between perceiver and percept is rendered here by means of synesthesia, which is Stevens’ poetic vulgate of a post-Berkeleyan observation: the audible “transparencies of sound” (21) that the bells generate, once perceived, become indissociable from the “movement of the colors of the mind” (24). Indeed, Stevens stops just short of calling

the familiar poetic trope by its technical name when he refers to “confused illuminations and sonorities (34). What matters to him most, though, is how through this “coming together” of opposites the moment connects with timelessness, and the local with the atopic: “we are poised,/ Without regard to time or where we are.” The idealist motif of the union of *esse* and *percipi*, of object and subject in the act of perception thus merges with the poetic device of synesthesia. Indeed, one is compounded by the other, for before the philosophical theme and the poetic device merge, each one separately is the stage of a prior merger—a coming together of subject and object in the case of perception, a coming together of the senses in that of synesthesia.

8. In Stevens’ meditation “enduring, visionary love” (30) is not just the impetus behind vision which lends it its visionary quality; it is a force at work within the moment of philosophical intuition and/or poetic perception, marrying “reference” (28) and object, “speeches” (33) and “bells” (32). It is tempting, in this light, to rank Stevens among the “bearer-beings” (36) of the master’s discourse, whose core tenet is that “there is oneness” (SXX 25). Or we may conversely notice that his poetics of the moment, while exposing the fantasy at the heart of philosophical discourse, asserts the reversibility of philosopheme into trope without giving clear precedence to one over the other. This tension, as I will try to show, remains unresolved throughout “An Ordinary Evening in New Haven.”
9. This explains why, although the “sense in which we are poised” (26) is allegedly reduced to a “point” (29), the identity of that point remains problematic. It refers, of course, to a point in time which is an evening, that moment when poetic vision is at its most acute. But it also designates the *purpose* of vision, which turns out to be identical to that of desire, in that the whole purpose is that the goal remain elusive and that desire be frustrated. This was implied from the start, in the hypothetical formulation in which canto II was framed: “Suppose these houses are composed of ourselves” (19). In logical discourse, a supposition would have to lead to some kind of inference: suppose A, then B. The moment of inference, however, never occurs in canto II. A supposition seems point-less if no conclusion can be drawn from it. Its only purpose is to create in the reader the *desire* for a logical continuation of the supposition he/she has been prompted to emit.
10. Stevens thus borrows some of the turns of philosophical discourse without allowing any kind of momentum to build up. This is even more evident when, after summoning the fiction

of a “hero of midnight” (38)—i.e., the aging hero of the poetic imagination—credited with the ability to turn a “hill of stones” into “beau mont” (39), the speaker addresses this figment of his imagination in the second person as the “ancientest saint” whom he entrusts with uttering the “ancientest truth” contained in lines 43-54:

Say next to holiness is the will thereto,
And next to love is the desire for love,
The desire for its celestial ease in the heart,

Which nothing can frustrate, that most secure,
Unlike love in possession of that which was
To be possessed and is. But this cannot

Possess. It is desire, set deep in the eye,
Behind all actual seeing, in the actual scene,
In the street, in a room, on a carpet or a wall,

Always in emptiness that would be filled,
In denial that cannot contain its blood,
A porcelain, as yet in the bats thereof. (43-54)

11. Even though Stevens’ hero is one to whom “we pray” (38), it is an injunction that is addressed to him, whose effect is oddly similar to that of the aforementioned supposition. Indeed, as a result of this imperative, the linguistic status of these four tercets remains unclear. Does the speaker acknowledge them as his own? Who is their author? The saint authorizes them. He is the authority upon which their claim to validity is based. But that authority itself is only a figment of the I who is the true author of canto III. Where does the focus of the canto lie? On the aphorisms it contains, or on their provisionality, due to the main

speaker's problematic involvement in his own utterances? The question seems doubly justified, since not only does the imperative make it difficult to assess the speaker's adherence to the truths professed here. It is also contained within a hypothetical clause which makes its power as an imperative conditional on the initial hypothesis ("if it is misery that infuriates our love," [40]) being verified.

12. As was observed previously, desire is inherent in the poem's syntax: it is a longing for semantic closure which must remain unanswered, much as poetic vision stems from a "desire, set deep in the eye" (49) which has little to do with actual seeing, the direct equivalent of "love in possession" (47). The central dimension of unfulfilment explains why, instead of taking on the shape of a Keatsian well-wrought urn, the poem remains at the stage of "[a] porcelain, as yet in the bats thereof" (54)—a metaphor it would take particularly blind devotion to Stevens to consider beautiful, which of course is the entire *point*. Not only is the word "bat" so rare, in the sense of "a flat round slab of clay or plaster especially as representing the first stage in plate or saucer making,"² that its presence can only seem odd to the average reader. The preposition "thereof," additionally, smacks of legalese, and brings the canto to a rather wooden close. From the angle of a poetics privileging unfulfilment, such clumsiness is not just oddly appropriate, bringing proof that if "the plainness of plain things is savagery" (55), so is the plainness of plain language. More importantly it is emblematic of a tension inherent in the poetic idiom of "An Ordinary Evening in New Haven," where Stevens often speaks the language of the law, notably when he legislates by way of aphoristic turns of phrase, yet manages to avoid being bound by maxims which wear the form of legality without retaining its power, since their logical grounding is often intentionally flawed.

