

“Merely Going Round”:

Engaging with Poetic Thought Through Play in Wallace Stevens’s Poetry

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Abstract

The following thesis examines the importance of play in Wallace Stevens's poetry and how it reveals a structural isometry between Stevens's poetics and the philosophical ethics of Immanuel Kant, Hans-Georg Gadamer, and Emmanuel Levinas. This comparison demonstrates that Stevens is not concerned with writing toward the philosophical concepts of 'good' or 'truth,' but rather with determining the ontological condition of poetic thought, which he does by writing poetry that reaches toward the guiding fiction of his age, the Supreme Fiction. This study is conducted in three stages, each aiming to demonstrate the importance of change, abstraction, and pleasure (the three key terms in Stevens's *Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction*) in determining how Stevensian play operates. The first chapter identifies a turning topos operating throughout Stevens's career in which poems are abstracted from extrapoetic reality by locating them in a separate space of thought, a play space. The second chapter looks more closely at this play space and the metaphors of dwelling, seasons, and climate that Stevens uses to describe it, arguing that the seasons' relationship to climate and climate's relationship to the Supreme Fiction finds a structural correlative in the ethical theories of Kant and Levinas. Much as Kant and Levinas's theories require a metaphysical grounding, Stevens's poetry is grounded by locating itself in a separate realm, poetic thought. The third chapter makes a diachronic study of Stevens's considerations of poetic thought as a separate realm, making particular use of Jacques Rancière's critique of ethics to demonstrate that Stevens's poetry is able to avoid the ethical turn through its own poetic turn.

Résumé

La thèse suivante examine l'importance du jeu dans la poésie de Wallace Stevens et comment il révèle une isométrie structurelle entre sa poétique et l'éthique philosophique d'Immanuel Kant, Hans-Georg Gadamer, et Emmanuel Levinas. Cette comparaison démontre que Stevens n'est pas concernée par les concepts philosophique «le bien» ou «la vérité», mais essaye plutôt de déterminer la condition ontologique de la pensée poétique, ce qu'il fait en écrivant de la poésie qui tend vers la fiction dominante de son âge; la Fiction Suprême. Cette thèse est divisée en trois étapes, chacune visant à démontrer l'importance du changement, l'abstraction et le plaisir (les trois termes dans la poème de Stevens *Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction*) pour déterminer comment les jeux de Stevens fonctionnent. Le premier chapitre identifie un topos observé tout au long de la carrière de Stevens dans lequel les poèmes sont abstraits de la réalité extrapoétique, les situant dans un espace séparé de la pensée, un espace de jeu. Le deuxième chapitre examine de plus près cet espace de jeu et les métaphores de l'habitation, des saisons et du climat que Stevens utilise pour le décrire. Tout comme les théories de Kant et de Levinas nécessitent une mise en forme métaphysique, la poésie de Stevens se localise dans un domaine séparé, la pensée poétique. Le troisième chapitre fait une étude diachronique des considérations de la pensée poétique comme un domaine distinct de Stevens, faisant un usage particulier de la critique de l'éthique de Jacques Rancière pour démontrer que la poésie de Stevens est en mesure d'éviter le tournant éthique à travers son propre tournant poétique.

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Introduction

“Ethics are no more a part of poetry than they are of painting”

Stevens, *Adagia*

This thesis aims to demonstrate that this axiom of Stevens’s carries with it profound implications with regard to how one can approach his poetry and how his poetry approaches the world. Stevens’s rejection of a poetic ethics, succinctly expressed in the above line, has consistently drawn widespread attention from his critics, particularly in the form of apology meant to demonstrate that he was, in fact, engaging with ethics in his poetry. Contemporary responses by critics including Al Filreis, Jacqueline Vaught Brogan, and Justin Quinn pay close attention to the relationship between Stevens’s writing and his socio-political context and argue for an ethical orientation in Stevens’s poetry that is obscured or made less apparent through his poetic style. An equal trend in the criticism is demonstrating personal correlatives to his poetry, typically involving gesturing toward Stevens’s personal struggle with belief (Jarraway) or of isolating his individual struggle to make sense of the chaotic realities of his time (Macksey, La Guardia, Lensing). Though both of these approaches succeed in revealing particular characteristics and references in Stevens’s poetry, they revolve around the assumption that Stevens’s poetry is oriented toward an ethical reality, if we just look closely enough.

It is this assumption that I wish to challenge by arguing that Stevens had a very particular conception of how poetry operates, a conception that finds a significant structural isometry to ethical thinking precisely because it is separate from it. In a letter to Leonard C. van Geyzel, Stevens admits to having a “most intense interest” at heart, though his emphasis on individual perception and pleasure demonstrates that it is not an ethical interest:

It would be current cant to say the place of poetry in society, but I mean the place of poetry in thought and its place in society only in consequence of its place in

thought, and certainly I don't mean strict thought, but the special thinking of poetry, or, rather, the special manner of thinking in poetry or expressing thought in poetry...It is simply the desire to contain the world wholly within one's own perception of it. As it happens, in my own case, and probably in yours, within perceptions that include perceptions that are pleasant. (*L* 500-1)

In an attempt to clarify a very complex idea, Stevens moves from “the place of poetry in society” to “its place in society only in consequence of its place in thought.” This shift emphasizes that if one is to determine what Stevens thinks the “special manner of thinking” in poetry is, poetry needs to be understood first in its ontological condition within poetic thought, and second in its relation to society in light of the fact that it operates within a different kind of thought.¹ Because poetic thought is not “strict” thought in that it is not bound by an ethical or scientific imperative, it is able to pursue “the desire to contain the world wholly within one's own perception of it.”² If we take Stevens's claim seriously, this means that any critical claims made about his poetry should be made in regard to how the poet figure's “perspectives” have shaped and pre-determined what can be said in the poem.

The following three chapters will demonstrate that Stevens uses poetry as a way of approaching the poetic, which he understands as something necessarily in excess of his own “perspectives” because he locates poetic thought in a realm that transcends normal awareness.

¹ J.H. Prynne and Simon Jarvis argue for a similar condition of poetic thought. Prynne argues that “poetic thought is brought into being by recognition and contest with the whole cultural system of language,” adding that, if this is the case, we should not consider “the poet as arbiter of rightness” (598). Similarly, Jarvis argues that “Verse is not merely a kind of thinking but also a kind of implicit and historical *knowing*: the possibility that the finest minutiae of verse practice represent an internalized mimetic response to historical changes too terrifying or exhilarating to be addressed explicitly” (99). Similar to Stevens, both critics are concerned with how poetry operates differently than other modes of thought, yet is still able to respond to cultural and historical experience.

² It is because Stevens places so much emphasis on poetic thought being carried out, or, to use Prynne's terminology, on the work of poetry being done, through containment (which he views as a central “desire” and “pleasure” of poetry) that the emergent theories of Prynne and Jarvis are not engaged with more extensively. Prynne argues that “strong poetic thought frequently originates” in “The extreme density of the unresolved,” suggesting that the “emergent poem” is formed through a dialectical struggle. As we will see, Stevens views this struggle as something emergent in poems, not the other way around.

The fact that Stevens's poetics are grounded in a transcendental gesture invites comparison to the work of Immanuel Kant and Hans-Georg Gadamer, and Daniel Tompsett engages in such comparison in his study *Wallace Stevens and Pre-Socratic Philosophy*. As a scholar of philosophy, Tompsett's project is to demonstrate that Stevens's poetry is grounded in philosophical ideas, which he does by pointing to Stevens's reading of the Pre-Socratics and arguing for a subsequent alignment of his theories with their own. He argues, following Heidegger and Derrida, that Western philosophy is equally indebted to the early Greek thinkers.³ Tompsett's study is well taken, particularly in that it makes evident the significant impact that Heraclitus's conception of change exerted on Stevens's poetics. The difficulty, as with most philosophical studies of Stevens, is that Tompsett assumes that Stevens is interested in the philosophical pursuit of truth and is merely speaking of philosophical issues in a poetic way.⁴ Though Tompsett makes use of play, a term that I also make extensive use of, he argues that Stevens thinks through play for the same purpose as Gadamer and his Pre-Socratic forebears, thereby disavowing the possibility that poetry could use the same concepts for a different purpose. Tompsett's claim that the Pre-Socratics saw truth rooted within fiction remains insufficient because, as Stevens states in his letter to van Geyzel, Stevens viewed poetic thought as one kind of thought among others.

In fact, Stevens regards poetic thought as a way of thinking that is interwoven—while remaining autonomous—with other, more culturally recognizable ways of thinking. The question, then, is how to go about beginning to map Stevens's poetic “manner of thinking”

³ Tompsett's argument and the references he makes to both Heidegger and Derrida are made in regard to Western philosophy as such, not to any particular philosophers.

⁴ Sebastien Gardner makes a similar argument for interpreting Stevens when he argues that “Philosophical concepts and propositions are the chief explicit subject-matter of Stevens's poetry” adding that this similarity is hardly “merely rhetorical,” and, rather, that “poetry may prove better at integrating the ethical with the speculative ambitions of philosophy” (323-4). Gardner's claim, like Tompsett's, that poetry could be “better” at philosophy than some philosophical discourses suggests, rather, that it could be worthwhile to consider how poetic thought plays a crucial role in philosophical discourse. Stevens argues for exactly that in his lecture “A Collect of Philosophy.”

without reducing it to other dominant modes of thought; in other words, to take seriously this claim of poetry's "special manner" and see what its broader conceptual implications are. In order to do so, I will make use of another kind of special thinking—philosophical thinking about the ethical—as a sort of scaffolding for my claims about the poetic. In some ways this involves associating myself with a longstanding critical approach, ethical literary criticism, which has not, in my view, done justice to Stevens's conception of poetry.⁵ As Lawrence Buell notes: "as ethics has become a more privileged signifier it has also become an increasingly ductile and thereby potentially confusing one" (11), suggesting that the problem of ethical criticism as an umbrella term is that it covers a wide range of methodologies without addressing or engaging with their differences.

The larger assumption behind the claim that either the literary work or the act of reading the work can be subject to an ethical critique (which most if not all ethical criticism adheres to) is that all literature is written within and about the same fundamental way of thinking about reality. It is only by comparing Stevens's poetic system to the ethical systems taken for granted in ethical literary criticism that it becomes clear that "the special thinking of poetry" is on equal terms with the "special thinking" of ethics: rather than the former being subject to the latter, Stevens's poetry demonstrates an isometry between the two. Paying attention to the ontological situation of poetry in relation to ethics within Stevens's *oeuvre* operates as an important corrective to much of the critical corpus on Stevens. Consider, for example, the ethical reading of Stevens pursued by J Hillis Miller. Miller is concerned with identifying the central obligation driving Stevens's poetry and does this by arguing for what he calls a "topography of ethics." In his essay on the topographical nature of Stevens's thought, Miller argues for an ethical reading of Stevens

⁵ Exponents of this approach with a more philosophical background include Martha Nussbaum and Geoffrey Harpham, though recent critical attention has been paid by literary critics Colin McGinn, John H. Timmerman and Tim Woods.

according to a “an irresistible obligation, but one without clear directions except the demand to go beyond” (289). Though Miller avoids the error of making Stevens’s focus too narrow, he does not pursue further the broad implications of what it means to “go beyond.” I argue that Stevens’s poetry is less concerned about what poems *should* or *ought to* be speaking about—that is, what they are obligated to speak about considering a larger ethical system—than he is in exploring the conceptual space in which poetry exists, a space that is, in fact, “beyond” that of ethics.

A central aspect of Miller’s reading of Stevens that allows for this claim to topographical ethics is his parallel reading of Emerson. Though, as David M. La Guardia has shown, there are some similarities between Stevens and Emerson in their insistence of an always changing interpretation of reality as the font of meaning, he also demonstrates that this connection with nature is not guided by the desire for an “Eternal Cause” or eventual unity for Stevens as it is for Emerson (6). As Gustaaf Van Cromphout argues, Emerson’s main concern is to “establish the universal authority of the moral sentiment,” an act that requires viewing nature and human nature as connected through their equal subjugation to moral law (35). As a result, for Emerson, his discoveries about nature are equally discoveries about himself, and discoveries about himself are equally discoveries about humanity: by entering nature, man is reminded that everything is a mere reflection of a Universal Mind, and an understanding of this Mind would be necessary before one could claim to understand anything at all. The ‘feeling’ and ‘acknowledgement’ of the universal ethical law play out in a pleasurable approach to understanding precisely because understanding is, by structural necessity, an unreachable goal.

The differences between this view and Stevens’s view of nature are, perhaps, readily apparent, but they are worth spelling out as a means of clarifying why Stevens’s relation to ethics is so profoundly different from that of Emerson. Stevens’s poetics is not founded on relating poetry to the truths, values, or laws of the world. In other words, it is the medium through which

Stevens writes (poetry), rather than the phenomenological condition which surrounds him (his ecology), that operates as the epistemological limit of his work and his ethics.⁶ Whereas Emerson is in pursuit of an “Eternal Cause,” Stevens pursues a “Supreme Fiction” which, were he to ever reach it, would allow him to better understand our connection to the poetic realm, but the only insight it would give about the extrapoetic realm is that there is a limit to what can be thought about within it. If we are to say that the ethical appears in Stevens’s poetry, it would be only as a spectral presence in the very construction of the poetic space.

The following chapters explore the implications of Stevens’s insistence on “the special manner of thinking in poetry” in three steps. Stevens poetic theory operates like a series of concentric circles, so each step will involve mapping out a particular circle or level and then moving beyond it to the next one. This method allows us to follow Stevens’s thinking from the level of individual poems to the intangible, transcendental level of poetic thought. Each level adheres to the principles of abstraction, change, and pleasure, the three categories that Stevens sets out in *Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction*, and I aim to show that they are also the categories needed to determine how the Supreme Fiction relates to particular poems.

Shortly after *Notes* was published, Stevens draws out the meaning of abstraction in a letter to Hi Simons:

The abstract does not exist, but it is certainly as immanent: that is to say, the fictive abstract is as immanent in the mind of the poet as the idea of God is immanent in the mind of the theologian. The poem is a struggle with the inaccessibility of the abstract.

First I make the effort; then I turn to the weather that is not inaccessible and is not

⁶ Angus Cleghorn makes a similar critical gesture to Miller when he argues that Stevens “revolutionizes epistemology (how we know things, such as nature, aesthetics, politics, philosophy, society, knowledge itself)” (13). In his view Stevens does this in order to take a step beyond epistemology toward his primary concern, ethics.

abstract. The weather as described is the weather that was about me when I wrote this. There is a constant reference from the abstract to the real, to and fro. (*L* 434)

There is no need to pay too much attention to Stevens's use of "immanent" as a theological or philosophical concept because he is not claiming that God or the abstract is itself immanent, only that they are both immanent within the mind of those thinking about theology or poetry. What he is arguing is that one must have a conception of a fictive "abstract" in order to think about or write poetry, thereby making a fictive abstract something that is immanent within each poem without being explicitly mentioned. Stevens argues that, whereas the theologian must assume that God exists (this claim being immanent or inherent to any theological study), the poet must assume a belief in a fictive abstract without requiring that it actually exist in an objective sense. It is because, in Stevens's view, "The poem is a struggle with the inaccessibility of the abstract" that a study of its structural similarity to ethics is particularly illuminating. The ethics of both Kant and Levinas, too, are struggles to reach the inaccessible, though in their cases the inaccessible is the metaphysical.⁷

The critical tendency is to read statements such as this one as indicating Stevens's belief in an imagination-reality complex that operates according to a push and pull between the two.⁸ However, as a close reading of "It Must be Abstract" reveals, the "to and fro" Stevens here refers to is not an antagonistic or even magnetic movement, but rather a means of approaching one through the other. For Stevens, abstraction requires both a separation and a generalization from the world which can result in a loss of connection, and for this reason Stevens always conceives of it in conjunction with his second category, change. Tompsett rightly calls attention to the

⁷ The metaphysical is, for this reason, a notoriously difficult term to define. Aristotle suggests that it is the study of "being as such," whereas Kant's approach does not assume that metaphysics can be so firmly accessed or defined. Instead, Kant, like Levinas, uses the condition of metaphysics as that which is beyond any human ability to verify it as a way to ground his *a priori* claims about ethics. For our present purposes my use of 'metaphysical' can be understood as the ultimate reality that exists outside of human epistemological limits.

⁸ See James Longenbach and BJ Legget (1987).

similarity of Stevens's conception of change to a fragment of Heraclitus which Stevens likely read: "The reality which changes must all the time be one and the same reality at bottom, or else there is not meaning in the statement that it changes" (qtd. in Tompsett 34). Heraclitus's logic of a closed system which is able to change its appearances is likely the inspiration behind Stevens's connection between the abstract and change, but Stevens puts a particular twist on the relation. For Stevens, change involves a particular instantiation of the abstract, which is lost almost as soon as it is created. This theory plays out in poetry in the sense that poems are particular instantiations of abstract, unreachable poetic thought. Poems create short-lived, always changing twists on reality because they channel all of their meanings through the poetic realm, and through an awareness of these concrete instances of the abstract one becomes able to perceive the abstract as the thing behind change, "the same reality at bottom."

This relation between abstract and change gives pleasure because it allows for short-lived experiences of poetic thought that do not require truth claims to be attached to the extrapoetic world. Taking pleasure in change is a final good in itself because it allows for a different kind of experience of reality without requiring that it be more accurate than other experiences. Stevens frees the poetic from ethical constraints by structuring it in the same way as the ethical, and this freedom from constraint gives rise to a particularly *poetic* pleasure.

Due to the structure of relation between abstract, change, and pleasure, each chapter incorporates all three, though, as we will see, different levels of the poetic emphasize different elements of this trio. The first chapter addresses how these elements operate at the level of individual poems, arguing that there is a turning topos running throughout Stevens's *oeuvre*, the tracking of which can illuminate how Stevens views poems as generators of temporary meanings. By topos I mean a particular, recurring formula for how thought occurs in the poems, and by turning I mean the movement in play wherein the visual plane becomes blurred and

mixed together, with the figure suggesting disorientation, dizziness, and sometimes vertigo.⁹ The turning topos manifests rhythmically, visually, and, most importantly, conceptually, operating as the generative principle for the logic of relation and meaning in each of the poems. Its emphasis on figural turning's relation to conceptual turning also serves as a useful first step in understanding the crucial role of play in Stevens's conception of poetry's "special manner of thinking." The importance of turning as a structural part of play is discussed in Roger Caillois' theory of sociological play and Hans-Georg Gadamer's philosophical hermeneutics, and each emphasizes the importance of play as a closed space in which particular kinds of thinking can be done. Gadamer and Caillois, taken together, demonstrate the multifaceted use of play as both hermeneutic and social explanation. Though neither emphasizes poetry's particular role as Stevens does, their ideas of play can be used to illuminate what Stevens implicitly theorizes because they bear such a strong similarity. Friedrich Schiller's argument that "man only plays when in the full meaning of the word he is a man, and he is only completely a man when he plays" (Letter XXVI) will prove a useful comparison to Stevens, as well, because both Schiller and Stevens identify play as something in excess of the player's experience of it.