13. This is markedly the case in the assertion that "[t]he plainness of plain things is savagery"—one of the many painfully unassuming polyptotons of the sequence³—which generates its own set of analogies:

The plainness of plain things is savagery,

As: the last plainness of a man who has fought

Against illusion and was, in a great grinding

² I quote from *Webster's Third International Dictionary*.

³ See for instance the variations on the adjective "savage" and the noun "savagery" in lines 55-6, 61-2, and 64 and on the verb and the noun "cry," lines 61-2.

Of growling teeth, and falls at night, snuffed out

By the obese opiates of sleep. [...] (55-9)

14. As was seen earlier, when Stevens began the poem with the gnomic statement that “[t]he eye’s plain version is a thing apart” (1) he immediately qualified this principle by defining the sequence as “an and yet, and yet, and yet” (3) of which the lines quoted above are an instance. Here, “the eye’s plain version” is the version of the man “who has fought/ Against illusion” (56-7). Yet despite its announced theme, the language of this canto is opaque, and calls for its own vulgate, beginning with the conjunction “as” which—somewhat paradoxically in a canto where matching and mating are prominent themes—leaves the reader at a loss as to what it exactly *conjoins*. Does it connect “the plainness of plain things” (55) to “the last plainness of a man” (56)? Does the conjunction pertain solely to the noun that immediately precedes it? In this case “savagery/ As” (55-6) could mean, savagery of such a nature as to produce the following result: the surrender of the fighter against illusion to the opiates of sleep, the “forgetfulness divine” of Keatsian harmonies. Or does the conjunction more loosely connect the whole aphorism, “[t]he plainness of plain things is savagery,” to the rest of the canto as a somewhat hermetic gloss of its initial line? Since all three hypotheses seem equally valid, the reader is confronted with one of those “intricate evasions of as” (502) which undermine what consistency the authoritative tone of Stevens’ maxim might lead one to expect. The legislating voice subsists in exact proportion to the text’s inability to found the law it signifies.

15. The same aporia affects the status of the cry in which plain men “hear/ Themselves transposed” (62-3). Much like the all-inclusive syllable mentioned in canto VIII, the cry is defined as a unifying element:

They only know a savage assuagement cries

With a savage voice; and in that cry they hear

Themselves transposed, muted and comforted

In a savage and subtle and simple harmony,

A matching and mating of surprised accords,

A responding to a diviner opposite. (61-6)

16. “Matching” and “mating” are two operations that involve a bringing together of distinct elements: theirs is the order of simultaneity. Yet in an effort to describe analogically “simple harmony” and “surprised accords” (both taking place along the vertical axis) Stevens resorts to the language of temporal *succession*:

So lewd spring comes from winter's chastity.

So, after summer, in the autumn air,

Comes the cold volume of forgotten ghosts, (67-9)

17. The antithetical definition of the cry as “simple harmony” is thus relayed by the logical conundrum posed by correspondence read in terms of *consecution*, which makes the aphorism “a savage assuagement cries/ With a savage voice” unverifiable, since its possible truth is predicated upon a comparison whose validity rests on the unsteady ground of succession mistaken for simultaneity.

18. Given this aporia, it is no longer possible to entertain the notion that the poet's craft has anything to do with a matching and mating of objective reality and subjective perception. Nor is there any validity to the opposite position denying the very possibility of an objective reality outside of the mind. Indeed, the very formulation of the following stanzas, suspended in a syntactical no-man's land, also disqualifies the Berkeleyan hypothesis:

Inescapable romance, inescapable choice

Of dreams, disillusion as the last illusion,

Reality as a thing seen by the mind,

Not that which is but that which is apprehended,

A mirror, a lake of reflections in a room,

A glassy ocean lying at the door,

A great town hanging pendent in a shade,

An enormous nation happy in a style,

Everything as unreal as real can be,

In the inquisite eye. [...] (73-82)

19. Outside the door is a “glassy ocean.” In the room is a “lake of reflections.” Since there are reflections on either side of the threshold of vision, we only have reflections of reflections, in a direct echo of the poem’s initial question, “[t]hese houses, these difficult objects, dilapidate/ Appearances of what appearances,” (7-8), which is being repeated here with a variation, in keeping with Stevens’ definition of poetic statement as re-statement. “Poetry becomes and is a transcendent analogue composed of the particulars of reality, created by the poet’s sense of the world, that is to say, his attitude, as he intervenes and interposes the appearances of that sense,” Stevens wrote in “Effects of Analogy” (*CPP* 723). What Stevens called “attitude” is reformulated here as that “style” which may be enough to make an “enormous nation” of readers “happy,” or what it might be more appropriate to call his turn-style, a mediation between two seemingly distinct spaces, yet without any certainty as to the ontological status of what is being mediated, since the paradoxical comparison, “as unreal as real can be,” imperfectly matches the unmatchable. Only the analogy remains, together with the “inquisite,” i.e., ordinary eye as its privileged organ, to which reality is “not that which is but that which is apprehended” (73), so that only shades and styles of vision exist.
20. If what Stevens calls “inescapable romance” (73) qualifies as a mode of analogical reading, then it features among the “evasions of as” whereby “[r]eal and unreal are two in one” (491). The paradox of inescapable evasion thus turns out to be the poem’s logical matrix, the rhetorical analogon of the cry in which plain men hear themselves “transposed,” and which, therefore, functions as a compromise formation of interiority and exteriority.
21. In order to be successful, allegory as Stevens sees it needs to avoid the pitfalls encountered by John Bunyan in his *Pilgrim’s Progress* where “we are distracted by the double sense of the analogy” (*CPP* 708). Instead it should aim for “an effect similar in kind to the