This chapter will trace the ways in which this turning topos can appear quite explicitly in some poems, including "The Pleasures of Merely Circulating" and "Domination of Black," and more discreetly in others such as "Extracts from Addresses to the Academy of Fine Ideas." The turning topos in Stevens is neither logical nor a-logical in that the effects it produces are purely contingent and idiosyncratic; though all of the ideas, objects, and sensations exist within the reality outside of poetry, the possible connections made between these things in poems are near-

⁹ Richard N. Soulen and R. Kendall Soulen suggest that 'topos' be understood as "a vessel sometimes filled with water, sometimes with wine, i.e., a form possessing different functions at different times depending on what is deemed appropriate to the rhetorical situation" (219). In this way, if one pays attention to the way that a topos appears (and is augmented by what fills it), one becomes better able to determine the kind of thinking that is involved.

infinite because they need not conform to the rules of extrapoetic reality.¹⁰ This continual change suggests that there is a larger, more abstract space in which the turning topos occurs, the play space.

The second chapter moves to the next level, the play space, in order to determine what pre-existent conceptual structures support the activity of turning in the poems. The logic of turning exists within this space, as well, as Stevens conceives of the space according to an otherworldly climate that is organized according to a seasonal cycle. Each season affects the turning topos in a particular way, and in this chapter I demonstrate how winter and summer operate as opposite poles in Stevens's thought, one privileging abstraction and the other change, respectively.¹¹ Just as the turning topos requires a larger space in which it can occur, the turning seasons of the climate suggest a larger space of thought, as well. By comparing Emmanuel Levinas's concept of dwelling within language as the definition of ethics to Stevens's use of dwelling as the condition of the poet, I argue that dwelling, for Stevens, is a form of abstract separation which allows for the realization of a larger transcendental abstract. I turn to a much earlier ethicist, and a major influence on Levinas's system, Immanuel Kant, in order to illustrate how Stevens's transcendental gesture from the constructed climate within the world of the poem to the Supreme Fiction finds strong structural similarity in Kant's move from the moral condition of humanity to the categorical imperative which drives all rational beings. The important difference between the two is that Stevens emphasizes that change occurs at all levels, meaning that even the Supreme Fiction, that which controls the dominant fictions of a society, can be changed and renewed, whereas Kant attaches an eternal relevance to the categorical imperative.

¹⁰ It is precisely for this reason that I emphasize a lack of competition and the ability to assert contradictions without having to eventually pick one or the other.

¹¹ The seasons appear within Stevens's poetry from the very beginning, though it is not until after *Ideas of Order* (1936) that the particular kinds of thought that each season allows begin to fully take shape in the poetry.

For Levinas and Kant, the validity of this ethical gesture is grounded in the fact that ethics is a move toward the metaphysical. The third chapter argues that Stevens views poetic thought as something equally transcendental as metaphysical thought by tracing his approach to it throughout his career. Stevens's move of locating poetic thought beyond the ontological climate established through the Supreme Fiction has two significant consequences: first, it destabilizes what Jacques Rancière calls "the ethical turn" by arguing for a poetic turn that operates according to its own set of assumptions;¹² second, it demonstrates how the pleasure gained from poetic play is a "final good" in the sense that it need not be interpreted through the ethical lens of what Al Filreis calls the pull between "confrontation" and "evasion" of reality. What both of these consequences demonstrate is that the value of poetic thought must not be evaluated according to the standards of the ethical realm.

This thesis argues that there is a structural harmony between each level of Stevens's poetic theory, making it appear like a fractal that follows the same patterns no matter how wide or narrow the frame of reference. What this type of structure allows is the ability to make claims that need only refer to the specifically poetic way of thinking. In other words, Stevens's poetry need never move beyond making statements about poetry because its entire thought process is encapsulated by the poetic. The same can be said of the ethical, which approaches the world by locating morality within a larger system of ethical thought. Though poetic thought is in excess of poetry itself (in that, for Stevens, one can think poetically outside of poetry *per se*), Stevens argues that poems are especially useful ways of determining, creating, and changing the dominant fictions of an age.

¹² Rancière defines the ethical turn as "the subsumption of all forms of discourse and practice beneath the same indistinct point of view" (110), arguing that this gesture inevitably excludes those who do not conform to the norms taken for granted by the society.

Chapter One

Determining Stevens's Poetic Orientation: Play and the Turning Topos

The concept of play is particularly useful for illuminating Stevens's poetic orientation because it sheds light on how poetry can be both entirely constructed upon reality and play according to its own rules, rather than those of extra-poetic reality. Stevens's poetic method becomes clearer when viewed through the lens of play because it reveals play's fundamental role in his way of thinking. As this chapter aims to show, play is not a feature of his poetry but rather the means through which his poetry gains its structure, creating an arena in which novel thought can occur. Both the figures in his poems and the poems themselves play by turning around, running in circles, and getting dizzy, a phenomenon that I describe as the turning topos. Ultimately these vertiginous effects end when the poem, and the playing, ends. Not only does this inevitable end of play shift how poems can be approached critically; it is also the first step in determining the space in which poetry occurs, the topic of the second chapter. The turning topos is, essentially, a particular kind of game that is characteristic of Stevens's method. It is intended to describe a way of thinking by capturing the way that elements interact with one another. As we will see, it operates according to the same logic of the space in which it occurs, suggesting a fractal harmony similar to that of an ethical structure. The turning topos is an ideal place to start a discussion of this harmonious structure because it occurs at the level of individual poems. Before delving into the topos itself, however, we need to first consider how it is formed within play.

In his sociological study of play, Roger Caillois defines play as non-productive, voluntary, and yet necessarily governed by particular rules: "The confused and intricate laws of ordinary life are replaced, in this fixed space and for this given time, by precise, arbitrary,

unexceptional rules that must be accepted as such and that govern the correct playing of the game” (7). The rules governing ordinary reality are, to say the least, highly complex, and social games offer a means through which these overwhelming intricacies can be played with and experienced through concrete (yet malleable) rules of play. If related to the method of Stevens’s poetry, Caillois’s study provides a means of understanding how reality can be the beginning and end of poetry, serving as the limit to a separate space where play occurs. The conditions of reality stand as the boundary of the game/poem: though play may incorporate these conditions in certain ways, they do not appear as they would within the realm of reality.

Hans-Georg Gadamer makes a similar claim for play’s role in his philosophical hermeneutic in *Truth and Method*, but he goes a step further by emphasizing that play is a way of thinking as much as a social interaction. He argues that “in playing, all those purposive relations that determine active and caring existence have not simply disappeared, but are curiously suspended” (102). It is not simply that when one plays one is freed from certain limitations, however: Gadamer assigns a unique ontological condition to play, saying that it “has its own essence, independent of the consciousness of those who play” (103). When entering a space of play, one is in the position to discover both previously unknown conditions of the world and the processes, structures, and orientation of the space itself. For Stevens, poetic thought occurs in this space by staging instances of play within and through poems, demonstrating that there is a larger “manner of thinking” behind these instances.

Stevens in fact suggests a Gadamerian approach to poetry in canto XXII of *Man With the Blue Guitar* (1937):

Poetry is the subject of the poem,

From this the poem issues and

To this returns. Between the two,
Between issue and return, there is

An absence in reality,
Things as they are. Or so we say.

But are these separate? Is it
An absence for the poem, which acquires

Its true appearances there, sun's green,
Cloud's red, earth feeling, sky that thinks?

From these it takes. Perhaps it gives,
In the universal intercourse.

Canto XXII is commonly mentioned in critical readings, though usually only for its seemingly impenetrable nature.¹³ The central problem of the canto is in identifying the ontological status of “things as they are.” Initially the suggestion is that they are absent from both reality and from poetry, but the fourth couplet shifts in thinking by suggesting the possibility that “things as they are” are not separate from poetry. In other words, poetry is able to add something to reality (to fill an absence) because poetry is able to access something otherwise inaccessible: through its “issue” and “return” a particular kind of thinking is made possible so that we can speak of “Cloud’s red, earth feeling, sky that thinks.” This particular kind of thinking marks an entrance into the poetic realm, whose laws of relation are independent from those of the exterior,

¹³ See in particular Vendler and Bloom.

extrapoetic world. Similar to Gadamer, Stevens is here outlining the way in which the poetic, “the universal intercourse” between abstract “poetry” and the concrete “poem,” is something one enters into rather than something momentarily created through subjective experience, and suggests that making use of this play space adds to our understanding of “things as they are” because it reveals that they have no “true appearances.”

Both Caillois and Gadamer aim to identify the rules of play—how to enter a play space and what sort of structures need to be in place in order for a game to occur. Though the majority of the rules in the “games” of Stevens’s poems are idiosyncratic structures of a given poem, there are two fundamental aspects that need to be in place in order for the turning topos to occur: it must function by combining the elements of the play space no matter how disparate or incompatible they may seem, and it must remain separate from reality while doing so; second, it must ultimately lead to its own destruction—none of the novel combinations produced by the turning topos can continue outside of the play space. From as early as 1919 in “Anecdote of the Jar,” Stevens was concerned with the way poems occupy a space that is separate from the world yet fueled by it. In this poem, the jar is an ideal container for a separate space for play and its “round[ness]” makes it especially apt for turning. But it is also “gray and bare,” suggesting a insufficiency and demonstrating that it needs the vitality of “The wilderness [that] rose up to it” to gain its poetic power. By 1949 the jars are more explicitly filled with their surroundings, as seen in “The Bouquet” where the bouquet “stands in a jar” and “A Golden Woman in a Silver Mirror” where “An attic glass” is what “The sun steps into, regards and finds itself,” suggesting that, by this point in his career, Stevens is more interested in how the act of turning could help one to better understand the environments it turns on. These later poems show an emphasis on the jar as something entered into (as play space) rather than something which incorporates the world within itself. The jar is a useful metaphor because it demonstrates how the environment

surrounding the jar can be made more vibrant and playful simply by being placed within the container, but also how the power of the jar is limited by what is placed within it. In “Woman Looking at a Vase of Flowers” (1941), the grand images of thunder, sun, and sea are all subsumed within the vision of the vase, locating them in the piano, the garden, and the water in the vase. This process is able to produce “An affirmation free from doubt” because it forces everything to occur within a limited sphere in which the assumptions and standards that would make for “doubt” are in abeyance. It molds “The crude and jealous formlessness” into “the form and the fragrance of things / Without clairvoyance, close to her.” The jar (or vase, or glass) metaphor locates the ideas being played with in a limited space, and the act of turning generates rules for the kinds of thought that can occur when elements in the extrapoetic world are combined and changed within it. The results can sometimes be surprising or counterintuitive (such as how “How blue became particular / In the leaf and bud” in “Woman Looking”) but, as Stevens notes in “Man Carrying Thing” (1946), “The poem must resist the intelligence / Almost successfully” if it is to bring any novelty or pleasure to thought; the poem should not go so far as to be nonsense, but it should consistently tease at the limit of the nonsensical through turning.¹⁴

The jar metaphor highlights how a poem both separates itself from the world and remains shaped by its surrounding environment. Stevens’s second metaphor for the poem after the jar, a building (specifically an apartment), helps demonstrate how this first rule also requires a second—that nothing continue beyond the poem: much as a building ceases to exist once its architecture has decayed or been destroyed, the meanings generated by the poem are dependent on the structure of the poem itself. These two rules of Stevensian play can be expressed in another way by saying that poems must be created through the interrelations of abstraction and change. In her reading of *Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction* Cook suggests that Stevens may have

¹⁴ Particularly, as we will see, through the experience of vertigo.

various definitions of ‘abstract’ in mind. She notes that the etymological meaning of abstract is “to draw off or apart,” a meaning he likely had in mind when he references apartments within the poem (221). I will be returning to Cook’s reading of the Stevensian abstract in *Notes* in the next chapter, but at this point I am primarily concerned with the idea that a poem could be abstract in the sense that it is as isolated as an apartment. It is drawn off from the rest of the world, yet it is a space in which the world can be contemplated. Much as the furniture, decorations, wall coverings, etc., of an apartment would serve as the catalyst for thought, what the poem (as jar) has within its purview functions in the same way: they both allow objects to be reshuffled in order to see them in a new light.

Stevens brings us closer to this idea of the poem as the abstract apartment through his other metaphor for the poem as architecture. What this metaphor adds that the jar metaphor cannot is that it emphasizes how these sites for abstraction are always temporary and incomplete: they must change because they are impermanent, unsustainable constructions. The importance that Stevens places on this aspect of poetry is evident in his selections in *Harmonium* (1923) and the later *Harmonium & Other Poems* (1931). “Architecture” (1923), a poem in seven parts that thrills at the possibilities for construction, makes no mention that one day “The bronze-filled plazas / And the nut-shell esplanades” will fall apart. In “This Solitude of Cataracts” (1948) Stevens says that “To be a bronze man breathing under archaic lapis” would be to be “released from destruction.”¹⁵ It is no surprise then that this early poem which fantasizes about rooms “bronze-filled” was taken out of the subsequent printing of *Harmonium* and a poem written four years earlier, “The Public Square” (1919), was printed in the 1931 edition instead. “The Public Square” presents the act of an aesthetic structure falling apart and can be read as a metaphor for

¹⁵ Bronze figures repeatedly in this way throughout Stevens’s career. In “Ordinary Evening in New Haven” the moon is “haunted by the man / Of bronze whose mind was made up and, therefore, died.” In the following line the reader is told “We are not men of bronze and we are not dead.”

how, when the poem ends, it loses its meaning. The fact that it was included in 1931 instead suggests that, from very early on, Stevens valued change over constancy as a poetic stance. The edifice is described as a combination of “A slash of angular blacks” and “blue slants” held together in their irregularity. Undone through its own beginning, the edifice composed of “A slash” is destroyed by “A slash.”

The poem demonstrates that poetic constructions of meaning are highly transient because they are so easily destroyed through the methods of their own construction. In this moment of clearing and revitalization, it is the moon, “The bijou of Atlas,” which is the last to leave the scene “with its porcelain leer.” Porcelain’s meaning in 1923 was closer to our meaning of bedroom (Cook *RG*) suggesting that the fact that structures will inevitably grow obsolete in their ability to express the poetry of the world is as easy to see as the moon from one’s bedroom window. Because these fictional structures built to test the bounds of what can be expressed through poetry in a particular moment are grounded in an act of the mind rather than an act of sublime truth, it takes only the most “languid janitor” to turn his attention toward a now inaccurate structure for it to immediately fall apart.

Much as as the structure and contents of the public square are what leads to its destruction, the new meanings created through turning are inevitably unsustainable for the same reason. Because poems are made through the addition of elements, connections, and experience within the idiosyncratic space of turning, it is impossible for the movement of the poem ever to come full-circle; instead, the poem must run its course until it is time for a new poem, a new apartment, to take its place. A much later poem, “Artificial Populations” (1955), compares the “state of mind” of poetry to:

weather when it has cleared

And the two poles continue to maintain it

And the Orient and the Occident embrace

To form that weather's appropriate people.

The description of the people as “appropriate” is important because it signals that the people created in this space of play can only exist within it. Once the space has been opened anew, a different kind of people, a different set of rules, will be more “appropriate.” The “embrace” of the “two poles” Orient and Occident create a circular space in which the people can exist, but the joining is not permanent—it is too prone to breakage. The artificiality of the play space in which the turning topos can occur is structurally necessary, as is the fact that it can contain only that which surrounds it through the polar embrace. Stevens's metaphors of jar and apartment are useful in illuminating these rules of poetic play because they illustrate how turning acts as a form of containment and isolation, and “Artificial Populations” demonstrates how these structures are essentially two poles, or a set of rules, in which the turning can occur.

In order to get at the ways in which turning functions as a form of play within Stevens's poetry, I will first consider two of Stevens early poems which explicitly feature characters playing circular games: “Earthy Anecdote” (1918) and “Life is Motion” (1919). Though these poems do not highlight the dizziness and vertigo that turning around in circles can produce (for that, we will need to turn to “Domination of Black”), these poems provide a foundational outline of what turning means to Stevens. In particular, they provide physicalized demonstrations of the concept of turning from an idea while never escaping it, and the yield of this form of non-confrontational engagement.

“Earthy Anecdote” is a short poem about the interaction between a hunter, the “firecat,” and the prey animal, “the bucks,” and Stevens uses this classic interaction to suggest the thought process behind his poetry. The “clattering” of the “bucks” featured in this play-world is opposed

to the “swift, circular line” they draw to avoid the “firecat,” and it is this interaction, like the two poles of “the Orient and the Occident,” which interact to form the rules of turning in the poem. Cook draws attention to the irregular use of “Over” in the second line, which suggests that the bucks are traveling over a map rather than through the state (*RG* 30). Add to this the cacaphonic effect of “clattering” and one conceives of the bucks as juggernauts ploughing through the poem. They are constructed as an unstoppable element which one assumes would bowl over anything and everything that gets in their way. Yet, the fact that the poem begins with “Every time” suggests there is a sort of ritualistic game going on (albeit, a potentially menacing one) between the two species, buck and firecat. Just as the poem “issues” and “returns” to poetry in *Blue Guitar*, the firecat and bucks are forever issuing from and returning to this infinite game. The firecat’s movements never truly provoke the bucks, as they are always able to cleanly redirect themselves, but the presence of the firecat does condition the movement of the bucks; the bucks seem to be more a source of entertainment and exercise for the firecat. The fourth stanza shows the two species at their ultimate play:

The bucks clattered.
The firecat went leaping,
To the right, to the left,
And
Bristled in the way.

The “clatter[ing]” of the bucks is matched by the “leaping” of the firecat and both are wound in the circular harmony of “To the right, to the left.” What was at first presented as the juxtaposition of a juggernaut and its obstacle is in this stanza figured as a repeating circular pattern. “Later, the firecat closed his bright eyes / and slept,” but given the cyclical nature of the process here, the reader understands this to mean that he only rests until the game begins again.

Jarraway makes note of the comparable use of circularity in both “Earthy Anecdote” and “Paltry Nude” (1919), arguing for a structural similarity to the Foucaultian circle that “must be abandoned as a faulty principle of return” (qtd. in Jarraway 68). Such a definition for circularity falls short in Stevens’s case, however, as Stevens’s circles are rarely perfect and never return to the point at which they began. For Jarraway, these poems mark an attempt by Stevens to “pitch his tent of faith in some artistic sphere,” an attempt which would later be marked as impossible and ill-aimed (68-9). In fact, this poem demonstrates the importance of allowing the turning topos its own set of physical implications, including circularity that does not come full-circle, outside of reality. Merle E. Brown hints at such a possibility in his discussion of Stevens’s poems as acts (rather than objects) that bridge the gap between individual feeling and the objective world. Brown’s argument runs into difficulty, however, when it too closely aligns physical human bodies and poems: though his theory pushes against the possibility of complete critical interpretation, it assumes that the poet’s process is fully accessible, that poetic acts are the same as non-poetic ones. According to Brown, Stevens “requires that one concentrate upon his poems as physical acts bodying forth mind” (37), thereby allowing critics to recreate the act of the poem through their own physicality. However, as we have seen in the circular movements of “Earthy Anecdote,” assuming that a circular movement in a poem is the same as a circular movement in reality is the result of a failure to allow a separate logic in the poetic realm.