prismatic formations that occur about us in nature in the case of reflections and refractions” (CPP 708). Canto VI, written in the same allegorical vein as the lines about the two giants in canto I, treads this fine line between the hieratic and the prismatic. Its logic is, at best, elusive. Formally, it is built around the Alpha-Omega duality representing two complementary versions of reality. “Naked Alpha” and “hierophant Omega” are both interpreters of life. While the poem’s discourse defines them as interpreters, however, in its enigmatic writing they primarily function as motives *for* interpretation. They inhabit the interval between two sets of interpretations: the one each of them personifies, and the one they demand from the reader. In other words, they echo Stevens’ earlier distinction between *love* “in possession of that which was/ To be possessed” (47-8) and *desire* as an “emptiness that would be filled” (52), as incipience rather than fulfilment (“A porcelain, as yet in the bats thereof” 54). In the immediate context of canto V, Alpha and Omega also constitute additional “branchings” of the polarity set up in the lines:

[...] Why, then, inquire
 Who has divided the world, what entrepreneur?
 No man. The self, the chrysalis of all men

 Became divided in the leisure of blue day
 And more, in branchings after day. One part
 Held fast tenaciously in common earth

 And one from central earth to central sky
 And in moonlit extensions of them in the mind
 Searched out such majesty as it could find. (82-90)

22. Alpha clings to perceptual reality and is fearful of Omega’s “prolongations of the human” (98), which are a direct echo of the “moonlit extensions” (89) that the divided chrysalis reaches for in an attempt to reach beyond the reality of the senses. Omega, conversely, has access to esoteric knowledge. He is depicted kneeling in an attitude of worship “on the edge of

space," i.e. on the threshold of the invisible whose mysteries he guards like the "hierophant" (92) of ancient Eleusinian mysteries.

23. Stevens' fascination with dualistic logic is seldom more apparent. The divided self troped as a tree rooted in earth and branching out into the sky retains a degree of unity before being split into Alpha and Omega in the rewording of the polarity contained in canto VI. Yet Alpha and Omega are themselves resolved into a harmonious synthesis in the tercets:

These characters are around us in the scene.

For one it is enough; for one it is not;

For neither is it profound absentia, (100-2)⁴

24. They are then again split apart in the canto's final tercet, which reasserts their difference in somewhat cryptic terms of "the end and the way/ To the end" (106).

25. Binaries thus repeatedly fold and unfold, like so many reverberations of the paradoxical "savage and subtle and simple harmony" (64) of the cry whose connection with the agency of the law has a direct bearing on the fact that both allegories are described as self-appointed "custodians of the glory of the scene" (104). They thus both embody the agency of the superego super-vising the scene/seen, ruling over the visible toward which poetic vision is directed and which stares back at the poet in cantos IX and XXV, as will be discussed further down.

26. Such contradictory, "fitful sayings" (304) preclude any possibility of closure or lasting synthesis. Theirs is the aimless dynamic of constant restatement and/or correction. It comes as no surprise, therefore, if canto VII dismisses as equally unsatisfactory "such chapels and such schools" (109) as "Alpha" and "Omega" previously stood for, even though they arguably both represented facets of Wallace Stevens' own poetic output. Alpha who "continues to begin" (107) is an apt self-portrait of the speaker constantly revisiting his subject in "Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird" (CPP 74), while Omega "refreshed at every end" (108) is the elder Stevens in renewed contemplation of the auroras of autumn. Yet, in a revisionary gesture consistent with the valuation of desire and lack above possessive love, the speaker

4 The same operation is repeated in the following tercet, where tragic and comic blend into the commonplace:

These fitful sayings are, also, of tragedy:

The serious reflection is composed

Neither of comic nor tragic but of commonplace. (304-6)

now *dismisses* these identifications and mirrors himself in the “impoverished architects” (110) who, in their destitution, nonetheless manage to create poetry out of the “things exteriorized/ Out of rigid realists” (114-5).

27. As Charles Altieri once argued, Stevens, by exploring the multiple valences of “as” throughout the poem, also opens up the possibility for the reader to further his own ability to develop analogies.⁵ The following lines are a case in point:

The objects tingle and the spectator moves

With the objects. But the spectator also moves

With lesser things, with things exteriorized

Out of rigid realists. It is as if

Men turning into things, as comedy,

Stood, dressed in antic symbols, to display

The truth about themselves [...] (112-8)

28. The agency to which the analogy of lines 115-6 is to be referred remains ambiguous: the anonymous spectator, the speaker himself, or conceivably the reader, equally qualify as those to whom “it is as if” men became allegories of themselves. “[T]hings exteriorized// Out of rigid realists” is too intentionally vague a description for any single reading to claim pertinence over others. Those “rigid realists” are, nonetheless, reminiscent of “the plain men in plain towns” (59) of canto IV, since their way of making the interior manifest is reminiscent of romantic pathetic fallacy—a process involving the “matching and mating” of private emotion and its counterpart in the visible world and, conversely, the discovery of “moonlit extensions” of the visible “in the mind” (89).

29. The metaphor of the tree whose roots cling to “common,” ordinary earth and whose branches reach for “central sky” once again underlies Stevens’ dualist depiction of the insight

⁵ “Everything about the ‘as’ depends on agents considering who they become and what tacit resources they call upon as they use the term.” (C. Altieri, *Painterly Abstraction in Modernist American Poetry*, 345).

to which the desiring⁶ and, therefore, “impoverished” architects—avatars of the poet himself — have access: an insight into the power vested in “rigid realists” to adhere to the “inexquisite” (82) and the “commonplace” (121), and to frame “miraculous,/ Conceptions of new mornings of new worlds” (122-3) in the manner of the early Stevens of “The Comedian as the Letter C”:

The tips of cock-cry pinked out pastily,
As that which was incredible becomes,
In misted contours, credible day again. (124-6)

30. We now realize that even though canto VII seemingly diverged from the identificatory positions delineated in canto VI, the dichotomy at work in this previous canto still prevails. What defines the poetics of this ordinary evening is once again this pendulum motion of the poetic imagination as it travels from the credible to the incredible, from the miraculous to the mundane, an oscillatory motion which lends itself to innumerable rewordings, as witness the first two tercets of canto XXII:

Professor Eucalyptus said, "The search
For reality is as momentous as
The search for god." It is the philosopher's search

For an interior made exterior
And the poet's search for the same exterior made
Interior... (379-84)

31. Given Stevens' fascination with what he once called “The Pure Good of Theory” (*CPP* 289), the distinction between poet and philosopher in these lines seems no less provisional than other dichotomies which, like Alpha vs. Omega, last only the space of a canto, and are always subject to a further rewording. As the signified of those polarities keeps receding, what remains is the movement away from and back to the “form” (127) of “credible day” (126), a

⁶ In canto XI of “Esthétique du Mal” men, as “[n]atives of poverty, children of malheur,” (*CPP* 284) are born of necessity, like Eros. Stevens suggests that this poverty is a condition shared by all desiring subjects.

pure binary rhythm which reverberates throughout the sequence.

32. The tryst between “ourselves” and “the real” which is staged in canto VIII does not substantially deviate from this pattern. More important is the pivotal role once again attributed to the *cry* in the negotiation that takes place in this canto between “ourselves” and “her” (136), i.e., what Stevens elsewhere calls “the earth,/ Seen as inamorata” (460-1). In an effort to trope the poet-lover’s receptivity to the exterior world, Stevens resorts to an intriguing series of variations on the motif of inclusion. Thus the “credible day” of canto VII becomes a “form,” then “a health of air” that we breathe into “our sepulchral hollows.” This metaphor of human lungs is a reworking of the “transparent dwellings of the self” (22) in which “[i]mpalpable bells, transparencies of sound” (21) were allowed to resonate once the outside world, under the metonymy of New Haven’s houses, had become part of our composition (in the physical and artistic sense of the word) through the agency of the imagination. This, however, is only the first of several variations that stretch throughout the canto’s central tercets:

Our breath is like a desperate element

That we must calm, the origin of a mother tongue

With which to speak to her, the capable

In the midst of foreignness, the syllable

Of recognition, avowal, impassioned cry,

The cry that contains its converse in itself,

In which looks and feelings mingle and are part (134-40)

33. Some clarity may be gained by breaking down these meandering lines into distinct grammatical rather than metrical units. The following vulgate then emerges:

Our breath is like

a desperate element/ That we must calm,

the origin of a mother tongue/ With which to speak to her,

the capable/ In the midst of foreignness,

the syllable/ Of recognition, avowal, impassioned cry,

The cry that contains its converse in itself/ In which looks and feelings mingle and are part

34. Breath is that out of which “the signal/ To the lover” and a “mother tongue” are elemented, in the now obsolete sense of the verb, meaning: to compose out of elements. It is the familiar (the mother tongue) we use to address, i.e., to designate *reality-as-lover* as opposed to the radically foreign *real* which, in Stevens’ poetic idiolect, is here “the anonymous color of the universe.” While contained “in the midst of foreignness,” our breath is also an element in the etymological sense conjured up by the adjectival noun “capable” (136) i.e., *able to contain* reality and provide a habitat for it in language. In the word “syllable” those two meanings of the word “element” coalesce. The syllable is both elemental and, through its Greek etymology, something which allows such distinct symbolic operations as “recognition” and “avowal” to co-exist; but when it takes on the form of an “impassioned cry,” it becomes a locus where such distinctions no longer hold sway, a metaphor for the imperceptible moment of overlap between question and answer when the possibility of their mutual transformation emerges, reversing the order of temporal succession and ordinary syntax; and for those moments of immediacy when verbal exchange is short-circuited: it alternately mediates and cancels mediation, contains, and is contained. The cry’s *extimate* position is conditioned by the semantic indeterminacy to which it is confined due to the imbedded syntax of the lines: “Our breath is like [...] the syllable/ Of recognition, avowal, impassioned cry, // The cry that contains its converse in itself” (134-139). Does line 139, “[t]he cry that contains its converse in itself,” modify “impassioned cry” (138) in the preceding tercet? Or, as was suggested earlier, do we connect it to “Our breath is like [...]” (134)? The “cry that contains its converse in itself” does not allow itself to be contained within strict syntactical boundaries. Its status as a modifier varies. It is a pulsatile object which mediates between the subject and the real sifted through the sieve of the imaginary and transformed into the vulgate of poetic *reality*.