Gadamer describes play as a “to-and-fro movement that is not tied to any goal that would bring it to an end,” later emphasizing that, through engaging in such movement, “it renews itself in constant repetition” (103). This reads as apt for the way that Stevens’s poetry conceptualizes circularity and turning in a non-Euclidean sense. In fact, the movement of the animals in “Earthy Anecdote” are closer to this to-and-fro movement, following one after another in a shape that most closely resembles a continuous series of figure eights: the circularity of the poem exists

only as a means of one thing avoiding another, repeatedly and with grace. The key here is that the bucks and the firecat never confront one another; in a way that is consonant with Gadamer's vision of play, it is the movement itself which carries the meaning, not the subjects who are doing it. In a letter often quoted by critics, Stevens says that the relationship between things in "Earthy Anecdote" is not a symbolic one, though it has "a good deal of theory about it" (*L* 204). The theory of the poem, I suggest, can be construed as a theory of poetic interaction. The bucks and firecat are the objects of interest in the poem, but they do not behave as "bucks" and a "firecat" do in the extrapoetic world.¹⁶ They are thought of purely through their interaction with one another as they interact, distinctively, within the world of the poem. If circularity is understood in relation to a single object or idea (in this case, both to the firecat and bucks separately), then one assumes a conceptual return: when the bucks swerve in a "circular line" to avoid the firecat, a somewhat paradoxical move in itself, they undoubtedly continue this movement back to their starting point, and when the firecat leaps "to the right, to the left" to meet the bucks, a second jump in the same direction is assumed to bring the cat back to its original resting place. Yet this is not how the circularity of either animal's movements is characterized in the poem. The bucks are "clattering / Over Oklahoma" throughout; there is never a sense of retreat or return. In this way, the circularity of the bucks and firecat can only be understood as a relationship grounded in repeatedly turning away and narrowly avoiding confrontation. They engage in circular behaviour without actually tracing circular paths. A. Walton Litz reads the firecat as the organizer of the bucks, arguing that the bucks existed in a state of chaos before the firecat was able to jump in and form a "patterned motion" (71). The rules of this game, however, seem to require mutual continual cooperation; it is impossible to say

¹⁶ A "firecat" is a particularly rich poetic device in this sense. Cook tells us that it is a real animal (*RG* 31), though its mythical, elemental name lends it an elusive nature and makes it an ideal candidate for play in an imaginative space.

which creature started moving first. The independent, emergent structure of their game is grounded in one primary rule: repetition. As Gadamer notes, “‘repetition’ does not mean that something is literally repeated—i.e., can be reduced to something original. Rather, every repetition is as original as the work itself” (120). The repetitive turning of the poem indicates a sort of “theory” of poetic interaction to Stevens, but it is not until later poems that Stevens begins to clarify precisely what this theory means.

We see a game involving turning around an object of interest again in “Life is Motion.” The children’s game here is quite simple: running circles around an object and crying out with delight. The poem’s title tells the reader that the focus is on the movement of the children, not the reasons for the game, yet there is an eerie significance that comes with the pairing of two young girls, full of life, and a tree stump, devoid of life:

In Oklahoma,
Bonnie and Josie,
Dressed in calico,
Danced around a stump.
They cried,
“Ohoyaho,
Celebrating the marriage
Of flesh and air.

Riddel reads “Life is Motion” alongside “The Pleasures of Merely Circulating” (a poem I will be dealing with shortly), arguing that they both highlight a truth about the world—that life circulates around death, the “enigmatic stillness” (*CE* 116). Similar to “Earthy Anecdote,” then, “Life is Motion” makes use of objects that are seemingly opposites, but rather than trying to uncover the conditions of this opposition, focuses instead on the type of movement their

interaction produces. The buck and firecat, prey and predator, interact by turning around one another, and the children and stump, energy and stasis, do the same. The pleasure of the game is found in the fact that the space between the stump and the girls can never be traversed, yet, the similarity of the cry “Ohoyaho” to their location, Oklahoma, suggests a profound harmony has been allowed to surface.¹⁷ The stump is an occasion and an impetus to spin around for the children, nothing more, and yet the poem seems to call for some symbolic significance to be applied to it.¹⁸ For this reason one could regard “Dance of the Macabre Mice” (1935) as an ironic reworking of the turning topos in “Life is Motion.” In this poem the mice “go round and round,” though in this case around a statue of the “Founder of the State” rather than the much less symbolically burdened stump. What was in the earlier poem an unattainable, elusive symbol that is also necessarily empty of meaning is here transfigured into the opposite: the mice (and to some extent the reader) know the history and significance of the object they orbit thanks to “the lordly language of the inscription.” Despite this over-determined meaning, the mice’s reason for turning around it is no more concrete than Bonnie and Josie’s: “This dance has no name. It is a hungry dance.” The mice have found a way to temporarily suspend the clear-cut meaning of the object precisely by spinning around it, the goal being to produce something that can fill their hunger.¹⁹

The poem has a disorienting effect in that the mice are both speaker and object in the poem. The “we” of the poem “go round and round,” “At the base of the statue,” while at the same time “The horse is covered with mice.” Later the reader is told that “We dance it out to the tip of Monsieur’s sword,” suggesting that the “we” must be mice for such an activity to be possible. More explicitly than “Earthy Anecdote” or “Life is Motion,” “Dance of the Macabre

¹⁷ The similarity between the cry and location were first made clear to me in Cook’s *Reader’s Guide*, 70.

¹⁸ The poem, only nine lines, leaves little room for details, though echoes of colonization (clearing land for a homestead) and the consequent destruction of pagan spirituality (the maypole reduced to a stump) leave their mark on this short poem.

¹⁹ The mice’s drive to satisfy their hunger echoes Stevens’s “desire to contain the world,” especially in the sense that the mice encircle the statue and figuratively contain it in their poetic gesture.

"Mice" demonstrates that Stevens's conception of going "round and round" is primarily a question of mental orientation: the turning topos creates a poetic orientation in which real world meanings are suspended and new meanings can be temporarily added to the space. No matter whether the mice are physically running around the base of the statue, swarming the horse, or dancing to and fro on the tip of the stone sword, they remain in a state of going "round and round." The dance of the mice is mirrored in the dance of associations in the poem, preventing the reader from orienting him/herself in any physical or conceptual space. The first line tells us that we are "In the land of turkeys in turkey weather," though the confusion of signifiers makes it impossible to map the space onto any real world geography. Nonetheless, I intuitively take "turkey weather" to be located in a crisp autumn, the season where the colours of the sky, leaves, and ground would best imitate the colours of the turkey. This makes the question in the third stanza—"Whoever founded / A state that was free, in the dead of winter, from mice?"—all the more puzzling and out of place. By staging a process of turning around the statue, the poem produces a sense of the familiar and unfamiliar, warm and cold, past and present, all pointing in the same direction. This plethora of association stands in contrast to the circumstances of the statue itself, which is limited to the ironic descriptors "beautiful" and "lordly." "The Founder of the State," so powerful in his capitalized "lordly language" that "tower[s]" over the insignificant mice, is overthrown through their play of turning, suggesting that poetry has the power to destabilize power structures by showing that they are not dominant in all ways of thinking.

"Earthy Anecdote" and "Life is Motion" function as lessons in one way that objects can encounter one another through the turning topos in poetry, and "Dance of the Macabre Mice" emphasizes the importance of this activity in the wake of solid, inflexible symbols. In the kind of movement Stevens sets up, ideas are neither violently smashed together nor peacefully

harmonized, but rather entwined in a game of turning but never touching.²⁰ Though in many ways “Earthy Anecdote” and “Life is Motion” deemphasize the role of the subjects within the poem, “Dance of the Macabre Mice” demonstrates the conceptual benefits of turning and dancing for the subjects in that play allows the mice to free themselves from the constraints of their surrounding symbols. Similarly, Schiller argues that play is beneficial because it brings man back to his essential freedom:

In the midst of the formidable realm of forces, and of the sacred empire of laws, the aesthetic impulse of form creates by degrees a third and a joyous realm, that of play and of the appearance, where she emancipates man from fetters, in all his relations...whether physical or moral. (*Letter XXVII*)

The historical, moral, and physical power of the statue in “Dance” is dissolved when the mice play around it, suspending the ordinary order and supplanting it with an alternative one. In a Schillerian reading, this is an aspect of aesthetic encounters because they allow relations to be viewed in a separate realm, the same function Stevens ascribes to the poetic. This type of interaction prevents any serious consideration of the symbolic nature of the objects themselves, as it limits (frees?) itself to the idiosyncratic, contingent associations that arise when these objects are a part of play. The reader may be inclined, like the speaker of “Paltry Nude,” to call this “meagre play,” though Bloom views the American Venus of this poem as an ideal “emblem for Stevens’s own poetic stance” (26). Unlike the “goldener nude” who goes directly “Across the spick torrent, ceaselessly,” the paltry nude “goes / In the circle of her traverse of the sea,” orbiting but never directly contacting the object which both birthed her and continues to draw her in. The paltry nude is “Eager for the brine and bellowing / Of the high interiors of the sea,” but

²⁰ It is because ideas turn but do not touch in Stevens’s work that I have avoided a comparison to dialectics, particularly Adorno’s negative dialectics. Rather than using art as a means of presenting the contradictions existent in ways of thinking about the world as Adorno argues, Stevens sees contradictions added in and limited to the play space.

the Stevensian Venus does not directly pursue that which it is intrigued by. Instead, her detachment reads as reflecting the pleasure she feels in anticipation of orbiting within the turning topos of play. She muses that she “would have purple stuff upon her arms,” an impossibility in her “salty harbors,” suggesting that the freedom of objects and meanings within the turning topos is her greatest desire. As Schiller notes in regard to the emancipation of man through play: “The free pleasure comes to take a place among his wants, and the useless soon becomes the best part of his joys” (68). Stevens theory suggests this as well, and the “useless” for Stevens is that which can be played with most easily.

Though “Dance” stands out among the poems discussed in that it is the only one concerned with reorienting one’s expected conception of a familiar object, even the earlier *Harmonium* poems’ non-confrontational, detached means of entering the playful space suggests that there is knowledge and significance to be gained from these encounters. Rather than a knowledge of how things work in the world, it is an awareness of how poetic thought operates. The turning topos in Stevens’s later poetry moves beyond these earlier poems by following turning and spinning around to its logical end: dizziness, vertigo, and an end to the turning. Caillois devotes an entire category of games, *ilinx* (a name he gets from the Greek word for whirlpool), to this activity. He defines *ilinx* as a kind of game “based on the pursuit of vertigo and which consist[s] of an attempt to momentarily destroy the stability of perception and inflict a kind of voluptuous panic on an otherwise lucid mind” (23). His primary examples for this kind of play are whirling dervishes and Mexican *voladores*, both of which strive to attain a particular kind of experience brought on by repeatedly turning. He draws a connection to children spinning around in circles, an action that allows the child to “reach a centrifugal state of flight from which he regains body stability and clarity of perception only with difficulty” (24). Most significantly, this game is engaged in for the pleasure it creates in the individual, whether this pleasure is

considered as bodily, intellectual, or sacred to the community. The Stevensian twist on the experience of vertigo is that he does not regard it as a way of better attuning oneself to reality; instead, Stevens regards it as an ultimate realization of poetry as a separate realm. Caillois argues that *ilinx* can have “dangerous effects” on a community because the person spinning is able to “temporarily destroy his bodily equilibrium, escape the tyranny of his ordinary perception and provoke the abdication of conscience” (31, 41). He suggests that it is important to focus on “clear-cut physical effects” rather than allowing vertigo to be experienced through “ambiguous chemical power” because it prevents the escapist potential of *ilinx* to get out of hand, especially since it could be read as something more real than bodily reality itself (51). Because Stevens positions the turning topos as an addition to reality rather than a way to uncover it, he avoids this societal implication. The vertigo achieved through poetry is a pleasurable effect of the turning topos, and, though it does uncover aspects of poetic thought, it does not privilege these experiences by giving them truth value.

We need look no farther than Stevens’s “The Pleasures of Merely Circulating” (1934) to find an example of this type of game. James Longenbach sees “a vista of order” (152), just as Litz remarks that the “constant motion and disorder” of the verse finds a kind of order through the poem (178). One can certainly imagine that there was an order before the poem began—that is, the speaker is standing in an ordered garden with a statue of an angel and clouds in the sky above—but it is precisely this order which is unhinged through spinning around in circles. Whether or not we want to attribute a physical spinning around to the speaker, this is the effect achieved by the first stanza. As the garden, angel, and clouds begin to rotate around the speaker’s vision, s/he loses control and dizziness sets in: “And the clouds flew round and the clouds flew round / And the clouds flew round with the clouds.” The two questions that follow in the next stanza are relevant only in that they are what arise out of the speaker’s dizziness. Through the

obscuration of the garden, angel, and clouds, the speaker is provoked to consider the meaning of “cattle skulls” and “drummers in black hoods.” These questions are additions that disrupt the repetitive flow of the previous stanza, just as the point where dizziness occurs is felt as a sudden shift in motion. There is no answer to the question of what these particulars mean.²¹ The significance of the activity of spinning around is, quite simply, that it gives a sort of Schillerian pleasure, but the way in which this pleasure is manifest in the poem is not simple at all: the nuance of the connections made in a vertiginous state of poetic play is found in the fact that we cannot read these connections as sublime or transcendental. Though the vertiginous concatenation of the poem brings pleasure in that it suggests a wider connectivity of ideas in reality, the poem does not push for—indeed, even prevents—such a reading. Once the speaker has left the play space and found solid ground again, the spinning and vertiginous experience it brought with it disappear, though the ability to enact these temporary additions remains.

The only exception to the rule of non-sublimated, earthly pleasure in the turning topos can be found in the earliest instance of it in Stevens’s work. “The Pigeons,” the first poem in Stevens’s unpublished “Street Songs” (1900) features birds which “rise and turn and turn anew / And like fresh clouds they roam.”²² Though they fly “Over the houses and into the sky,” the description of the birds turning and rising captures their movement as something closer to DaVinci’s aerial screw, or helicopters more generally. The birds of the poem move just as the previous figures have, yet their act of spinning allows them to move upward where the others cannot. Robert Buttel remarks that the repetitious structure of the poem encourages “excitement and awe over [the birds’] radiant flight” (51), suggesting that the birds’ ability to transcend human spaces in this way is something to be admired. In their case, turning around in circles is a

²¹ Just as there is no reason to assume “Mrs. Anderson’s Swedish baby” is Swedish for any particular reason, even though this seemingly small detail would have profound implications for a child raised in the 1930s.

²² The poem, among his other unpublished poems (all written between 1898-1955), can be found in the *Collected Poetry and Prose*.

means of gaining a better view of the city and, though such a quick movement upward and around might make a human being dizzy, the pigeons are at home in this action—the sky, their “airy home,” requires this kind of movement in order for it to be accessed. It is no coincidence that it is only in this unpublished poem that we find a transcendental use of the turning topos. As Cook argues, Stevens’s early poetry is “poetry of the earth” (6), meaning it relies on natural spaces and symbolisms, and the turning topos continues to operate in the rest of his *oeuvre* by maintaining its connection with the ground. The play space is necessarily limited to the real environment on which it is constructed, though it finds ways to add to and temporarily alter it.²³

Birds appear again in relation to the turning topos in Canto IX of “It Must Give Pleasure” in *Notes* (1942), this time as wrens and robins. Unlike the pigeons who appear godly in their “glistening wings of white,” the wren is “too weedy” and the robin’s song is “forced” rather than divinely inspired. The hierarchy of the chain of being is leveled by an equal propensity toward pleasure, and the birds, men, and angels are united in their ability and willingness to enjoy. It is this state of enjoyment and pleasure that the speaker urges the red robin to preserve: he calls on the bird to “stop just short,” to maintain the state of “practicing mere repetitions” in perpetuity rather than end the cycle of “merely going round” by attaining a mate. In this poem, as in the ones we have already discussed, the turning topos “is a final good” despite its not being the only possibility for meaning. Because it operates according to the rules of the play space rather than the rules of reality, it allows the subject to experience objects and their relations in novel ways. Repetition and turning is one kind of “exercise” in the world, and its ability to proliferate and propound novel connections makes its area “vast” and largely indeterminate. As Gadamer argues, “the aesthetic consciousness is more than it knows of itself” (115). Though pleasure is

²³ This is not to say that play spaces cannot involve fantasy or speculation, but rather that fiction should be considered part of the ‘real world.’ What is important to keep in mind is that the turning topos operates by incorporating the elements around it, not above or beyond it.

found in repetition because it “spins its constant spin,” one should not forget that this spin has an “eccentric measure” (canto IX). The etymology of eccentric, ‘out of center,’ is particularly revealing when in the context of turning: it suggests both that taking pleasure in poetic turning is an off-kilter activity and that poetic turning is itself off-kilter and imperfectly circular and imperfectly understood. This imperfect circularity occurs on every level of the poem. Visually and rhythmically, the poem carries the eye and ear in quick turns through the rhyming of ‘wren,’ ‘can,’ ‘them’ and ‘men’ across the first stanza and through the alternation of end-stopped and concealed rhymes and the wide-spread use of alliteration more generally. Conceptually, Stevens paints a world in which men enjoy *like* angels through their enjoyment *of* angels, and men are like “a leaf / Above the table” in that they take pleasure from watching it spin. One idea or relation turns into another, but this action is not completed through to a conclusion of systematic, objective relation. Finally, as in much of Stevens’s work, these conditions operate on a metapoetic level, with the poem ending in the statement that the man-of-repetition, and the man-of-turning, so to speak, “is most master.” Each level of meaning in the poem turns into another, both evading and complementing in the continual twist of poetic pleasure. In fact, the nature of Stevens’s poetry is such that words, objects, and the reading process all behave as figures turning. The role of the figure in Stevens’s poetry is crucial to issues of play, in that to consider a turning topos is to metaphorically imply that there is a figure turning in the poem. In this way the conditions and realities one anticipates in a turning figure—vertigo, blurring of boundaries, a sense of motion and disorientation—are all factors to consider when assigning meaning to poems (or, indeed, when questioning the limits of this process). We should not take this to be an oversimplification: Stevens’s poems are not bodies; they are not organic constructions which can be mapped and systematized through anatomy. The poems do not occur within the play space, but rather are generated by the turning topos, which itself arises in and through the play space.

“Domination of Black” (1916) is an excellent poem to turn to, as it were, for clarification on this point in that it provides us with a clear figure on which the turning topos acts: the speaker. The repetition of words, consonants, and vowels visually operates on the page in the same way as objects do in the vision of someone spinning around. The first stanza begins slowly, each line consisting of only three to five words elegantly turning like a ballroom dance. This flow is disrupted when the reader is told that not all aspects of this experience operate at such a gentle speed: “the heavy hemlocks / Came striding,” and all the speaker can do is sit back and watch as the elements of the poem are rearranged in various orders, blending and shifting grammatical and conceptual positions. This is the impact of the vertigo that follows spinning around at its finest in Stevens’s work. There is a sense in which the speaker is spinning around the room and experiencing the reality of the outside world (i.e. “The colors of the bushes / And of the fallen leaves”), yet we are told at the poem’s opening that he sits “by the fire” “in the room.” Poetic play allows for this alternate experience of reality, and the critic need not be too anxious to clarify this spatial disorientation. Regardless, the fact that the “color of the heavy hemlocks / Came striding” is due to the turning of colors overwhelming the speaker into a state of dizziness. The color of the hemlocks seems to both arise out of the movement of the other turning colours and also works against, or is at least unaffected by, this turning energy. Hemlock, that notorious killer of Socrates, has a paralyzing effect on anyone who consumes it, suggesting once again that an irrevocable distance between objects must be maintained in a state of poetic play. The turning topos avoids such dangerous consummation by being a space where the consequences that these elements might have in the extrapoetic world are suspended. As Schiller notes of the space of play: “To give freedom through freedom is the fundamental law of this realm” (70).