35. If there is no sexual relationship as Lacan repeatedly stated, poetry, for Stevens, is a substitute for this absence. In this suppletive logic the cry plays a crucial role in “An Ordinary Evening in New Haven.” Occurring at the juncture of the real of the body and of the symbolic,

it is particularly apt to host imaginary constructs involving various forms of con-junction, i.e., fantasies of origins. In *Démasquer le réel* Serge Leclaire points out that “no origin is conceivable unless it has been constituted after the fact, and even then: provided its atemporality or simply its entanglement within the structure of fantasy is unveiled during analysis” (39). To such an ex-post facto reconstruction, I would argue that Stevens’ poem also offers a privileged space. Leclaire adds that originary fantasies connect the subject to the object-cause of his/her desire, an object upon which “the construction of his-her desire is founded.”⁷ In this nexus of fantasy, the point of origin itself occupies the place of the object:

Let us take the extremely common example of originary fantasies. How those fantasies are set up is a well-known fact: the question is frozen between *a point of origin, substituted for the object*, which is projected into the past, and a point in the present in which it allegedly unfolds and which the subject usually identifies when he/she asks: where do I come from?⁸

36. The structure of originary fantasies thus involves a “representation standing in for the object,” (Leclaire 38) which is characterized by “the potential for promised jouissance it opens up,” (Leclaire 38) but which also contains jouissance within the limits of the originary scenario. The Stevensian cry is such a representation. In it “looks and feelings mingle” (140) as do question and answer (141), and most famously, the poem and its “occasion” in the lines: “The poem is the cry of its occasion,/ Part of the res itself and not about it” (199-200).

37. It is interesting to note that in several of its occurrences the word “part” is placed at the end of a line (86 & 140), as if to accentuate its fragmentary dimension. The relationship of part to whole is notably at the center of canto XII, where the poem itself is made to *relate* synecdochically to the “res itself” (200), as the partial object surrendered to the earth “[s]een as inamorata”—a cruel lover who, when no longer kept at a distance, carries the threat of the return to formlessness, and whose whispered injunction is grating enough to prove a barely euphemized invitation to surrender to the death drive:

[...] These lineaments were the earth,

Seen as inamorata, of loving fame

Added and added out of a fame-full heart ...

⁷ S. Leclaire, *Démasquer le réel*, 38.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 37. My emphasis.

But, here, the inamorata, without distance
And thereby lost, and naked or in rags,
Shrunk in the poverty of being close,

Touches, as one hand touches another hand,
Or as a voice that, speaking without form,
Gritting the ear, whispers humane repose. (460-68)

38. In canto XII the cry of the thing echoes within the walls of the poem's stanzas as does "the reverberation/ Of a windy night as it is" (202-3). It opens up a void where the absence of the thing is made to coincide with the pure moment. The poetics of the moment and the poeticization of what Stevens elsewhere calls the "ding an sich" (*CPP* 23) thus coincide in the interval where the intermittent brilliance of the cry as object outlines the contour of the absent thing:

The mobile and the immobile flickering
In the area between is and was are leaves,
Leaves burnished in autumnal burnished trees

And leaves in whirlings in the gutters, whirlings
Around and away, resembling the presence of thought,
Resembling the presences of thoughts, as if,

In the end, in the whole psychology, the self,
The town, the weather, in a casual litter,
Together, said words of the world are the life of the world. (208-16)

39. What matters here is the authoritative, commanding tone as much as the actual meaning of the somewhat complacent aphorism which brings canto XII to a close. No less important is the fact that the flickering, intermittent absence-presence of the object is isolated as such prior to its being identified as leaves turning in the wind (209)⁹, and that it gives rise to the whirlwind in which various avatars of the Emersonian “me” and “not-me” merge in *a unison* which, though described as a “casual litter,” lends itself to the trans-l(itter)ation situated in the canto’s coda. It is “as if” (213) the moment of the object-cry overlapped with the moment of the sexual relation as fantasized harmony of subject and object and/or of the voice that proclaims that the words of the world and its life, poetry and what is excluded from the signifying order, are one.
40. It then behooves Stevens to celebrate the imaginary marriage of the poet and a reality whose faithfulness (178), secured by fantasy, cannot be doubted. This union he performs within the fabric of language by means of hyphenation, as in the antithetical compound “oldest-newest” (274-5) uniting past and present, making visible in the form of a hyphen “the area between is and was” (209), which is nothing but the temporal equivalent of such symmetries as “mobile” vs. “immobile,” (208) “ponderable” vs. “imponderable” (266), “[t]he instinct for heaven” vs. “[t]he instinct for earth, for New Haven, for his room” (256-7). The most minimal of paronomasias serves a similar purpose, as when the difference between identity and similitude is made to depend on the barely noticeable substitution of one letter for another in “as and is are one” (259).
41. The “casual litter” (215) mentioned in canto XII actually defines the hodge-podge poetics of this ordinary evening when it comes down to naming conjunction. Sometimes Stevens’ formulations are so shoddy and vague that only lineation reminds us that we are actually reading poetry:

[...] The enigmatical

Beauty of each beautiful enigma

⁹ This association between the cry and the force of the wind materialized by dry leaves harks back to “Domination of Black.” Stevens’ intuition is that the void in the real opened up by the cry is similar to the semi-vacuum created by an upward draft.

Becomes amassed in a total double-thing.

We do not know what is real and what is not (164-7)

42. Conversely, there are some wildly inventive phrases occasionally straddling several languages, as when Stevens reformulates his rather plain, if not downright ordinary, “total double-thing” as “[t]he gay tournamonde of a single world” (258). Other passages qualify as more conventionally poetic—in a more vatic, Hölderlinian mode—, for instance when Stevens describes the moment when the “instinct for heaven” (256) and the “instinct for earth” (257) join forces as “wide delvings of wings” (255), a formula combining the earth-bound activity of digging with the poetic *topos* of the wings of song.
43. If we take a broader look at the entire sequence, its way of pairing the anecdotal and the theoretical, the local and the atopic, the personal and the anonymous, makes it a poetic hybrid whose only law is juxtaposition rather than logical succession. The portrait of the poet that emerges from “An Ordinary Evening in New Haven” is thus *cumulative*: it is a composite including the barely sketched characters of the “impoverished architects” (110), the ephēbe who “seeks out/ The perquisites of sanctity” (218-19), professor Eucalyptus who “seeks// god in the objet itself” (240-1), the “scholar [who] in his Segmenta, left a note” (469), the anonymous voice behind such aphorisms as “Reality is the beginning not the end”, and the collective “we” (“We seek/ Nothing beyond reality” [155-6]).
44. Likewise some cantos are clearly time- and space-bound, as when Stevens quite exceptionally uses a deictic to observe that “[t]he imaginative transcripts were like clouds,/ Today” [343-4]), or when towards the end of the sequence, he affords his reader a glimpse of a seascape which, though it apparently wears the colors of an ordinary evening, has little to do with New Haven, a town which Stevens seems intent on avoiding to describe, as the allusion to “mountains” amply demonstrates:

How facilely the purple blotches fell

On the walk, purple and blue, and red and gold,

Blooming and beaming and voluming colors out.

Away from them, capes, along the afternoon Sound,

Shook off their dark marine in lapis light.

The sea shivered in transcendent change, rose up

As rain and booming, gleaming, blowing, swept

The wateriness of green wet in the sky.

Mountains appeared with greater eloquence

Than that of their clouds. [...] (451-60)

45. Throughout many cantos, however, Stevens privileges the timelessness of the gnomic present (“The consolations of space are nameless things” [415]) and shows little interest in referential fact.

46. Finally, one of the main difficulties that we encounter in Stevens’ poetic sequence stems from the abrupt changes of pace imposed on the reader by the utter hermeticism of some passages contrasted with the fluidity and plainness of others. Certain lines are fairly unambiguous:

We keep coming back and coming back

To the real: to the hotel instead of the hymns

That fall upon it out of the wind. [...] (145-7)

47. Others challenge the reader to interpretive leaps whose validity is bound to remain a matter of conjecture:

In the metaphysical streets, the profoundest forms

Go with the walker subtly walking there.

These he destroys with wafts of wakening,

Free from their majesty and yet in need
Of majesty, of an invincible clou,
A minimum of making in the mind,

A verity of the most veracious men,
The propounding of four seasons and twelve months.

The brilliancy at the central of the earth. (190-8)

48. The poem's underlying fantasy, however, is that none of these contradictory features are dissociable from their counterparts. They are all integral parts of the same general economy where they dovetail harmoniously—an economy which only wears the trappings of Hegelian dialectics. Indeed, Stevens' poetics of restatement is less geared toward the possibility of a final synthesis than it is weighed down by the compulsion to invent new formulations for the same imaginary structure in accordance with the core principle set forth in "The Relations Between Poetry & Painting":

The theory of poetry, that is to say, the total of the theories of poetry, often seems to become in time a mystical theology or, more simply, a mystique. The reason for this must by now be clear. The reason is the same reason why the pictures in a museum of modern art often seem to become in time a mystical aesthetic, a prodigious search of appearance, as if to find a way of saying and of establishing that all things, whether below or above appearance, are one and that it is only through reality, in which they are reflected or, it may be, joined together, that we can reach them. (CPP 750)

49. A direct echo of this paragraph's mystical overtones may be found in the lines:

[...] We seek

Nothing beyond reality. Within it,

Everything, the spirit's alchemicana

Included, the spirit that goes roundabout

And through included, [...] (155-9)

50. Bearing in mind that alchemy relies on the pre-scientific belief that the philosopher's stone may be obtained from the union of male and female principles, Stevens' discovery of "the spirit's alchemicana" (157) in *New Haven*, as well as in the cry where the poem and its occasion are conjoined, appears as an avatar of the fantasy of origins—be they the origins of poetry—discussed in the previous paragraphs. In this respect, the allegorical wedding of the Ruler of Reality to the Queen of Fact staged in canto XXVII calls for a metapoetic reading, though perhaps not along the lines intended by Stevens himself, i.e., as yet another illustration of the process whereby fact is metamorphosed into "reality" by the workings of the imagination, but as an allegory of the poet's treatment of polarities throughout the sequence, where thematic and structural opposites are juxtaposed much in the same way as the Ruler of Reality, "with the Queen/ Of Fact, lies at his ease beside the sea" (485-6).
51. Canto XXVIII contains a somewhat strange syllogism—strange in the sense that beside its syllogistic form its contents have more to do with psychoanalytical than philosophical truth—which has a direct bearing on this allegory. Indeed the following tercets specify the terms of the relationship between "Ruler" and "Queen" within the space of fantasy:

If it should be true that reality exists

In the mind: the tin plate, the loaf of bread on it,

The long-bladed knife, the little to drink and her

Misericordia, it follows that

Real and unreal are two in one: *New Haven*

Before and after one arrives or, say,

Bergamo on a postcard, Rome after dark,

Sweden described, Salzburg with shaded eyes

Or Paris in conversation at a café. (487-95)

52. These lines suggest that the reader curious about what external fact looks like once it has

been processed into “reality” by the (poetic) mind will find little there that does not resemble the most ordinary implements of daily living, such as might feature in a Dutch still life. Those include “the tin plate, the loaf of bread on it,/ The long-bladed knife, the little to drink” (488-9). So modest and unassuming are those objects, and so frequently associated in our representation of the bare necessities of life, that it seems hardly worth the trouble to connect this vignette to anything but the immediate context of a canto which, like many others, “endlessly elaborat[es]” (496) on the distinction between “Bergamo on a postcard” and the actual city.