The hemlocks certainly intrude on the space of the poem and the collection, but it is a desired effect: their entrance into the poem begins with “Yes,” suggesting that the turning of the leaves was meant to usher in this foreign power.²⁴ With the entrance of one foreign element comes another, and the speaker tells us how he “remembered the cry of the peacocks.” In fact, the animal’s cry “flew from the boughs of the hemlocks” as they simultaneously “swept” across the room. The peacocks’ tail feathers seem to fly from the hemlock into the fire, as we find out further into the poem that the leaves are “turning as the tails of the peacocks / Turned in the loud fire.” The objects in this poem feed in to one another as they are each fed into the fire, creating a fusion of smoke, colour, and sound all visible from the speaker’s position. In this way, the figurative connection established by each being “like” one another has a stronger sense to it than the dialectical relationship between things: the speaker is unable to determine whether the hemlocks are “Full of the cry *of*” or “a cry *against* the peacocks” (my italics). This question of ‘of or against’ is not the crisis of the poem, but rather a curious ambiguity that seems to pop into the speaker’s mind as he muses about the whirlings around him.

The speaker deals with this point of ambiguity by turning (this time, physically) to look “Out of the window.” As if to confirm the reality of the tumult coming from inside, the speaker finds the same dizzying turning outside as well. The outside world does nothing to steady the speaker, but instead adds further elements into the cauldron of poetic turning: now the planets, too, are like the leaves, and the night turns with the same stride as “the colour of the hemlocks.” The product is something which incorporates all surrounding reality into an experience that is equally real and equally thoughtful. Nonetheless, vertigo is evident in this poem more than any other and one feels the unease this causes in the speaker in the lines “I felt afraid. / And I

²⁴ Especially within the context of these earlier *Harmonium* poems, the intrusion of hemlock has interesting spatial consequences. It is a plant of Eurasian origin, making it quite out of place in the distinctly North American poems of *Harmonium*.

remembered the cry of the peacocks.” By this point there is a profound weight to the speaker’s experience, and it is largely due to the fact that turning to look out the window failed to create the interruption, the stabilizing effect the speaker desired in that moment. The crisis of the poem can be found in “how the night came,” an ominous suggestion that references the title of the poem. Not only does the speaker seem to have no control over the effects of the turning topos, in this case the poem reveals the possibility that its effect may not be entirely pleasurable. The giddiness of the lines “And the clouds flew round with the clouds” in “The Pleasures of Merely Circulating” is nowhere to be found in this poem, and the speaker is instead left with an intellectual darkness.

Though the novel connections and vertiginous feeling produced by the turning topos are a large part of how it gives pleasure, they are not an end in themselves. If they were, then a poem like “Domination of Black” would be a poem about failure, when in fact the poem bestows a profound intellectual significance to the blackness enveloping the speaker by the end.²⁵ The value of the turning topos is twofold: it is able to provoke experiences unavailable in the extrapoetic world, more often pleasurable than not, and the fact that it is temporally limited is valuable because it makes us aware of the fact that the turning topos must be occurring within a more constant space. “Extracts from Addresses to the Academy of Fine Ideas” (1941) is a poem which encapsulates the importance of recognizing not only the turning topos, but the space in which it occurs. In canto VII the speaker argues that the first step toward “want[ing] nothing from the sea” (to experience it without prejudice or expectation) is “To have satisfied the mind.” Insisting that the turning topos provide real world truth claims and observations is equivalent to wanting *something* from the sea. By being satisfied strictly by the existence of the play space in

²⁵ Like the “metaphysician in the dark,” the speaker is not so much in a preferable or ideal situation, but certainly an illuminating one.

which the turning can occur, the pleasures created by the turning will not be mistakenly directed toward or assessed with reference to the non-poetic world. It is *the act* of “turn[ing] to see” that requires belief, rather than what turning appears to reveal. It is because belief is confined in this sense that Stevens is able to say that “What / One believes is what matters.” The enjambment separating “What” from the rest of the line suggests that it is also the fact that “One believes” that “matters,” regardless of “What” the belief is. The turning topos forms “Ecstatic identities / Between one’s self and the weather” because the identities are formed outside of truth values in the space of poetic play. The result is that a belief in turning is also “the belief in one’s element,” as it requires that one view poetry as a space that *can* be turned to. The poem emphasizes holding belief in “the weather” “the things and men / Of the weather and in one’s self” not in what different combinations of these things may come to mean. Though reading the world properly begins with a “return to the subtle center,” for Stevens this center is locating along the circumference of the circle.²⁶ He paints the picture of the moon as “a different element,” one that would be impossible to turn upon and would therefore leave one “Incapable of belief.” If, however, one returned from the moon and “if then / One breathed the cold evening, the deepest inhalation / Would come from that return to the subtle center.” This return is precisely what the opening of the canto refers to as “To have satisfied the mind;” the canto has returned to the center. In this way, “Extracts” emphasizes the importance of finding a beginning, a resting place that is grounded on a “subtle center” found rather than reasoned, but it also goes a step further to actually illustrate how this indicates that there is a more constant space of play in which the turning topos occurs.

²⁶ Another way of expressing this would be to say that Stevens’s circles are imperfect because they are spirals. What begins as an attempt to come full-circle is by the end revealed to be a “return to the subtle center.”

This chapter has looked at the movement of ideas and objects in Stevens's poems, arguing that examining them through the notion of poetic play, and the turning topos in particular, helps to clarify the important role of play in Stevens's poems. In many of these poems he implicitly theorizes about the distinctive operations of the kind of poetry he favours. Gadamer, Schiller, and Caillois all suggest in their theories that play has a unique ontological status. For Gadamer this means that it is a useful metaphor for the structure of understanding, and for Schiller it is the key to realizing that man is not limited to the moral and political conditions of his age. Rather than offering a means of overcoming these conditions, both Stevens and Schiller argue that aesthetics (poetics for Stevens) is a pre-existent means of experiencing free pleasure. Caillois's sociological theory is a reminder that play is an experience rooted in physical, concrete reality. Though the turning topos as process of thought is continual, its concrete appearances are ephemeral and short-lived. Each instance has the lifespan of the poem, but because Stevens locates the topos within a space of play, there will always be another opportunity to turn again.

This chapter has also addressed that the central tenets of what Stevens imagines as the Supreme Fiction, the dominant fiction that orients the imagination—that it must be abstract, change, and give pleasure—are important aspects of the turning topos as well.²⁷ It is because its revelations are only briefly there yet gesture toward an abstract space that they are able to give a pure pleasure. The next chapter will move forward with these ideas by paying closer attention to the play space itself. As Gadamer argues, it is a space that exists before and after anything actually plays in it, but, as we will see, the Stevensian play space remains characteristically defined by the important aspects of abstractness, change, and pleasure.

²⁷ Especially if we keep in mind Soulen and Soulen's claim that topoi are like vessels that can be filled with any number of things (see fn. 9), it could be argued that the term "topos" is itself an abstract concept that is only recognized through the temporary, always changing elements that 'fill' it.

Chapter Two

Thinking in Play: Climate, Dwelling, and the Supreme Fiction

As addressed in the first chapter, philosophical notions of play expressed by Schiller, Gadamer, and Caillois all posit an ontological condition in which one enters a pre-existent play space. Gadamer in particular emphasizes the hermeneutic benefits of thinking in a play space, as it prevents art from being seen as merely the “‘contingency’ of the chance conditions in which it appears” because it locates these “chance conditions” within conceptual space (115). In this way, Gadamer’s theory provides a means of approaching Stevens’s poems and their “chance conditions” as reflective of a larger manner of thinking without erasing their particular meanings. Gadamer formulates this aspect of the play space as allowing art to be both abstract and concrete:

Play is structure—this means that despite its dependence on being played it is a meaningful whole which can be repeatedly presented as such and the significance of which can be understood. But structure is also play, because—despite this theoretical unity—it achieves its full being only each time it is played. That both sides of the question belong together is what we have to emphasize against the abstraction of aesthetic differentiation. (116)

We have already seen how the turning topos has to be approached as abstract because its instantiations are brief and idiosyncratic. The act of turning abstracts from extrapoetic reality but it is also abstract in the sense that it can only be concretized through changing instantiations. The passage quoted above demonstrates that Gadamer’s conception of play and structure correlates quite well with Stevens’s ideas of change and the abstract. Though there is a danger in “the abstraction of aesthetic differentiation”—of approaching art only through its structure and

thereby not attending to its concrete manifestations—it is only dangerous in this sense if it is conceived of without its structural complement, play.

Nicholas Davey argues that Gadamer's philosophical hermeneutics have an ethical orientation despite its initially appearing to be a theory that precludes any attempt to pursue truth or a moral ought. He claims that philosophical hermeneutics “brings the subject to an awareness of its profound dependence upon cultural realities that are not of its own making...Whatever I understand, I come to understand through the mediation of another” (9). Gadamer's theory of play, then, is ethical because it is used as a means of understanding, of getting closer to what Davey later calls “a final solution to the question of meaning” (197). Gadamer's justification for entering a play space is that it allows one to better understand the nature and structure of the play space, which Davey equates with “cultural realities that are not of its own making.” In other words, play is useful for Gadamer because it helps to reveal the true nature of one's social milieu. Stevens follows much the same process of justification for why one should enter into the space of play within poetry, as well, though he sees it as revealing the Supreme Fiction rather than the truth. Stevens suggests that the Supreme Fiction can be uncovered through playing (via the turning *topos*) in poetry because he understands the Supreme Fiction to be the generative principle for that play space, just as Gadamer considers “cultural realities” to be the generative principles for the play space in his philosophical hermeneutic. In both cases what is generated is the structure of the play space, which, as Gadamer argues, is also what is being played with. In Stevens case, this means that the Supreme Fiction is used to generate what Stevens theorizes as “the first idea” and its subsequent fictions, which operate as the structure of the play space. As we will see, the way in which this fictional structure is played with will determine how one is able to recognize the “first idea,” the first step in reaching toward the Supreme Fiction.

"The Well Dressed Man With a Beard" (1941) demonstrates how the first idea interacts with, and determines the structure of, the play space. The poem begins "After the final no there comes a yes/And on that yes the future world depends." This "yes" is soon revealed as "this present sun," making the sun act as the "the first idea" through which all other fictions within the space of the poem can be generated. The poem considers what it would take for the sun to be overturned and a new first idea to take its place. It would need to "Slid[e] over the western cataract" suggesting both that it would have to be made visible but also that it would have to be able to survive rushing down the cataract as waterfall. For this reason the new first idea would have to be "firm," "infallible," and able to "sustain itself on speech." If such an idea were to appear, it could become the new "thing affirmed" and take on its role as "The aureole above the humming house." In this way, the first idea operates as the shining light through which the play space gains its temporary structure. It determines the things seen and "the things denied" because all the subsequent fictions of the space are built from it. Of course, the similarity between the sun and aureole suggest that there is a greater determinant factor beyond the first idea, the Supreme Fiction, controlling the space in a less perceptible way.

In order to understand how turning, as a particular form of poetic play, helps to bring to light the first idea, and how this could be the means through which the Supreme Fiction can be reached, we need to consider further the implications of viewing the turning topos as an abstract apartment. One of the consequences of creating an abstract apartment is that it allows one to be protected from what happens outside of it so that this outside can be safely recollected, contemplated and played with. Another term that Stevens uses for these apartments is 'dwelling,' and the roofs of these dwellings are often emphasized as a means of protection. Stevens's roofs are there to create a separation so that a certain degree of contemplation can occur, but he also emphasizes the porosity of the membrane separating inside from outside: "It is the sea that

whitens the roof” in “Ideas of Order” and “The wind [that] beat[s] in the roof” in “Repetitions of a Young Captain.” In “Puella Parvula” the roof protects the speaker from “The elephant on the roof and its elephantine blaring,” and in “Mozart, 1935,” the artist is safe from people throwing “stones on the roof.”²⁸ In each case the poet figure is separated and protected from that which s/he contemplates. If the dwelling is a separate space within the play space, then this means that the roof protects the poet from the first idea and its dominant fictions as well as the conditions in which these are experienced in extrapoetic reality.

In *Totality and Infinity* Emmanuel Levinas also argues for the importance of a dwelling as secure space in which recollection and contemplation can occur: he differentiates between a person’s ‘being’ and the person as ‘I’ by arguing that the ‘I’ is formed only through recollection in the dwelling—it is a way to formulate one’s being through the use of reason, making it an inherently ethical act because it allows one to better understand what one *ought* to do. Similarly, Stevens’s roofs, and the dwellings to which they belong, are inherent to poetic thought because they are a protective space that permits turning to occur. Both Levinas’s and Stevens’s dwellings are constructed based on one’s conception of the world, and are built in order for these conceptions to be thought about and made more clear. Judith Butler comments on this aspect of Stevens’s thought when she argues that “The conflation of the rational or intelligible with the meaningful suggests that meaning comes first from the acts of the mind, that the domain of particular beings receives its meaning only after being filtered through the cognitive grid of a rational agent” (283). It is precisely these acts of the mind (as acts conforming to the particular

²⁸ The roof can also be harnessed to capture even more of the sun, like the dove who “Lay on the roof/And made much within her” in “Song of Fixed Accord.” An interesting predecessor to these roof images is Emily Dickinson’s poem #657, in which she writes that “I dwell in Possibility/A fairer House than Prose.” She continues in the following stanza to say that this dwelling has “for an Everlasting Roof/The Gambrels of the Sky—.” Dickinson’s “Possibility,” like Stevens’s space of play, are spaces in which things can happen that could not in the real world (“Prose” for Dickinson). They are also similar in their association of the poetic with the natural world, but they differ in that Stevens does not regard the poetic as something always “fairer” and for this reason his roofs are more protective and more secure.

logic of Stevens's poetics) that are used to construct the dwelling. It is also what makes these dwellings dependent on and shaped by the environmental conditions which made them, as Butler suggests by adding that "for Stevens, there are clearly moments where what 'is' has its meaning in virtue of a kind of primary, and precognitive 'isness'" (283). Levinas's dwellings allow for recollection and Stevens's allow for conceptual turning, but both are regarded as what is needed to make sense of what the dwelling is constructed on, the "precognitive 'isness.'" The turning topos can be regarded as marking a form of recollection because turning is a way of abstracting from the play space (which is already abstracted from the extrapoetic world) so that this world can be thought about. Stevens does not regard this as an ethical gesture, though, because the separation allows for the world to be thought about only poetically; instead, as we will see, he insists that the act of dwelling is a means of clarifying the structure of the play space produced through the Supreme Fiction.

Dwelling plays a direct role in two of Stevens's earlier poems "Hymn From a Watermelon Pavilion" (1922) and "The Comedian as the Letter C" (1922). The concept continues to appear throughout his *oeuvre*, but these early poems stand out in that they showcase the term's formative logic within his poetic thought. The poet figure in "Hymn" has chosen to live as a "dweller in a dark cabin." S/he has limited his/her dreams, which strongly resemble recollections, to the "night," which means that they are always "obscured by sleep." However, it also means that the figure can "Rise, since rising will not waken," demonstrating that the act of constructing a dwelling (in this case a "dark cabin"), always both limits thought through abstraction and adds to it by allowing otherwise inconceivable possibilities. These new possibilities mean that "the watermelon is always purple," an edict which makes sense within the

poem's logic of darkness but also as an indicator of poetic thought's dominance in the space.²⁹

The dwelling's ability to add to an abstracted world also means that "the sun may speckle,/While [the blackbird] creaks hail," adding light to a cabin which requires that everything be "dark." The experience of the poetic dwelling drives the figure to "cry hail, cry hail" just as Levinas's dwelling calls on a person to seek generality in language and make "the offering of the world to the Other" (103). Levinas figures the switch from possession of one's labour (the house created as dwelling) to the "primordial donation" to the Other via transcendence as the ultimate ethical act (173). The poet figure switches from someone who receives poetry's gifts ("the plantain by your door" and "the best cock of red feather") to someone who engages with a larger, transcendental poetic, and this switch is, for Stevens, the ultimate poetic act. The purpose of dwelling is, in both cases, a way of reaching toward the ultimate condition which created it. For Levinas this means recognizing that the Other exists in infinity rather than within our own totality, and for Stevens this means understanding that the play space is formed in relation to the Supreme Fiction.

"The Comedian as the Letter C" is an early poem that represents this realization. It works through the process of recognizing the Supreme Fiction's generative potential through imagination (Sections I-III), establishing a new "colony," or play space, in which to imagine and play (Section IV), building a "A nice shady home," or abstract apartment, in which to dwell in the colony (Section V), and finally producing poetic offspring (Section VI). In this way the poem suggests an aetiology of the poetic process in that it outlines, step by step, the way in which a poet comes to make his poems. The switch in opening lines from Section I to Section IV, from "Nota: man is the intelligence of his soil" to "Nota: his soil is man's intelligence," makes the

²⁹ Purple is an important colour within Stevens's poetics. Whether it is winter with "all its purples" in "The Man Whose Pharynx was Bad," or the "Empurpled garden grass" in "Delightful Evening," the colour tends to signify an entry into the poetic. Another later poem, "Of Hartford in a Purple Light," plays with the ambi-gendered nature of purple and makes a similar allusion to the poetic.

speaker remark "That's better. That's worth crossing seas to find" because it reorients the cause of poetic desire from an ethical to a poetic one. For Stevens as poet, "his soil is man's intelligence" because poetry is concerned only with determining the conditions of its play space. This means that the kind of thinking ("intelligence") that can occur within that space is dependent on what sort of play space is created. For Levinas, "man is the intelligence of his soil" because it is man's act of making a world out of the soil which produces the possibility of intelligence in the first place. Levinas argues that within dwelling one builds a home, and this labor creates a world out of nature. It also creates an 'I,' meaning that the act of dwelling creates an intelligent being capable of determining the conditions of this world, "his soil," through recollection and contemplation.

For Stevens this realization is important first and foremost as a corrective to past intelligences. The new colony of Section IV is meant "to drive away / The shadow of his fellows from the skies." Once their "stale intelligence" has been gotten rid of, he will be able "To make a new intelligence prevail." The colony is "A comprehensive island hemisphere" which allows infinite possibilities for play in its finite geography. Seen as a metaphor for the play space, this means that the colony is not really limited by being determined by the Supreme Fiction as long as the "island hemisphere" can be entirely cleared of past colonies, or past fictions, every time a new one appears. The next section, "A Nice Shady Home," demonstrates the kind of home that the speaker plans to build in the colony. In his home he will remain "the prickling realist," and the kinds of thought made possible will still be confined to "was and is and shall or ought to be." The poem shows early signs of the turning topos, which is equally confined to this type of realism. The difficulty of how the turning topos could point to the Supreme Fiction is unsolved at this point in Stevens's career, and he is able only to recognize the difficulty:

Crispin dwelt in the land and dwelling there

Slid from his continent by slow recess
 To things within his actual eye, alert
 To the difficulty of rebellious thought
 When the sky is blue. The blue infects the will.