53. Indeed, it seems equally inappropriate to disrupt the natural order of association between the details of this Stevensian still life. The “loaf of bread” (488), for instance, inevitably calls for the “long-bladed knife” (489) necessary to cut it, and there is no obvious reason to link it to “her// Misericordia” (489-90), a Latin word whose connection to the rest of the set is actually quite problematic. Problematic, that is, unless we retrace our steps to canto IX where in an effort to outline “[t]he poem of pure reality” (148), Stevens defines it in dynamic terms that are a prefiguration of the poem’s final troping of reality as “a shade that traverses/ A dust, a force that traverses a shade” (557-8). In canto IX, likewise, the “poem of purely reality” is a trajectory “[s]traight to the transfixing object, to the object/ At the exactest point at which it is itself,/ Transfixing by being purely what it is” (150-2).

54. It seems only fair to apply the logical tools made available to us by Stevens himself here: “if it should be true that” (487) a “long-bladed knife” (489) were a “transfixing object” (150), “it follows that” (490) reality, although loving (or “inamorata” [461-3]) and merciful (i.e., gifted with “[m]isericordia” [490]), is “transfixing” as the sharp blade and “point” of a knife. It also follows from reality being described as merciful that the poet who defines himself as her unfulfilled lover whose desire is “set deep in the eye” (49) is deserving of mercy, like one who suffers. Not only is this self-portrait of the poet as the martyr of the visible consistent with reality including “the habits of saints” (161). It is also reminiscent of the prayer to the “hero of midnight” (38) on a Golgotha-like “hill of stones” (39). Added to the Sulpician overtones carried by the Latin term “misericordia,” this converging network of signifiers points toward another fantasy configuration featuring the poet as he who willingly subjects himself to the passion of the gaze that traverses and/or transfixes him from the midst of the visible world placed in the position of the loving yet pain-inflicting Other to whose fragmentary enjoyment

the poet contributes his share within the framework of scopic fantasy.

55. I am reminded here of Lacan's observations on the Baroque in *Seminar XX*, notably when he points out how the baroque era "oozes with representations of martyrs" (SXX 105) whose suffering bodies are reduced to fragmentary objects of scopic enjoyment as if by means of this "reduction of the human species" (SXX 105) it were possible to turn the body into the signifier of the Other's *jouissance*, and thus secure the Other's consistency by including the body subjected to castration within an economy of enjoyment governed by the pleasure principle where "the partner of that *I* which is the subject [...] is not the Other, but its substitute in the form of the cause of desire" (SXX 114). Only within such an economy is it possible to posit that there is oneness, which is precisely what Stevens sets out to do in "An Ordinary Evening in New Haven": although the poem's overt preoccupation is with the contour the world takes when caught "[i]n the movement of the colors of the mind" (24), it turns out that vision rests not only in the eye of the beholder, but also in that which is being beheld, a necessary inversion so that the "res itself" (200)—Stevens' own version of the Lacanian "inhuman partner" (SVII 185), which was already posited in the hymn to unfulfilled desire contained in the initial cantos—may be reduced to the dimension of the object.
56. The reversibility of the seer and the seen is indeed what connects Canto XXV to the rest of the sequence:

Life fixed him, wandering on the stair of glass,

With its attentive eyes. And, as he stood,

On his balcony, outsensing distances,

There were looks that caught him out of empty air.

C'est toujours la vie qui me regarde... This was

Who watched him, always, for unfaithful thought.

This sat beside his bed, with its guitar,

To keep him from forgetting, without a word,

A note or two disclosing who it was.

Nothing about him ever stayed the same,

Except this hidalgo and his eye and tune,

The shawl across one shoulder and the hat. (433-44)

57. Stevens' allegory of life as a gender-neutral hidalgo holding "its" guitar conjures up the intertext of "The Man with the Blue Guitar" (*CPP* 135) whose eponymous character asserts that "[t]hings as they are/ Are changed upon the blue guitar" as metaphor of the poetic imagination. Interestingly, the man in this earlier poem is portrayed as "[a] shearsman of sorts" (*CPP* 135), which confirms, if need be, that transfixing object and watchful hidalgo are two facets of the gaze imagined in the field of the Other, the master reduced to the castrating and/or interdicting look that "life" casts upon the subject, demanding of him a faithfulness to match the "faithfulness of reality" (178). It should be noted, additionally, that the hidalgo's "eye and tune," i.e., the registers of the gaze and of the voice, are intricately linked here. This is consistent with their being both connected to "the drive involving desire to the Other"¹⁰ (Assoun 96) vested with a presumption of power which may indifferently exert itself in the form of a domineering gaze or of a seductive voice like the one which is heard preaching that there is oneness in New Haven after sunset:

If, then, New Haven is half sun, what remains,

At evening, after dark, is the other half,

Lighted by space, big over those that sleep,

Of the single future of night, the single sleep,

As of a long, inevitable sound,

10 Translation mine.

A kind of cozening and coaxing sound,
And the goodness of lying in a maternal sound,

Unfretted by day's separate, several selves,
Being part of everything come together as one. (402-10)

58. The sound one hears is also, for all its "goodness," the homonym of the sound in which one may drown, as we are reminded in the lines "capes, along the afternoon Sound,/ Shook off their dark marine in lapis light" (454-5). "Reality," "earth," "New Haven," "the inamorata," "life," the "hidalgo," are restatements of "The dominant blank, the unapproachable" (295), "the late president, Mr. Blank" (549) whose "Romanza out of the black shepherd's isle,/ Like the constant sound of the water of the sea" (364-5) underlies the fantasies delineated this far, fantasies in which the world as other appears in the predatory guise of a threatening gaze or a seductive "single voice in the boo-ha of the wind" (378) beckoning to the subject to make himself the "consort" of its enjoyment, albeit fatal. This romanza, however, is not exclusively contained in the meaningless sound of the sea as amplified by the Ruler of Fact, the texture of whose pronouncements is privileged over their text in the lines:

[...] "The sibillance of phrases is his
Or partly his. His voice is audible,
As the fore-meaning in music is." [...] (478-80)

59. Due to their specific gnomonic temporality, Stevens' adagia are moments of stasis in the poem's progression, islands of meaning where the inevitability of statement is made to echo and amplify "the will of necessity" asserted in canto XXI. Are we then to conclude that the poet's voice completely merges with the master's in "An Ordinary Evening in New Haven"?
60. Possibly so, but matters of voice and questions of logic are quite distinct, and it may well be that what is conceded to the master's discourse in the poem's themes, is simultaneously withheld in its syntax. Canto XXVII, where the imprint of the master's discourse is most noticeable, amply demonstrates this in the mock-logic of its opening lines:

A scholar, in his Segmenta, left a note,

As follows, "The Ruler of Reality,

If more unreal than New Haven, is not

A real ruler, but rules what is unreal." (469-72)

61. If A, then B: these lines are voiced in the form of two logical moments following each other. Logic and syntax, however, are at odds. In order for the aphorism to make sense, we need to interpret the condition, "if more unreal than New Haven," to apply to "Reality," not to the ruler thereof. If what we call "Reality" paradoxically turns out to be more unreal than what New Haven stands for in the eye of the poet, then the ruler of that reality "rules what is unreal," and therefore does not qualify as a "real ruler": while this is the most logical reading of the lines, it is not, by far, the most syntactically accurate. In the phrase, "The Ruler of Reality/ If more unreal than New Haven," the condition pertains to the noun "Ruler," not to the noun "Reality." The syntactical reference of the modifying clause thus does not coincide with its meaning. In this instance as much earlier, in the lines "Suppose these houses are composed of ourselves" (19) and "say next to holiness is the will thereto" (43), utterances remain in a limbo where they are disconnected from their point of origin or reference. The master's discourse may obey the grammar of fantasy, but its foundation in Stevens' poetic grammar proves much shakier.

62. To conclude this study I want to attempt a restatement on the subject of aphoristic provisionality with reference to one of the final cantos where the figure of the master is interestingly conjured up in the conditional mood, thus undermining at the level of syntax what imaginary authority it may hold on the stage of fantasy:

[...] A more severe,

More harassing master would extemporize

Subtler, more urgent proof that the theory

Of poetry is the theory of life,

As it is, in the intricate evasions of as,

In things seen and unseen, created from nothingness,

The heavens, the hells, the worlds, the longed-for lands. (498-504)

63. The moment of gnomic assertion is delayed as its momentum is reduced by its being framed within a hypothetical formula. Is “the theory of life, as it is” identical to the theory of *life as it is*? “Life, as it is” is life for what it’s worth, including what distortions “the intricate evasions of as” may entail. It is actually the very opposite of *life as it is*, or reality as Stevens understands the term when he writes in “About One of Marianne Moore’s Poems” that

[poetry’s] function, the need which it meets and which has to be met in some way in every age that is not to become decadent or barbarous, is precisely this contact with reality as it impinges upon us from outside, the sense that we can touch and feel a solid reality which does not wholly dissolve itself into the conceptions of our own mind. It is the individual and particular that does this.” (CPP 701)

64. In canto XII “the poem as it is” and “a windy night as it is” partake of such factuality, since one is the mere reverberation of the other. In “sight and insight as they are” (205), therefore, we now understand that there is none of the “journalism of subjects” (218) which probably qualifies as a variety of evasion.

65. Two versions of “as” thus emerge: one where “as and is are one” (259), the other where “as” only eludes being—although there ultimately is no indication that one is to be valued over the other. If New Haven “[b]efore and after one arrives” (492), i.e., New Haven conceived and New Haven experienced, are the same, then poetry theorized and the poetry that is lived are, likewise, identical:

This endlessly elaborating poem

Displays the theory of poetry,

As the life of poetry. [...] (496-8)

66. What Stevens words in terms of *display* is an analogy hinging on the conjunction “as”: heading toward New Haven is to arriving in New Haven *as* the theory of poetry is to the life of poetry. The “evasions of as” thus prove more intricate than expected—unless *evasiveness* is a

more appropriate term here. Not only does analogy evade reality through the *ex nihilo* creation of imaginary worlds (“[t]he heavens, the hells, the worlds, the longed-for lands” [504]), it *eludes* the reader as the analogy connecting “New Haven/ Before and after” to the theory and life of poetry. “There is always analogy between nature and the imagination, and possibly poetry is merely the strange rhetoric of this parallel,” Stevens writes in “Effects of Analogy” (CPP 714). Despite the poet’s obvious willingness to relay the master’s discourse, the strangeness and success of this rhetoric lie in its evasiveness.

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