The space of play requires that a house be built within it—the turning topos needs a place to turn. Even in these instances, however, the sky is always still blue and the "rebellious thought" lingering "within his actual eye" struggles to come to pass, suggesting that one can never escape the fact that there is a dominant presence, the Supreme Fiction, driving poetic engagement.

Levinas also contends with such "rebellious thought" but in his case he regards this struggle as inherently ethical. He argues that man must dwell in nature because man only becomes himself as ethical agent through contemplation and recollection. This separation from nature effects a sense of spontaneous will in man, as he is able to conceive and enact that will into being. This power of interiority is a process of making things the same, of bringing them within a single system of thought or ontology. It is this act which creates a world out of nature, a world in which one can build a house of recollection to dwell in.

Levinas argues that the creation of an ontology, a "world out of nature," is an arbitrary gesture, making the kinds of thinking that can occur within that ontology not as spontaneous as they initially appear. This realization is of the utmost importance, as Levinas says that "We name this calling into question of my spontaneity by the presence of the Other ethics" (43). In other words, there are many worlds that could be created "out of nature," and it is by recognizing one's world as only one possibility out of (a potentially infinite) many that one is able to think ethically. I believe that we should approach Stevens's play space in much the same way. The play space, then, is as subject to change as the turning which occurs within it, and it is through recognizing this change as inherent to poetry that one can think poetically. Because Stevens

places such an emphasis on the incorporation of the surrounding environment within the turning topos (as we saw in the previous chapter), I suggest using the word ‘climate’ as a means of capturing the changing nature of the play space. If the turning topos is responsible for the mixing together and reorientation of the environment, then the climate is the general sort of conditions of that environment it has to work within. This environment can be understood as the dominant fictions generated using the Supreme Fiction. Though the word ‘climate’ appears in only one Stevens poem, “The Poems of Our Climate” (1938), critics have often used it to encapsulate their critical approach to Stevens.³⁰ Most often this means using ‘climate’ to reference either the literary or socio-political conditions inherited and inhabited by Stevens.³¹ My use of the word varies from this tradition in that I am more concerned with how the concept of ‘climate’ can be a useful stepping stone from the turning topos to the Supreme Fiction. If the climate determines how the turning topos operates, then the Supreme Fiction is the generative principle that determines the climate. The key is to recognize that the poetic climate is constructed according to dominant fictions that are not readily accessible to the inhabitants of the climate, yet they must be accessed in some way in order for the climate to be recognized as something impermanent. Depending on the particular climate of the play space, one would be limited in the kind of thinking that can occur in particular ways. Similarly to Levinas, Stevens argues that it is only

³⁰ See, in particular, Bloom, *The Poems of Our Climate* (1980), Riddel, “The Climate of Our Poems” (1983), and Brogan, “Poems Against His Climate” (1987). Historical critics, most notably Al Filreis, focus on the historical climate, what he deems “the actual world” of Stevens’s work, making the weather conditions determined by reigning ideologies, economic statuses, and political norms. Formalists such as Harold Bloom read ‘climate’ as a literary climate, whose weather conditions are determined by influence. I would argue that the former probably weighs more heavily for Stevens than the latter, though what truly determines the climate for Stevens is the position of poetry, the status of the imagination, within the society the poet inhabits. If poetic thought is not a commonplace occurrence then the poet has only “Pink and white carnations” to work with, even though “one desires/So much more than that.”

³¹ An example of this occurring outside of literary criticism is a study of philosophical ethics by William O’Neill called *The Ethics of Our Climate*. Considering the fact that his chapter on R.M. Hare and John Rawls begin with epigraphs taken from Stevens’s *Adagia* and “Asides on the Oboe,” it is very likely that his work’s title is an allusion to Stevens. Neither this allusion nor readings of either epigraph are done within the work, suggesting that O’Neill assumes Stevens’s climate to be an ethical one.

through coming to terms with the arbitrary nature of his own Stevensian climate that he can gain access to its governing Supreme Fiction—the larger fiction, created by a society but not directly accessible to it, that governs the imaginative lives of those living in the time. It is only by tracings its effects on the poems themselves that one can access the Supreme Fiction *as* a fiction, thereby allowing it to be seen as something that can be changed because it exists within a way of thinking, poetic thought.³² This requires recognizing and subsequently coming to terms with the dominant fictions, especially what he calls “the first idea,” of the climate, just as Levinas’s ethics requires a recognition of the existent ontological structures.

Levinas argues that “The relationship with the Other is not produced outside of the world, but puts in question the world possessed. The relationship with the Other, transcendence, consists in speaking the world to the Other” (173). It is this act of “speaking the world” which constitutes theory in his conception of the term.³³ By attempting to generalize the conditions of the world through language, Levinas argues that one becomes better able to locate the world within “a common world” that does not reduce the Other to the same but rather allows it to exist as metaphysical desire (174). A similar process occurs within Stevens’s poetic climate in that he theorizes it by separating it into seasons, each of which points toward the climate’s arbitrary nature in its own way. These seasons operate much as they do in the extrapoetic world, and his choice of titles for his collections reveals this mimetic interest: *Auroras of Autumn* and *Transport to Summer* are collections that claim an affiliation with a particular sort of weather.³⁴ Stevens’s

³² In “It Must be Abstract,” Stevens writes that “There was a myth before the myth began, / Venerable and articulate and complete,” suggesting that all myths are understood based on a subconscious participation in the Supreme Fiction, the “Venerable,” original myth of a society which orients poetry outside of reason and extrapoetic reality because it makes a fiction its generative principle.

³³ This claim is reminiscent of Stevens’s statement that “Earthy Anecdote” has “a good deal of theory about it” (*L* 204). If theory in the Levinasian sense is a way of generalizing one’s ontological condition so that it can be expressed to something beyond that ontology, then perhaps Stevens’s theory of turning operates in the same way: as a means of expressing the nature of the climate to the Supreme Fiction.

³⁴ Throughout his career Stevens affiliates his poems with different seasons, as well, whether it is the winter poems like “The Snow Man” or “Snow and Stars,” the spring poems like “Mud Master” or “Paltry Nude,” the autumn

poetic climate is a rich, though also limited, American climate. It is composed of seasons abstracted from and heightened beyond those of the seasons of the extrapoetic world. His winters are made more gelid through his winters in New Haven, and his summers more fluid and vibrant through time spent in Florida,³⁵ and in his poetry he imagines these seasons allowing for particular kinds of thinking to occur, each directing us toward an awareness of climate and the Supreme Fiction in a different way. Stuart M. Sperry defines Stevens's seasons as the organizing relation through which "random states of weather achieve anything approaching coherence or permanence of character" (607). Where Stevens moves beyond mere mimicry of the extrapoetic seasonal cycle is in his association of the seasons with particular kinds of thinking. Summer and winter thinking, as Stevens theorizes them, are especially relevant in this regard because they demonstrate Stevens's two primary ways of coming to terms with the arbitrary nature of his poetic climate through a confrontation with "the first idea" and its dominant fictions. Summer thinking is characterized by a profusion of colours, combinations, and possibilities that are vulnerable to entropic dissolution through their forced coherence with the "first idea"; winter thinking is characterized by a cold confrontation with the structure of the play space itself, allowing for the first idea to be seen in a less powerful and less overwhelming light.

Summer thinking characterizes the creation of myths or fictions and, through the summer heat, exposes the "first idea" used to create them. The most common first idea in Stevens's poetry is the sun and the vibrant green it produces in summer. As Stevens says in *Blue Guitar*, "It is the sun that shares our works," and, though one might crave the ability to proclaim that "The

poems like "Autumn Refrain" or "An Ordinary Evening in New Haven," or the summer poems like "Things of August" or "Credences of Summer."

³⁵ Stevens travelled to Long Key and Key West, Florida every winter from 1922-1940. He also received letters from Leonard C. van Geyzel who wrote to him from Ceylon, and Jose Rodriguez Feo, who wrote to him from Cuba. All of these places, in combination with the more wintry New Haven, Hartford, and New York, played roles in the development of Stevens's climate. The seasons take on a more holistic relationship with each other in time, becoming more solid in *Ideas of Order* (1936) but not really taking on consistent, interrelated meanings until *Transport to Summer* (1947).

sun no longer shares our works” and seek a new “immaculate...merciful good,” “The strings are cold on the blue guitar”—within the current system of poetic thought they require the warmth of the sun in summertime. The sun as provider of warmth operates as a fundamental metaphor within Stevens’s summer season, and its ability to heat, melt, and energize the play space makes “play” and “change” the dominant principles here, rather than “structure” and “abstraction.”

The other fundamental metaphor, connected to the warmth of the sun, is green as a signal of the sun’s dominance. In “Credences of Summer” “the natural tower of all the world” is described as “green’s green apogee.” Similarly, in “Someone Puts a Pineapple together, “A jar of shoots of an infant country” “fortifies/A green that is the ash of what green is.” The role of green as summer’s signifier of the first idea is so significant that it often functions as the indication that summer’s affirmation has gone on too long. “Banal Sojourn” (1919) is an early poem that captures this effect. Cook describes it as “A poem of a humid heat wave” (*RG* 59). Like heat’s effect on smells and sounds, making them travel farther and linger longer, the first three lines show the effects of the summer season on poetic thinking:

Two wooden tubs of blue hydrangeas stand at the foot of the stone steps.

The sky is a blue gum streaked with rose. The trees are black.

The grackles crack their throats of bone in the smooth air.

The blue of the hydrangeas begins safely and sturdily contained among the brown “wooden tubs” and grey “stone steps.” By the following line the hydrangeas have mixed into the sky, figured as “a blue gum.” None of the colours used to describe this landscape, a summer day just before the sun is setting, are surprising. What is surprising is the way the colours are connected to their objects: gum, usually pink, is here blue “streaked with rose,” as though the presence of flower within blue (in the hydrangeas) is here transposed as blue sky flecked with roses. The line continues with the quick statement “The trees are black,” and this time it is the sound of colour

that carries an effect into the next line in the rhyming words “grackles crack.” The green that would normally be in the trees appears later in the stanza as summer itself:

Pardie! Summer is like a fat beast, sleepy in mildew,
Our old bane, green and bloated, serene, who cries,

"That bliss of stars, that princox of evening heaven!"

The green that is missing from the trees is so present in the season itself that it is personified and “bloated.” The dominance of the first idea has made it so that the colours and features don’t operate as they would in the extrapoetic realm. “Pardie,” an oath with etymological roots in *par Dieu*, the archaic word “princox” and reference to “wigs despoiling the Satan ear” show that time is as smeared in the poem as colour. The possibility that there is *too much* summer in the poem is suggested in the line “And so it is one damns that green shade at the bottom of the land.” We saw in the first stanza how a green tree exposed to shadow loses its colour and becomes black, leaving its greenness to flow freely throughout the poem, and the second stanza demonstrates that this prevents “that green shade” from having a place in heavy, humid summer thought. The dizziness and sickness that accompany the overabundance of summer through the dominance of the first idea is expressed in the final line: “One has a malady, here, a malady. One feels a malady.” This malady is brought out more fully in a much later poem, “The Green Plant” (1952). It follows a similar logic of the last hot days of summer:

The effete vocabulary of summer
No longer says anything.
The brown at the bottom of red
The orange far down in a yellow

Colours have begun melting in to one another like wax crayons left in the sun, but rather than signaling the effects of the turning topos as we saw in “Banal Sojourn,” in this case the melting of colours “Are falsifications from a sun” that are “turning down toward finality.” Even the turning topos is melting in the sun, suggesting that dominant fictions run the risk of overheating the play space. The only thing preventing this summer-laden space from becoming an inarticulate, final “legend” is the fact that “a green plant glares.” It glares “with the barbarous green / Of the harsh reality of which it is part,” demonstrating that the puddle-effect of the summer heat on the turning topos only creates the *illusion* of a melted, inescapable space. In fact it is still the same space of play—the melting is only the effect of the first idea’s dominant logic taking hold and running its course. A change of season will bring with it a return to health because winter thinking is able to isolate the first idea and its dominant fictions in a space that does not allow such decadent flourishing. Poetic thought requires this pull from one season to another in order to stay fresh and productive, which in turn prevents stagnancy from being mistaken for truth.

With this in mind, Stevens’s winter poems, such as “The Snow Man” (1921) take on new meanings. Using Hegel’s theory of determinate negation, Judith Butler argues that Stevens’s “the nothing that is” featured at the end of this poem can be a positive affirmation because it can only exist by forming a limit or boundary against ‘the something that is.’ I believe that Butler’s reading of “The Snow Man” can be pushed further as a means of demonstrating the logic behind Stevens’s winter poetics more generally. The subject matter of this poem, as Butler demonstrates, is essentially the negation of what Stevens calls the “Yes” in “Well Dressed Man.” The speaker of “Snow Man” considers a hypothetical situation in which one would be able “have a mind of winter” that would allow one “not to think / Of any misery” when observing the surroundings because there would be no separation between the surroundings and oneself.

Unlike the overwhelming sun as first idea in the summer poems, here it is only a wan “January sun” barely bright enough to make the surroundings visible and certainly not bright enough to melt the snow and allow for the decadent play seen in summer. Because everything is “crusted with snow” and “Full of the same wind,” ‘change’ and ‘play’ are less characteristic of this space than ‘abstraction’ and ‘structure.’ Without the sun as dominant first idea to create “the thing affirmed,” the listener would be “nothing himself” and therefore more able to view the structure of the play space, “the nothing that is.” Whereas summer thinking directly exposes the first idea by showcasing its dominance and infectious play, winter thinking allows for the abstract space in which the first idea operates to be better seen and explored.

The possibility of winter thinking remains hypothetical within “The Snow Man,” but by “Man and Bottle” (1940) its possibility is considered in greater depth. Now “The mind is the great *poem* of winter,” allowing “the man” to “destro[y]” the dominant fictions, the “romantic tenements.” The fact that the “Tenements” are made “Of rose and ice” suggests that they are a poetic architecture particularly short-lived. He wants to destroy them because he is trying “to find what will suffice” “In the land of war,” suggesting that the dominant fictions produced by the first idea are no longer relevant means of engaging with the extrapoetic world. Just as the speaker considers becoming one with “the nothing that is” in “Snow Man,” here the man also attempts to associate himself with the abstract structure of the play space by trying to “persuade that war is part of itself, /A manner of thinking, a mode /Of destroying.” The suggestion is that the “romantic tenements” were made through “an old affair with the sun” and that a new affair, and new forms of apartments, are necessary if the turning topos is actually to be filled by its environment. The larger thought process connecting summer and winter thinking can be found in cantos I and II of “It Must be Abstract.” Canto I encourages the ephebe to “Begin...by perceiving the idea/Of this invention, this invented world.” This idea is the first idea, “The inconceivable

idea of the sun,” and it is precisely what summer thinking allows to surface. As Stevens writes in a letter, “The first step toward a supreme fiction would be to get rid of all existing fictions” (L 431), and if one has the tools to destroy one fiction, then one has the ability to destroy all fictions (by going back to the idea from which they began). Cook notices the double meaning of the lines “The sun/Must bear no name” by suggesting that it can mean both that the sun cannot have a name, and that there is not one name in particular which must be assigned to the sun (219). In this way, ideas find substance, conceivability, and god-like power through being named, but they also become less clean, more burdened, and closer to their own decreation. The struggle and malady characteristic of the summer poems showcases this difficulty, as “to be” is always also to be temporary. Canto II demonstrates that this act of surfacing is not enough, because once one is able to reach “back to the first idea,” it “becomes / The hermit in a poet’s metaphors”: though it still enables the play, it becomes something that cannot be played with. This is because summer thinking puts the first idea in a similarly dominant position to truth, and “the ravishments of truth” leave it inaccessible and inert.

Winter thinking is necessary because it combats the “poisonous” inertness of the first idea through “ennui.” It creates an abstract apartment in which the first idea does not hold the same power, and can therefore be seen as only one fiction among many (like “the January sun” in “Snow Man”). Winter thinking “observes the effortless weather turning blue/And sees the myosotis on its bush” without requiring that these aspects of the environment be subsumed under the dominating presence of the first idea, the sun. Through this process comes the realization that “what it has is what is not.” Like the speaker in “Snow Man” who sees “the nothing that is,” here the poet figure is able to recognize the first idea as something arbitrarily constructed and *not* representative of a greater truth, and as such “throws it away like a thing of another time.”

Though, as the following canto says, “The poem refreshes life so that we share, / For a moment,

the first idea,” the poem also offers the tools to confront the first idea as something temporary and changeable, “as if blood newly came” and brought with it a new first idea that “brings back a power again/That gives a candid kind to everything.” Canto VII of “It Must Give Pleasure” goes a step further with poetry’s ability to refresh by demonstrating how climate can refresh the Supreme Fiction and make it more accessible. The poem claims that “It is possible, possible, possible” to “come on major weather” (a very Stevensian synonym for climate) “Out of nothing,” implying that it is simply by being within the space that one can “discover an order as of/A season.” He continues by saying that “It must be that in time/The real will from its crude compoundings come,” though in Stevens’s case “the real” is “The fiction of an absolute,” the Supreme Fiction. He is able to say that there “must” be a Supreme Fiction because it is a structural necessity of the way the turning topos and its climate operate.

The question then becomes less how Stevens is able to claim that a seemingly transcendental fiction “must” exist and more how he believes that such a fiction could be accessed by the poet. So far we have seen how the structure of the climate as generated by the first idea and its dominant fictions logically implies that there is a more constant governing principle behind it, as well, but in order to get at how one’s ability to access the Supreme Fiction operates, we have to continue with the structural comparison to ethics.

Levinas’s system remains ethical because it is founded on the assumption that language is a means of looking for metaphysical truth. Stevens’s concept of dwelling within a space of play and constructing a temporary architecture, a home, within that space, suggests an equal rejection of ontology, but only on the basis that there is more than one way to conceive of it. The poetic is one way among many, and, in its case, its ontological foundation finds its metaphysical equivalent in the Supreme Fiction. Levinas acknowledges the Kantian echoes behind this argument in “Is Ontology Fundamental,” where he argues that the Other’s “object is at one and

the same time given to us and *in society* with us, without this event of sociality being able to reduce itself to an ordinary property revealed in the given, without knowledge being able to take precedence over society” (126). Through a reading of the first section of *Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction*, “It Must be Abstract,” I aim to demonstrate that Stevens’s poetry finds a poetic autonomy structurally similar to the moral autonomy found in Kant’s moral theory. Much as Kant’s ethics finds metaphysical support in the categorical imperative, so does Stevens’s poetics find support in the Supreme Fiction. Though this poem occurs in the middle period of Stevens’s career, it is the necessary starting point for the discussion at hand because it begins to carve out the position that poetry takes, and what this position is in relation to.

That *Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction* orbits around an interest, in the Kantian sense, is immediately clear from the opening octave. Harold Bloom argues that the octave is concerned with transcendence, and that if we were to assign any identity to the “you” of the poem it would be the text of *Notes* itself (PC 167-8). It is clear that some sort of metaphysical-like address is occurring in these lines, but the difficulty in establishing who the “you” is will follow us throughout the poem. There are a few possibilities that can be easily dismissed. First, that “you” is directed at either Henry Church or a future writer. The central problem with this possibility is that it is simultaneously too simple and fails to explain anything: if “the light / In which I meet you” is simply a reference to the atmosphere created through the meeting of two old friends or two equally poetic people, then what of the “vivid transparence” that is brought on through this encounter? It seems highly unlikely Stevens to say that this sort of effect derives only from an interpersonal encounter. A similar problem exists in saying, like Bloom, that the “you” is a reference to the poem to come. Once again, it does not really line up. “Our being” does convey some intense connection between the speaker and the “you,” but it seems an unlikely statement for a Stevensian speaker to say that s/he only “feel[s] love” for the following poem.

Rather than attempting to come up with a concrete subject to whom the octave is addressed, we can take the far more Stevensian route and allow the “you” to be something more abstract. I believe this leaves us with two options: either the octave is addressed to poetic thought or, as Cook argues, the Supreme Fiction.³⁶ The difference is a subtle one, but worth considering. Most critics approach *Notes* by reading the “It” beginning each section as a statement about Stevens’s poetry and the poetic more generally. This approach involves viewing the Supreme Fiction as something that Stevens either achieved or wanted to achieve in his poetry, as Carroll and Leggett have both argued. My reading of *Notes*, however, operates under the assumption that the “It,” similar to the “you,” is something outside of the poem through which the poem operates. For this reason, I argue that the “you” refers to the space of poetic play/thought, and “It” refers to the Supreme Fiction, the guiding principle and foundation for the autonomy of this poetic space. The near-metaphysical nature of the Supreme Fiction is found in the fact that it operates as a sort of boundary line through which poetic thought can be accessed in its most transcendental purity.

The first canto begins by outlining the relationship between an “idea” and its “name.” The idea is as abstracted as one can get, and for this reason one must not destroy the abstract by “suppos[ing] an inventing mind as source.” One way this could occur is if the first idea is mistaken for the Supreme Fiction, making “the quick of this invention” seem to be beyond the invention itself. The same problem is considered earlier in *Man with the Blue Guitar*, where the speaker must “Throw away the lights, the definitions,/And say of what you see in the dark.” Similar to winter thinking, the speaker is here calling on the need to get rid of all the distracting fictions (“the definitions”), especially the first idea (“the lights”) so that one could see the poetic space of play for what it is. Canto XXXII of *Blue Guitar* thinks through this idea:

³⁶ Cook makes this argument based on the fact that he “revises” religious orthodox language rather than directly invoking it (216). She considers the Supreme Fiction to be her “tentative answer to the riddle of “you,” suggesting that Stevens may intend this question to remain unanswered, or, at least, answerable only in the abstract (216).

How should you walk in that space and know

Nothing of the madness of space,

Nothing of its jocular procreations?

Throw the lights away. Nothing must stand

Between you and the shapes you take

When the crust of shape has been destroyed.

Surprisingly, the poet is more attuned to “the madness of space” and its “jocular procreations” when freed from “the rotted names”—just as the ephebe must allow the sun to “bear no name” for too long. This light, this name, this “crust of shape” is what prevents the real form of light, name, and shape from being seen: poetic thought cannot be mistaken for its temporary placeholders. More importantly than being seen, of course, is that once the “crust of shape has been destroyed,” the poet is able to actually “take” shape; the boundary between conception and perception is broken and a true relation with the abstract can occur only when the poet can interact with poetic thought unimpeded.³⁷ In this encounter, where access to “things as they are” is unimpeded by the MacCulloughs of the world, we are given some of the most memorable lines of the poem:

You as you are? You are yourself.

The blue guitar surprises you.

We can extrapolate and say that if you as you are = yourself, then all things as they are = themselves. There is no transcendent truth realized, only the realization that there is an accessible

³⁷ Hence the importance of emphasizing change as a sustainability practice when it comes to interacting with the poetic realm.

abstract found in poetry that is able to revitalize an otherwise stale series of names and conceptions. This will turn out to be the guiding principle for the Supreme Fiction's relationship to major man, as well.

Cook argues that "Stevens wants the major man to be embodied but only as a possibility and never as a necessity" (228). She continues by adding "The embodiment, if it happens, will be as random as the name, and perhaps short lived. It is the abstraction that is necessary, not the incarnation" (228). Though Cook is right to emphasize that it will likely be short lived, the importance of change within Stevens's poetic theory suggests that the incarnation, the temporary instantiation, is equally necessary to the abstraction. There are several moments in "It Must Be Abstract" which suggest a clear relationship, perhaps even a mutual dependency, between the turning topos, which instantiates, and the "major abstraction." The "major man," one form of "major abstraction," is one of Stevens's examples of how abstraction emerges in particulars. I read the "major man" as the fictive abstract that Stevens conceives as guiding his society's perspective of what "man" is. Because the poet's occupation is at least in part to uncover fictive abstracts, the speaker of *Notes* pursues the "major man," and succeeds in encountering him in canto IX:

He comes,

Compact in invincible foils, from reason,

Lighted at midnight by the studious eye.

Swaddled in revery, the object of

The hum of thoughts evaded in the mind,

Hidden from other thoughts.

He is “Compact in invincible foils, from reason” in the sense that no war reason wages against “the hum of thoughts” will reveal their source.³⁸ Instead, he is revealed only obliquely through what the “hum of thoughts” orbits around. In these lines Stevens suggests that there is a greater meaning in the act of turning around an object without ever touching it than his early poems like “Earthy Anecdote” and “Life is Motion” suggest on their own. What appears in those poems as an act which has significance only in its structure is here suggested to be the key to accessing the otherwise inaccessible “object”: “major man.” The fact that these thoughts are “Hidden” only further emphasizes the fact that they are “hum[ming]” in an isolated, idiosyncratic space of play.

My move into *Notes* was founded on my assertion that there is a fundamental Kantian “interest” behind the turning topos, and it is here that this interest begins to take a clearer shape. In *Groundwork for the Metaphysics of Morals* Kant argues for an intrinsic, fundamental connection between the rational will and the categorical imperative. This connection exists outside of humanity and can, therefore, be accessed *a priori* by anyone. In order for it to be accessed, however, one must step outside of human experience into metaphysical contemplation, a necessarily philosophical endeavor.³⁹ Kant’s description of autonomy is especially helpful in that it insists on the autonomy of each individual maxim—that is, the categorical imperative requires that each maxim be suitable as a universal law. In this way autonomy also refers to a specific example’s ability to reflect the whole. He argues that “[Autonomy] must therefore abstract the will, so that practical reason (the will) may not merely administer alien interest, but merely prove its own commanding repute, as supreme legislation” (111). The authority of the will is found in its ability to be abstracted, to gesture toward a universal application that would

³⁸ Which is precisely what Levinas argues for an ethics of dwelling.

³⁹ Kant’s justification for why the categorical imperative is both what all reasoning beings are subject to and what makes them free is more fully discussed in *Critique of Practical Reason*. In this text he argues that the presence of the categorical imperative is what gives intelligibility to reason and morality; it is the imperative which gives moral thinking a firm grounding (indeed, a metaphysical one) so that a complete devotion to reason amounts to one being the most free.

have otherwise remained unattainable. In other words, the will is able to gain authority because it is the practical manifestation of a larger, pure reason, of which all rational beings are a part. It is in this way that Kant secures the power of the individual without placing any emphasis on subjectivity as such. Furthermore, he defines morality as “the relation of actions to the autonomy of the will, that is, to the possible universal legislation through its maxims” (107). Actions can be taken that appear to be moral, or are, in fact, good things to do, but for Kant, actions can only be considered moral if they are directed toward, and justified by, the categorical imperative: “*act only according to that maxim through which you can at the same time will that it become a universal law*” (Kant 71). The process of applying the categorical imperative is made possible because the will, practical reason, is able to access the much greater pure reason of which the imperative is a part.⁴⁰

In many ways Kant’s theory of morality can be subsumed under the category of what Stevens calls “reason’s click-clack, its applied/Enflashings.”⁴¹ It is not so much that Stevens, as poet, repudiates such a system of morality, but rather that he does not see morality having the same hold over poetic reality as it does over extrapoetic reality. Where Kant’s theory does play an important role for the study at hand is in the relationship he lays out between the abstract and the concrete. For Kant only an absolute good does not have to adhere to the categorical imperative out of obligation. For all other rational beings (including humans) morals have to be elevated to the principles of pure practical reason before they can be widely applied. This means abstracting concrete moral actions to reflect the categorical imperative.

⁴⁰ It could be argued that Kant takes for granted that the universal law is something all reasoning beings can access, assuming that most anyone would be capable of abstracting from their personal moral insight in order to determine the universal law undergirding it.

⁴¹ Though there is not definitive evidence that Stevens read Kant, Bart Eeckhout argues that “he grew up in a time when neo-Kantians were everywhere, and Stevens’s worldview and concerns unmistakably stand in a Kantian tradition (110). Eeckhout notes that this is particularly apparent in Stevens’s quest to find “the thing itself.”

The relevance of Kant's moral theory to Stevens's poetic theory is that it helps to explain the profound significance that Stevens places on poetry: Kant's "supreme legislation" operates in the same way as Stevens's Supreme Fiction. For Kant, actions that appear to be moral but are in fact guided by one's own self-interest qualify as heteronomous actions, just as, for Stevens, poetry that does not recognize its participation in the Supreme Fiction are only guided by the logic of the immediate climate. In order for an action to be autonomous and, therefore, moral, it must be guided by its formal relation to the categorical imperative, which, in turn, reflects a metaphysical background beyond reason. Stevens orients poetry in a parallel fashion by insisting that the reality of poetry also reaches beyond reason, but in his case it reaches to unreason, a final fiction that has no truth value in itself. Poems can be written for a variety of reasons, some of which could be found after the poem is written; if the poem is to participate in the Supreme Fiction, however, it must approach it in the same way that the moral act approaches the categorical imperative. The categorical imperative demonstrates the metaphysical nature of morality much as the Supreme Fiction demonstrates the transcendent role of the abstract in poetic thought.

With Kant in mind, we can begin to make sense of canto X, the final section of "It Must Be Abstract:"

The major abstraction is the idea of man

And major man is its exponent, abler

In the abstract than in his singular.

Once a culture assigns an exponent (a major man) to the major abstraction (the idea of man), a space of play, of poetic thought, is formed, though it is just as important to recognize that this assigning could not occur if it did not have a larger space, sustained by the Supreme Fiction, in which to work. Like Kant, Stevens must first move backward from what already exists, a

Supreme Fiction not his own, in order to discover the abstract roots of this phenomenon. The strongest difference from Kant's theory, of course, is that Stevens insists that the Supreme Fiction continually change, and it is its ability to be imagined which makes it pleasurable and good, whereas Kant insists that his categorical imperative is necessarily eternally true and unchanging because it derives from metaphysical necessity, thereby making it good because it can mediate pleasure through reason.⁴² Once the Supreme Fiction has temporally established its reign, it must remain abstract—i.e. removed from the particulars of the world—because this has to be its state by definition. This is because it is formulated through the naming of “the idea of man” via the major man, and the major man is “More fecund as principle than particle.” In order for major man to be “an heroic part, of the commonal” it must simultaneously be “Invisible or visible or both.” “The inanimate, difficult visage” must remain “A seeing and unseeing in the eye” so that the rabbi, chieftain, or poet who sees it must still ask “Who is it?”

Canto VIII thinks through the process of how the Supreme Fiction can remain “Invisible or visible or both” without a concrete man taking the place of major man:

If MacCullough himself lay lounging by the sea,

Drowned in its washes, reading in the sound,

About the thinker of the first idea,

He might take habit, whether from wave or phrase,

Or power of the wave, or deepened speech,

Or a leaner being, moving in on him,

⁴² Readers of Kant, including Schiller and, much later, Freud, have disagreed with Kant and stressed the fact that morality is a reflection of its age. See in particular Schiller's emphasis on the ‘cultural age’ in *Letters* and Freud's equating of moral duty and super ego in *The Economic Problem of Masochism* (1924) and his later formulation of morality in *Civilization and its Discontents* (1930).

Of greater aptitude and apprehension,

As if the waves at last were never broken,

As if the language suddenly, with ease,

Said things it had laboriously spoken.

Though a first reading of the canto suggests that MacCullough has made the mistake of giving a name to “the thinker of the first idea,” the twist lies in the double meaning of the word “About.” Rather than *thinking* about “the thinker of the first idea,” this thinker is *about him* because it is figured as the sea in which MacCullough is surrounded and “drowned.” The effect is that he “take[s] habit,” a phrase whose double meaning suggests MacCullough both makes a habit of engaging with the poetic in a way that does not anthropomorphize it, and undergoes a religious transformation due to the “power of the wave” and its “language.” Similar to “The Idea of Order at Key West,” the effect of the sea as representation of an abstract that can never be fully known (the Supreme Fiction) is that it captures how an abstract can be experienced without that experience offering a totalizing awareness; what MacCullough becomes aware of by allowing the sea to be “About” him (rather than saying what the sea is “about”) is that there is a “greater aptitude and apprehension” beyond the human ability to express or capture it. One would erase the transcendental obscurity and conceptual power of the Supreme Fiction by attempting to cut straight to conceiving of a thinker of it, but in this case MacCullough is able to avoid this error by letting the Supreme Fiction itself be that which thinks.

The question then becomes how one gets from the poem to the Supreme Fiction—how does an abstraction get blooded, and how does this result in an awareness of something outside of, or delimiting, ontology? One possibility can be found by turning to Kant’s and Levinas’s arguments for how ethics is rooted in metaphysics. For Kant they are intertwined because reason

is something which, by definition, all rational beings have. The categorical imperative is the ultimate proof of reason—it is a practical law because all rational beings can access it through reason. It is autonomous because it is able to bridge the gap to the universal—to “abstract the will” toward a “supreme legislation” that is rooted not just in reason, but in an even more objective realm, metaphysics (111). Levinas reorients the question of Kantian ethics by arguing that the other is something that cannot be reduced to our representation of it—our ability to locate the Other within our system of reason is insufficient. He therefore argues that “the autonomous person” can “recover her/his sovereignty” “only by becoming universal” (72). By making the general and the universal possible, language is inherently ethical. Because Stevens is interested in a type of thinking that orients itself in play (or “unreasoning”) rather than reason, we need not assume that the Supreme Fiction is rooted in metaphysics as Kant’s categorical imperative and Levinas’s generalization-as-ethics is.⁴³ The ethics of Kant and Levinas do not make any claims for a full understanding of the metaphysical. For Levinas it is precisely this aspect of his theory which makes it ethical: for Levinas the Other can be understood through the space that the Other inhabits, not through its actual *being*. Kant does not presume this level of metonymic harmony in the relation between human face-to-face encounters and encounters with Others of the metaphysical type (Levinas would argue these are the same), and for this reason he understands the metaphysical as something we must assume based on its ability to explain aspects of our lives. Rather than use the term metaphysics to describe what Stevens views the Supreme Fiction to be an indicator *of*, I suggest that we call this transcendental space simply

⁴³ At the very least, it need not be in the same way. Because this project is directed toward poetry rather than philosophy, I approach metaphysics as Stevens does, rather than as a philosopher would. From this perspective it is clear that Stevens connects poetry with metaphysics (the *metaphysica* in “The Water Glass,” for example, which will be discussed in the next chapter). This does not mean that he reduces poetry to a study of the metaphysical, which is evidenced in the fact that objects and landscapes take on metaphysical forms *within poems* (see, in particular, “An Ordinary Evening in New Haven” and “Esthetique du Mal,” canto XV).

‘poetic thought.’⁴⁴ In the last section of “It Must Give Pleasure,” Stevens considers the nature of poetry, what he describes as “the more than rational distortion, / The fiction that results from feeling.” He wonders if, when confronted by it through the “moving contour” of the turning topos, he “should name [it] flatly, waste no words, / Check your evasion, hold you to yourself.” He concludes the section by saying that the main reason he does not “call [it] by name” is that by that point it “will have stopped revolving except in crystal.” Considering the title of the section, the implication seems to be that the revolution, the turning, of poetry is what makes it pleasurable, and therefore to rationalize the seemingly transcendental location of the Supreme Fiction by naming it directly would be to lose it entirely, an action that Stevens is not yet willing to do because it gives pleasure. By comparing this gesture to that of the ethical gesture of Kant, we have been able to see how Stevens’s obscure poetic system operates.

This chapter has aimed to locate the turning topos within its larger context, climate, by addressing the structural similarity between Stevens’s poetic system and the ethical systems of Kant and Levinas without assuming that Stevens’s climate is therefore based on an ethical imperative. Both Kant’s and Levinas’s ethical systems rely on an assumed structural harmony between human reason and the metaphysical realm, and Stevens’s poetic relies on the structural harmony between human poetic play and what he theorizes as the Supreme Fiction, which implies a realm beyond, poetic thought. A considerable requirement for any reader of Stevens’s poetry is to move beyond the need to ‘make sense’ of the poem and start asking what the poem itself is trying to make sense of. This aspect of Stevens’s thought is ubiquitous in his work,⁴⁵ and reveals that there *is* a profound interest behind the turning topos: an interest, or as Stevens might

⁴⁴ The primary reason to avoid calling it metaphysical is that he does not claim that poetics is a different way to reach toward what ethics reaches toward. Instead he says it is fundamentally different at every level, an important aspect that could get lost if we too easily assign poetic thought to the metaphysical realm.

⁴⁵ This is often presented through a figure trying to determine what s/he is perceiving, as in “Domination of Black” and “Man Carrying Thing,” though it can also appear through a figure questioning what lies beyond perception, as in “Of Mere Being.”

say, a desire, in experiencing the abstract space, the climate, in which poems occur. The climate is abstract both in the sense that it is separate from the extrapoetic world and in that it is not tangibly accessible within the poetic world, either. It can only be accessed by becoming temporarily blooded within poems, but this cannot be done if one assumes that climate, with its first idea and dominant fictions, is an end in itself: there must be a Supreme Fiction, even more abstract and even more difficult to change, that operates as the gateway to a transcendental realm, poetic thought. As the next chapter aims to demonstrate, if we locate the final point at which poetry is directed and finds its source in poetic thought (while still allowing this to remain an abstract concept), then it becomes clear how the pleasure we gain from thinking in this way can be a final good in itself, and how it can valuably destabilize what Rancière calls the “ethical turn” by allowing for other kinds of turning, as well.

Chapter Three

Poetic Thought: Tracing the Concept Through Stevens's Career

The previous two chapters have considered how Stevens's particular kind of poetic thought operates according to a turning topos, and the implications that this has for how we locate the poetic ontologically. This chapter considers how Stevens's concept of poetic thought relates to other kinds of thought by working through poems that struggle with poetry's position within thought and/or assert its difference from other ways of thinking. The way in which the turning topos gestures toward a climate and that climate gestures toward a Supreme Fiction suggests that Stevens considers reality as something that can be thought of in different ways, the poetic being one of these ways. Throughout his career Stevens emphasizes the importance of according poetry this level of ontological seriousness because it is what makes poetry so pleasurable. As he says in a letter to Henry Church, "to give pleasure to an intelligent man, by this sort of thing, is as much as one can expect" (*L* 430).⁴⁶ It is an aspect of poetry that Stevens comes back to often, remaining steadfast in his view against those who believed that poetry ought to respond to the world in ways that can be judged according to their ethical valence. However, if poetry is made to think in ethical rather than poetic terms, then it loses its ability to give pleasure because it has to write toward the ethical *ought* instead of a fiction.

If we understand poetic thought as operating in parallel to ethical thought, then it avoids being subsumed under what Rancière calls the "ethical turn":

The reign of ethics is not the reign of moral judgements over the operations of art or of political actions. On the contrary, it signifies the constitution of an indistinct sphere in which not only is the specificity of political and artistic practices

⁴⁶ The "sort of thing" he refers to in this case is the highly complex *Notes*.

dissolved, but so also is that which formed the very core of ‘old morality’: the distinction between fact and law, between what is and what ought to be. Ethics amounts to the dissolution of norm into fact. (109-110)

If poetry is viewed from the perspective associated with such an “ethical turn,” then it becomes clear how idiosyncratic, temporary relations can have meaningful roles within a poem: in the space of the “poetic turn” they are equivalent to law. This “poetic turn” results in a dissolution of a possible imagined into something that can be played with and thought through within the poem, all without requiring that it be ‘true’ or subject to “the reign of ethics.” Though poetic thought, like the ethical, is a somewhat “indistinct point of view,” the following chapter aims to clarify what role Stevens conceives for it. In particular, it allows for a novel way of confronting reality that can result in a pure, free pleasure.

Al Filreis has provided one of the more significant readings of Stevens’s confrontation with reality and its relation to the poetic by tracing the ways in which the shifting reality of World War II and the postwar period affected Stevens’s poetry. He argues that Stevens maintained a much stronger relation to the actual world, whether through “engagement,” “resistance,” or “detachment,” and was much more invested in finding harmony with it, than most contemporary scholarship allows. Filreis locates a fundamental shift in Stevens’s thought in 1943: from a particular form of American isolationism that meant escaping and evading reality to a more morally sound stance that required facing reality and reaching agreement with it. This argument is quite successful in demonstrating Stevens’s social and political views and the ways in which they inevitably manifested in his poetry. Indeed, Filreis demonstrates quite soundly that Stevens uses methods of evasion and confrontation as a means of expressing and coping with his views of the war in his poetry, continuing to grapple with them in the postwar period, as well. I aim to demonstrate that these methods and patterns of confrontation and evasion existed long

before the war and are inherent to Stevens's conception of poetic thought, though they can be better understood within the context of the importance of abstraction and change within the poetic.⁴⁷ Because these methods cannot be limited to the sphere that Filreis has laid out, we cannot critically read them within the sphere of what Filreis calls "a moral sustenance," either (48). If there is an ethical, political, or religious reading to be pursued in Stevens's poetry it must be done within the context of how these kinds of thinking conflict with his equally complex, specifically poetic thought.

The early *Harmonium* poems "The Emperor of Ice-Cream" (1921) and "Tea at the Palaz of Hoon" (1922) both have a long history of being read as illuminating a tactic of evasion. I argue, however, that these poems, both early examples of Stevens's conception of the poetic, focus on how the poetic is bigger than just poems, and on the larger implications it has for how the world can be approached in various ways. Both poems demonstrate, albeit through very different means, the importance of not regarding a move into poetic thought as merely escapist. They are representative of an early tactic in Stevens's career—a rather carefree representation of poetry's ability to be separate from while still inevitably being involved in the world.

"The Emperor of Ice-Cream" is a good example of a poem that moves outside of normal societal expectations in what Jarraway describes as a "rambunctious wake" (41). The poem expresses the power and importance of poetry primarily through its use of the word "let." The repeated use of the word gives power to the reader: the speaker merely suggests that the reader "Call the roller of big cigars" "and bid him whip / In kitchen cups concupiscent curds." The speaker is calling on the reader to allow for temporary play to occur, in which objects and people take on idiosyncratic meanings and relations—in other words, the speaker is calling for the

⁴⁷ In this sense, evasion becomes focusing on how poetic thought rests in a separate abstract, and confrontation becomes showing how the abstract can change and add to the world.

turning topos to create an alternate, poetic world. Stevens tells us “The poem is obviously not about ice cream” (L 341), reminding us that, in this play space, ice cream has *become* “concupiscent curds,” and is therefore no longer what it is in extrapoetic reality. The speaker encourages the reader to

Let the wenches dawdle in such dress
As they are used to wear, and let the boys
Bring flowers in last month’s newspapers.

In both cases it is an encouragement to allow a sort of non-presentness by allowing the turning topos to create meanings beyond what is there in reality. As we find out in the second stanza, these are people who are coming to a wake. By allowing “the wenches” to “dawdle” and wear their normal clothes rather than the expected appropriate wake dress, and by allowing the boys to “Bring flowers,” a gift for the deceased, in old newspapers rather than the current one (something I take to be considered an act of disrespect), the speaker is asking for a redefinition of what ‘correct wake behaviour’ is. The line “Let be be finale of seem” suggests, like the previous lines beginning ‘let’, that it is usually the opposite which is true. The poem suggests that outside of poetry it is social reality and its norms, taboos, and regulations that are the emperor—the bearer of ultimate, impregnable truth—and for this reason one is inevitably confined to make *seem* be finale of *be*: appearances must reflect the intractable reality of the world because they are assumed to be reality’s starting point. In poetry, however, it is appearance, formed by the turning topos, which constructs the reality of the play space, but only for that moment. It is this condition of the world that Stevens refers to when he says that the “concupiscent curds” “express or accentuate life’s destitution” (L 500). The argument that the world would be destitute without poetic thought’s ability to play and refresh is both an argument for its further incorporation within everyday life and an argument that it is *already* what makes life exciting and pleasurable

though it is not recognized as such. In poetry “The only emperor is the emperor of ice-cream,” and the drive for novel experience is given a prominent place as creator and generator of “be.”

Theodore Sampson offers the following summary of “Emperor”: “we can look upon the appearance of things and the essence we choose to attach to them as coterminous, since all reality...is ultimately subsumed in the empirical” (32). The flattening of the world via empirical perception that Sampson suggests here is helpful in the sense that it clarifies the equal interaction of everything in Stevens’s poetry, though it neglects to contend with the invocation of the poetic around which the poem revolves. The speaker is calling on the reader to “Let the lamp affix the beam”: let the poetic way of thinking have its effect on the way things are seen, if only for this gathering, this moment. It is a powerful call to power for the poetic, suggesting not that this shift in thinking should become permanent, but rather that it can be enacted in any environment—even at a wake whose dominant image is cold “horny feet.” Poetic thought is something that one must “let” occur, demonstrating that recognizing its equal position alongside ethical thought, which operates by different standards, asking for the “good,” rather than the pleasurable, is crucial since it will likely prevent the poetic from being forgotten as an important kind of thought.

“Tea at the Palaz of Hoon” is another early poem that shows signs of one of Stevens’s central arguments about the poetic: that imagination is not a form of escapism because it makes use of the world around which it is constructed, even if the decadent speaker, Hoon, does not realize it. The poem begins with his syntactically convoluted claim that he is “not less” himself because he “descended” “in purple.” This could simply mean that he was wearing purple, as is usually understood, though I suspect that Stevens means more than simple clothing. Purple tends to signify for Stevens an entrance into the poetic, and this is made more pronounced in that Hoon “descended” the day “through” the “air,” anticipating Stevens’s later namesake for the sun,

“purple Phoebus.”⁴⁸ Read in connection with “the western day,” this suggests Hoon conceives of himself as his own sun. As we have seen in the summer poems (of which this could certainly be one) the sun is often seen as the foundation for other metaphors and “seemings.” Hoon’s imaginative power as sun personified is used to heighten verbs: “sprinkled” becomes “rained;” “buzzed” becomes “blowing;” and “swept” becomes something with greater control, direction, and force through “compass.” Hoon’s mistake is not in assuming that he has this power or in taking pleasure in it, but in his claim that “what I saw / Or heard or felt came not but from myself.” His imaginative power serves to heighten and sometimes catalyze his pre-existing experience, yet here he claims that there was no experience before his imagination. This is a logical impossibility within the poem—even his inclusion of the qualifier “what you called / The loneliest air” suggests exterior influence. Nonetheless, it is “there,” in the poetic space both his and not his own, that he has the important experience of finding himself “more truly and more strange.” Like “Emperor,” “Hoon” demonstrates the power of invoking the poetic, but also the pleasure that can be found in it, as well. In this poem the possibility of mistaking poetry’s power to create pleasure as one’s own power to control the world is satirized through the figure of Hoon. His insistence that “not less was I myself” suggests that poetic thought is as valid a way of thinking as any, even if Hoon intends this statement to signify his own superiority.

Ideas Of Order (1935) shows a similar emphasis on the fact that poetic thought exists alongside other modes of thinking. Though it was published more than ten years after *Harmonium*, it is Stevens’s next published collection and makes use of some of the same moves used in “Hoon.” In “The Idea of Order at Key West” (1934) this comparison is most evident at the end of the fourth stanza:

⁴⁸ From “It Must be Abstract.” As I argue in chapter two, the sun plays a central role as the creator of climate out of the Supreme Fiction. See fn. 28 for a discussion of purple’s larger significance within Stevens’s poetry.

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.

One can imagine Hoon's triumph if these lines were about him. Her precision in making "the sky acutest at its vanishing" and "measur[ing] to the hour its solitude" echoes Hoon's description of the grandiose transformations he produces in the ointment, hymns, and, most importantly, himself. The crucial difference between the two is that neither the singer nor her observers in "Idea" would ever claim that she was "the compass of that sea," instead allowing the sea to exist as something foreign, "Whatever self it had" beyond humanity's ability to express. Although the sea in both poems can be read, albeit insufficiently, as the body poetic, only Hoon claims that it is something that he can fully map and be the compass of. At this later point in Stevens's career he has expanded on the possibilities of escaping into the poetic by defining the space in which one escapes as unconquerable and infinite. Unlike the turning topos and the larger climate in which it occurs, poetic thought is not a product of human construction. The sea "Was merely a place by which she walked," meaning that her approach to the poetic is limited to its shoreline,

though the waves may cause some surprises to wash up.⁴⁹

J Hillis Miller compares “Ideas of Order at Key West” to Emerson’s “Seashore,” because, he argues, they are both dealing with a “rudimentary liminal scene” (Topography 261). While they do both deal with liminality to some degree, what Miller does not recognize is the crucial difference separating the two poets and their poems: Emerson’s poem personifies a conversation between seashore and sea/men/history, whereas Stevens explicitly forbids this type of poetic thinking because he believes it would be inaccurate. The difference is the same as the one between ethics and poetics, in that the two poets are operating according to different assumptions about what can be said and understood within and about poetic thought. Miller is right to say that “Idea of Order” is “a meditation on... a response to the woman’s response to the sea” (263), but he does not pick up on the layered thinking that this poem presents because of this. Not words but rather a “constant cry,” the effect of the singer’s song is to confront the viewers/listeners with the power of the poetic, “the veritable ocean.”⁵⁰ These viewers, unused to poetic thought and expression, remark that this “cry” is something “not ours although we understood.” The key here is that the viewers are in awe of the fact that something “Inhuman,” the idea of the ocean as the ocean itself, is transformed into something they understand without knowing how. The repeated reminder that “it was she and not the sea we heard” prevents generalized conclusions about the surroundings to continue once the song is over. It is only through human poetry, the “idea of order,” that the ultimate abstract, poetic thought, can be reached. This is echoed in what has traditionally been taken to be a profound philosophical enquiry:

Whose spirit was this? we said, because we knew

⁴⁹ This preserves the structure of the Supreme Fiction as indicator of larger poetic thought, just as the categorical imperative and face-to-face encounter indicate a larger transcendental metaphysic.

⁵⁰ Similar to MacCullough’s encounter with the sea in *Notes*, “the veritable ocean” is both what the poet figure is thinking about and, through its symbolic association to the Supreme Fiction, where poetic thought originates.

It was the spirit that we sought and knew

That we should ask this often as she sang.

Stevens, always demanding care and attention from his readers, plays with the expectation of knowledge and understanding. The double instance of lines ending “knew” privileges the knowledge of the reader, but this is also doubly undone by the enjambment. All that the speaker really knows is that the spirit is the one that s/he has been looking for, and that it is important to remind oneself of this every time the spirit performs. This demonstrates the transcendental condition of poetic thought in that it is not something that can be succinctly captured, only felt as an inchoate presence.

The Man With the Blue Guitar & Other Poems, published in the following year, shows a new-found emphasis on and clarification of poetic thought. *The Man With the Blue Guitar* could be considered the ultimate poem about a specifically poetic kind of thought, at least at this stage in his career. In an attempt to summarize canto XVIII of *Blue Guitar*, Ronald Sukenick argues that “Stevens systematizes, through his theory, the specifications for this relation [with reality] in order to be able to encourage it into existence” (27). This summary could rightly be taken to summarize the more general goal of the poem as a whole, especially if we understand the “They” of the poem as those who have yet to recognize this relation. Most critics understand the “They” of the poem as a unified mass of people, Justin Quinn going as far as to suggest that “They” is like a Greek chorus “whose task was to mediate the public significance of the events on the stage” (85). The opening section, in which “They” first challenge the guitarist by saying that he “do[es] not play things as they are,” illustrates the fundamental problem faced by the poet. As Al Filreis notes, we could narrow the mass of men further to Stevens, or poetry’s, detractors, most notably his/its critics. If we take this identification seriously, then the primary argument against the imagination, and poetry in particular, is that it turns the green day into something blue by

attempting to express it via the blue guitar. In the Stevensian view, the “blue” of poetic thought is as formative as the “green” of other thought, but because it operates through temporary instantiations of its abstract form, it can be mistaken for something that comes after. The “They” insist that Stevens’s poetry be subsumed under the “reign of ethics,” preventing it from properly establishing itself in poetic thought. The consequence of not recognizing the distinctive structure mode of thought of the poetic is that its ability to give pleasure will be greatly diminished. The detractors do not respond to the guitarist’s insistence that “Things as they are / Are changed upon the blue guitar” by demanding that he get a green guitar, or even a colorless guitar; rather, they refuse to internalize the guitarist’s statement and insist on the impossible:

And they said then; “But play, you must,

A tune beyond us, yet ourselves,

A tune upon the blue guitar

Of things exactly as they are.”

In many ways we can consider the rest of the poem as a response to this demand made by the “They.” The guitarist is in dialogue with a group who refuses to recognize the unique space of poetic thought and the work that it can do within this space. I find this refusal not only in the “They” of the poem, but in readings pursued by Stevens’s critics as well. Most close readings of this poem reference a summary of the poem’s goals that Stevens sent to his Italian translator, Renato Poggioli, in which he states that the

general intention of the Blue Guitar was to say a few things that I felt impelled to say 1. about reality; 2. about the imagination; 3. their interrelations; 4. principally, my attitude toward each of these things. This is the general scope of the poem,

which is confined to the area of poetry and makes no pretense of going beyond that area. (*L* 788)

Though critics have stayed close to this statement by routinely focusing readings on the relationship between reality and imagination and Stevens's views on them, there are very few who take the last sentence to heart. The poem "*is confined to the area of poetry and makes no pretense of going beyond that area.*" Riddel takes this limit seriously but goes too far to the other side by insisting that everything must, therefore, be poetic.⁵¹ In fact, Stevens makes poetry only one area, meaning that he does not claim that everything is poetry, but he also insists that it is only this area that *Blue Guitar* is concerned with because it is where pleasure emerges from. What makes *Blue Guitar* stand out against the poems already discussed is that here Stevens faces the frustrating misrecognition of poetry head-on by including the voice of his detractors, whereas previous poems either feature mistaken speakers or successful poetic engagement.

No matter what way the guitarist orients himself, he will be still be playing music about a green day on a blue guitar. Blue, the "amorist Adjective aflame," makes the guitar, the imagination, powerful through its ability, as necessary adjective, to augment and make something else of all that it sees. Canto II begins to respond to the demand to play "things exactly as they are" by stating that "I cannot bring a world quite round, / Although I patch it as I can." This statement goes against a common metaphor for the imagination, 'working with whole fabric,' by reminding us that the guitarist is a shearsman—imagining "things as they are" involves making cuts and patches, not simply folding and rearranging. The guitarist reorients the demand to play "A tune.../Of things exactly as they are" by instead saying that he will "serenade almost to man" by singing of "a hero's head, large eye / And bearded bronze, but not a man."

⁵¹ Riddel's logic is that, since Stevens emphasizes that poetry is a way of viewing the world, all human experience, all perception, must be poetry. See in particular *The Clairvoyant Eye*, 138-44.

The guitarist's description of his craft is an almost perfect inversion of the detractors' demand: they want him to sing to them in order to move "beyond" them, to "things exactly as they are;" the guitarist on the other hand, constructs as complete a picture of the "hero" as "he can" in order to "reach through him almost to man." The structure is the same as that between the major man and man we see later in *Notes*. Though the aim of the guitarist's song is to fully paint a picture of a hero, it is because he "cannot bring a world quite round" (poetic play's imperfect circle) that he is able to reach through this imagined world toward something foundational and, one could say, most real—the Supreme Fiction, that which generates the fictions we use to approach the world.

As though in defense of this perceived imperfection, canto IV is the first stanza in which the guitarist seems to concede to his audience and provide them with what they want to hear in order to demonstrate that the perfection they demand is impossible and, more importantly, undesirable. Quinn describes these shifts, of which canto IV is but one, as "modulat[ions] back and forth between the natural world and the need to comprehend the masses" (86). The difficulty with interpreting this shift in tone as an attempt to think in the same way as the detractors, however, is that it provides no greater means of making sense of Stevens's puzzling tone. Critics often read the opening and closing couplets of this section as complementary:

So that's life then, things as they are?

It picks its way on the blue guitar.

is seen to formally and conceptually answer and confirm:

And that's life then: things as they are.

This buzzing of the blue guitar.

The key to understanding this canto is to recognize Stevens's joke. The first half of the canto, constituted by the first three couplets, is a series of rhetorical questions to which the detractors would be quick to answer 'yes': "Things as they are" becomes the definition of "life," which

“picks its way on the blue guitar.” Reality is something produced by and acting on the guitar, giving it the ability to capture “a million people on one string.” Stevens proposes these possibilities with a wryness often unrecognized by critics, the tendency being to assume a constant earnestness and naïveté in the poet. A close reading of *Blue Guitar* requires that we put away such gentle assumptions of Stevens, whose brief ridicule of readerly assumptions is then followed by a much more profound, and much more poetic, description of how the blue guitar is involved in reality. In truth it is the fourth couplet which runs parallel to the fifth:

The feelings crazily, craftily call,
Like a buzzing of flies in autumn air,

And that’s life then: things as they are,
This buzzing of the blue guitar.

The buzzing of the guitar both constitutes and is constituted by “things as they are,” in the same way that “The feelings” come together in something “Like a buzzing of flies.” In other words, this poem argues that poetic thought is visible only as an amalgamation of thoughts, like a swarm of flies appearing as a solid thing, but once visible it becomes evident that it was a pre-existing aspect of reality to begin with. Imagination plays to poetic thought but is also constructed by it, and its revolutionary potential is grounded in the fact it requires no truth to accompany pleasure.

On the dust jacket of the 1937 edition of *The Man With the Blue Guitar*, Stevens says that the poem “deals with the incessant conjunctions between things as they are and things imagined.” His use of the word “incessant” suggests that there is an unpleasantness to this continual realization. There is a danger in this realization, as well, since there will always be detractors quick to argue that poetry is nothing but “The unspotted imbecile revery” (XIII)—the mere revaluation of reality rather than its equal contender in thought. The poet has to be careful

in how he argues for the value of poetic thought because his detractors are so quick to understand it through the ethical turn.⁵² As Stevens goes on to say, the blue guitar “is used most often simply as reference to the individuality of the poet, meaning by the poet any man of imagination.” This idea of individuality as something held and played with is beautifully described in canto XVII as “A dream (to call it a dream),” echoing the earlier poem “Hymn to a Watermelon Pavilion” where the kind of dream dictates the kind of dwelling and turning topos. Within this dream the poet can “believe” “A dream no longer a dream, a thing, / Of things as they are.” This moment, where dream becomes “things as they are,” marks the point where poetic thought exists as a belief so intrinsic to how one sees the world that it becomes fact. One implication of this stanza is that on most nights “strumming” the guitar gives the touch of the hand, not of the senses—on most nights playing with one’s individual spirit gives rise to a greater sense of one’s physicality and its potential to create. As Schiller argues, “The imagination, like the bodily organs, has in man its free movement and its material play, a play in which, without any reference to form, it simply takes pleasure in its arbitrary power and in the absence of all hinderance” (Letter XXVII). There is a rich pleasure to be gained from this kind of playing, but “on certain nights” playing the guitar can lead to something with much greater social and political relevance: to remind one’s audience of “the very senses as they touch / The wind-gloss” is to redistribute what can be spoken of, what Rancière terms ‘the sensible,’ by demonstrating the extent to which fictions, through poetic thought, play a fundamental role in how people think, interact, and interpret the world. It turns a poem into “a missal” made more profound from it having been “found / In the mud” (canto XXIV). It is the ideal replacement for “That generation’s dream” that was “aviled / In the mud” (canto XXXIII). The “missal” is found “In the mud” because it is the mud as

⁵² His detractors conflate participation in mimesis with the pursuit of an ethical ‘good.’ The particular approach that Stevens takes to mimesis is a separate issue, and one that goes beyond the confines of this project, though it is worth noting that in poems like “Idea of Order” and “The Red Fern,” mimicry can often function as a stepping-off point for poetic thought in the Stevensian sense, whereas for the detractors it is an end in itself (albeit a confused one).

dwelling that constructs new fictions and reveals old ones, suggesting that the poem is made more ‘sensible,’ in Rancière’s sense, by being read through a Catholic symbol, an ancient fiction.

We can see, then, that *Blue Guitar* is neither an “aesthetic anecdote,” nor a “post-Enlightenment crisis poem” (Riddel *CE* 137, Bloom 120)—more importantly, nor is it merely “an imbecile revery,” a series of improvisations that make “no grand claims...for poetry” (Vendler 143). The poem is remarkable simply for its ability to make such direct claims for poetry that tends to go unrecognized in the criticism. There is a marriage between reality and the imagination in poetry, even if only for a few moments. However, even though the act of poetry is to “sit and to balance things / To and to and to the point of still,” the act also requires that all participants “know that the balance does not quite rest.” It is an ambiguity that does not sit well with those who think outside of poetry, but within poetic thought it matters not that “The shapes are wrong and the sounds are false” because “Franciscan don was never more / Himself than in this fertile glass.” This return to the individual’s benefit from thinking poetically underscores that it is necessarily both for its emotional contribution to people and for establishing communal fictions. But neither of these are possible if poetic thought is not regarded in its proper transcendental position. Though Stevens would write about the important distinction between religious and poetic thought later in “Response to Papini,” at this point in his career he was more concerned with eliminating the view of poetry as direct social critique, and establishing it as a contributor to a wide-ranging and necessary way of thinking.

“The Glass of Water” (1938), from the following collection *Parts of a World*, works around the idea that poetic thought is not equal to scientific/metaphysical thought. Though more energy was spent throughout his career on poems like *Blue Guitar*, which locate poetry as a means of recognizing and establishing fictions, it is equally important to acknowledge the obverse: unlike science and metaphysics, poetic thought is not interested in establishing truths,

even alternative ones. In order to demonstrate this, the poem moves through three stages or “states” of seeing a glass of water. The first stanza is concerned with physics and metaphysics.⁵³ By isolating “glass” from “water” and determining that they would both change under hot and cold temperatures, the speaker concludes that “this object is merely a state.” The physics is playfully amateur: one part would have to be heated, the other frozen, yet the speaker brings the two together under a single “object” that is “One of many, between two poles.” This foray into scientific thought is used in the last line to justify a fundamental belief in binaries by concluding “So, / In the metaphysical, there are these poles.” This mock reasoning process gives way to the metaphorical, a new “state,” in the second stanza. The neat end-rhyme of “jaw” and “claws” ending the stanza gives it a silly, youthful feel. This tone disappears in the final two stanzas:

And in the water winding weeds move round.

And there and in another state—the refractions,

The *metaphysica*, the plastic parts of poems

Crash in the mind—But, fat Jocundus, worrying

About what stands here in the centre, not the glass,

But in the centre of our lives, this time, this day,

It is a state, this spring among the politicians

Playing cards. In a village of the indigenes,

One would have still to discover. Among the dogs and dung,

One would continue to contend with one's ideas.

⁵³ The connection between the physical and metaphysical and physical comes up elsewhere in Stevens's poetry, as well, though “The Glass of Water” seems to be the first direct instance. See “Chocorua to its Neighbor,” “Credences of Summer,” and “An Ordinary Evening in New Haven” in particular.

The metaphor as it stands in the second stanza requires nothing but the water glass and some imagination, but by the third stanza it has taken root and there are now “winding weeds.” Significantly, they “move round,” suggesting the turning topos is now in play—the poem has entered “another state,” poetic thought. What began as a poem that ignored the role of light in the identification and categorization of the water glass as object then turns into a metaphorical presentation of the role light-as-lion plays. By the third stanza, light is seen for its “refractions” which are called “*metaphysica*, the plastic part of poems.” Whereas the use of “metaphysical” in the first stanza carried a mock-significance, the italic, latinate “*metaphysica*” comes across as a more sincere, poetic element. It is these elements, which amateur science failed to find in the “two poles,” that take hold in the poem and leave a lasting effect when they “Crash in the mind.” The “centre” is shifted from the painterly image in which the glass “stands” in the middle to “the centre of our lives.” There is a deep relevance to the glass of water, but it is not because scientific and metaphysical truths can be discovered through it—it is because it allows one to “contend with one’s ideas,” to feel the *metaphysica* “Crash” instead of cogitating it into lifeless, immobile existence. The poem has succeeded in gesturing beyond itself toward poetic thought. This could only be done through play, since its ability to abstract and change prevent anything from becoming static. Poetic thought as a “state” of “discover[y],” the subject of the poem, is juxtaposed with other ways of thinking, especially the scientific. This is not to say that the poem is *against* scientific thought, but rather that it emphasizes the importance of not being limited to its methods. One of the central differences between scientific and poetic thought as they are seen here is that scientific thought requires a rational process (though it is comically abridged in the poem) whereas poetic thought seems to occur all at once in a “Crash.” The neat syntax of the first stanza’s “That,” “Shows,” “So,” is in stark contrast to the stuttering “And” “But” of the

third stanza, demonstrating that in poetry contradictions, additions, and irregular syntax are all suitable ways of pointing toward the greater *metaphysica*, poetic thought.

One of the implications of “The Water Glass” is that poetry can be better than other kinds of thought at expressing certain ideas. In many ways it can be read as a reconfiguration of the poem as jar metaphor discussed in the first chapter. By removing the bouquet from the jar that is poetry, Stevens is able to demonstrate the thought processes that could be used to explore the jar stripped of all potential descriptions. What we end up seeing is that only poetic thought is able to combine all elements—light, air, water, glass—in such a way as to allow all of them to be thought of at once. Along similar lines, “Description Without Place” (1945) captures the importance of understanding poetic acts as “seeming[s]” rather than truth statements, showing a sharp distinction between philosophical and poetic thought.⁵⁴ It is an aspect of Stevens that can often go overlooked, leading critics to conflate Stevens’s thought with philosophical thought rather than allowing for his distinction between them. Literary critic Justin Quinn’s study of Stevens, though exemplary in its willingness to engage with poetry *as poetry*, maintains a binary between the realms of nature and the political/ideological that assumes the same need for truth claims seen in Gardner and Tompsett. Though he argues for a subtle relationship between the two, it is a causal one in which natural spaces are used to think through ideological conditions. Quinn claims that “Stevens needs a *space* to think about history and politics, and that space is nature and its object” (5). As I have aimed to show, however, poetry, through the turning topos, reorients nature and its objects by locating them in another space—poetic play. This means that rather than pursuing the truth of ideological, historical, or political reality, Stevens is looking for a greater understanding of abstract, poetic thought.

⁵⁴ I.A. Richards makes a similar argument for the importance of “pseudo-statements” in *Science and Poetry*, which he defines as “a form of words which is justified entirely by its effect in releasing or organising our impulses and attitudes” and views in structural opposition to truth statements in science (65). Richards argues that if one believes in pseudo-statements, then “the world *seems*, while we do so, to be transfigured” (68).

“Description” addresses the absence of truth claims in poetry by demonstrating the central role that “seeming” plays in poetic thought. The poem begins with the statement “It is possible that to seem—it is to be, / As the sun is something seeming and it is.” Like letting “be be finale of seem” in “Emperor,” this poem lets poetic thought begin by establishing the counterintuitive act that defines it: making ‘seem’ equivalent to ‘is’ within the space of the poem. Once this structure of poetic relation has been put into action, the topos of play takes over and “Thus things are like a seeming of the sun / Or like a seeming of the moon or night / Or sleep.” The third section muses on the possibility of something other than seeming, something “immenser than / A poet’s metaphors,” which may point to the “immediate whole” that is the mind in which poetic thought exists, but this is quickly dismissed and a more humble interest restated in its place: “seemings that are to be / Seemings that it is possible to be.” Stevens’s concern in this poem is to develop what can be said through poetic thought (via poetic play), by establishing its role in what we would normally consider the philosophical contemplation of perception.

The fourth and fifth sections demonstrate the extent to which anything can be incorporated within this system of seeming, including descriptions only speculated upon (the seeming of “the seeming of a summer’s day”) and descriptions that are yet to happen (“The future is description without place, / The categorical predicate, the arc”). The genius of “Description Without Place” lies in its ability to theorize poetic thought outside of poems themselves, an aspect of the poetic that Stevens often claims but rarely elucidates. It is for this reason that critics so often confuse his claims to be about reality, when they are in fact aiming to outline a parallel means of thinking about reality that runs alongside the ethical and philosophical consideration of truth. The sixth section begins to flesh out the powerful implications of this understanding of poetic thought, and as a result it is worth quoting in full:

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

It is an artificial thing that exists,
In its own seeming, plainly visible,

Yet not too closely the double of our lives,
Intenser than any actual life could be,

A text we should be born that we might read,
More explicit than the experience of sun

And moon, the book of reconciliation,
Book of a concept only possible

In description, canon central in itself,
The thesis of the plentifullest John.

As Cook notes in her *Reader's Guide*, the first couplet emits a wonderful ambiguity; the revelation could be either *by* and/or *to* the describer, despite the fact that the revelation cannot have to do with “The thing described, nor false facsimile.” What, then, would the revelation be about, if a revelation about the describer is only one of the options? Description itself is what is “artificial,” “plainly visible,” and yet “Intenser than any actual life could be”; yet it is also a “text” in itself, something that seems to exist outside of any individual act of description because

it is produced by poetic thought. An excerpt from a letter Stevens wrote to Barbara Church could be of some help in clarifying this:

It is possible that pages of insight and of reconciliation, etc. are merely pages of description. The trouble is that poetry is so largely a matter of transformation. To describe a cup of tea without changing it and without concerning oneself with some extreme aspect of it is not at all the easy thing that it seems to be. (*L* 643)

In this letter Stevens clarifies that he places poetic thought both at the forefront and in the background of everyday experience. Though transformation is a capability of poetry, it is not the most difficult one to succeed at. Rather, it is the descriptions which are “More explicit than the experience of sun,” more than just an example of description, that are the central focus of Stevens’s work. The profound nature of description is its ability to not merely operate parasitically (or mimetically) on reality, but to exist as a separate organizing principle and separate ‘text’ to be read using poetic thought. It is able to express wonder and spirituality in its fullest sense—“the plentifullest John”—but it also dominates religious texts in that it is the “text we should be born that we might read.” The last section of the poem is a barrage of the powers of description without place, the most significant of them being “It is a world of words to the end of it, / In which nothing solid is its solid self,” and “It matters, because everything we say / Of the past is description without place.” It is “without place” because it is not subject to verification: it is not as though one could hold up a picture of the past and verify its representative accuracy.

What we learn from these lines is that Stevens constantly sees ways in which poetic thought exists outside of poems because poetic thought is needed when one must abstract from the surroundings to conceive of the past or future. What we cannot forget, however, is that description, whether it be in a poem or outside of the poem in imaginings of the past or future, always exists only within “a world of words.” Stevens is not claiming that the entire world, the

entire reality, is governed by this mode of “description without place.” He is arguing that the “seeming” developed through poetic thought exists alongside other means of thinking about the world, and to remain oblivious to the relevance of poetic thought is to miss not just how one can imagine present fictions, but how one thinks about the past and future. It is not that poets ought to talk about the world around them as a means of understanding its singularity, but that poetry demonstrates that there is not one singular meaning, as the poetic mode of thinking allows for some things to be thought, and subsequently articulated, that other modes do not.

“Reply to Papini” (1948) is a rare poem, similar to *Blue Guitar*, in that it so consciously and deliberately presents poetic thought as different from another kind of thought—in this case, religious thought. Stevens is well-known in his use of all lowercase letters when writing ‘god’ in his poetry, and in this poem we find an explanation for why God has no place in poetic thought. The first section of the poem begins by asking Papini “why do you ask someone else / To say what Celestin should say for himself?” and ends by concluding that Celestin, a fictional Pope, would have to get rid of “the removes toward poetry” first. It is not only poets who have access to the poetic, though there are differences between how a poet and a Pope would access it. Stevens suggests that a Pope would be more fit to rise “to sing the hymn of victory of the psalm, of supplication” because he can base his claims on “an ever-living subject.” “The poet / Has only the formulations of midnight:” s/he is wrapped up in the human reality of constructing and making sense of a time, “the confusions of intelligence,” whereas the Pope need not make such correspondences. The reference to midnight echoes another poem in *Auroras*, “What We See is What We Think” (1949), where twelve noon is seen for all its connotations. Of course the poet “wishes that all hard poetry were true,” but often the reality is that the only truth in the poem is that it reflects the confusion of its time. If Celestin wishes that “This pastoral of endurance and death,” life, be accurately sung then he must let it “be perceived / And not imagined,” the

implication being that “orotund consolations” are imagined and not perceived. this difference between “perceived” and “imagined” echoes the criticism of MacCullough’s perception of “a thinker of the first idea” in the sea. It can be explained through the differing approach to metaphysics between Pope and poet. The Pope places God as the ultimate truth, and in this way is able to use the metaphysical as a firm ground on which to think.⁵⁵ The poet, rather, cannot rest on the Supreme Fiction because one can only ever gesture toward it. Faith and belief can be placed in the fictions it produces, but not in it or its transcendental bearing.⁵⁶ It is only when the Pope learns to get rid of “the removes toward poetry” and view it for what it is that he will be able to approach poetry without requiring a firm metaphysical foundation.

The speaker goes on to claim that “The poet / Increases the aspects of experience,” making it a gift, danger, or irrelevancy in a society depending on its conditions, and emphasizing poetry’s ability to alter what a society considers ‘sensible.’ The key here is that neither the poet nor the poem offers revelation as the Pope desires. It does not expose the truth or reality of experience, but rather “increases” it through the ‘adding’ of change that occurs in the turning topos. This puts a particular twist on the last four lines:

And final. This is the centre. The poet is

The angry day-son clanging at its make:

The satisfaction underneath the sense,

The conception sparkling in still obstinate thought.

It is the intangible existence of “satisfaction” and the “sparkling in still obstinate thought” that *makes* the poet a poet. A subtle reconfiguration of the abstract nature of the poetic, these lines

⁵⁵ An example of this type of thinking is Anselm of Canterbury’s ontological argument for the existence of God.

⁵⁶ As Stevens says about *Notes* in a letter to Henry Church: “It is implied in the title that there can be no Supreme Fiction” (L 430), unlike Kant’s categorical imperative, which he argues is true *a priori*.

capture why neither ethical nor religious truth can be the aim of poetry. The aim of poetry is, first and foremost, to give pleasure. It does so by pulling the poet away from existent reality as it is perceived outside of poetic thought and demonstrating how the addition of poetic play can reorient one's mind in satisfying ways. The use of the words "final" and "centre" in this context augments their meaning, adds to their sense, by using them to explain something that aims for no tangible end and uses this abstract feeling behind sense as its mark and maker.

When Stevens asks "Is Celestin dislodged?" he reminds us of the importance of dwelling in poetry, suggesting that there is more to Celestin's dwelling than simply finding "the way beyond it." Dwelling is something made in Stevens's poetry, not something assumed. "Final Soliloquy of the Interior Paramour" (1951), the last poem I will discuss in this chapter, develops the kind of dwelling that can be made in poetic thought generally. The poem begins in the imperative, "Light the first light of evening," with the echo of "like" creating a sense of the figurative and the possible. We are reminded of "the light / In which I meet you, in which we set at rest" from the opening octave of *Notes*, though by *The Rock* (1954) Stevens has expanded his conceptual space: the "first light of evening" is *like* "a room / In which we rest," making the whole outdoors their new resting ground and play space. An encounter that in *Transport to Summer* required a room now requires nothing except the thought that "The world imagined is the ultimate good." Not only does this thought require only a "small reason," it need not last beyond this "intensest rendezvous." The poem centers around the intersection of intimacy, togetherness, and perception. It is a common theme in *The Rock*, though the subtlety and patience through which he explores these ideas stands out:

Here, now, we forget each other and ourselves.

We feel the obscurity of an order, a whole,

A knowledge, that which arranged the rendezvous,

Within its vital boundary, in the mind.

We say God and the imagination are one...

How high that highest candle lights the dark.

Like the poetic that “must be perceived / And not imagined,” “A knowledge” is felt in all its “obscurity,” and it is this act of bringing together the fuzzily imperceptible into “a whole” that brought together and “arranged the rendezvous.” Everything is united in this poem, but only through the will of the plural speaker. They “forget each other and ourselves” through their thoughts about “the ultimate good,” and “God and the imagination are one” only because “We say.” Outside of the “vital boundary, in the mind,” these ideas have no life. It is their structure, like the structure of play, which carries its strength and meaning. “God and the imagination are one” because they make the same ontological gesture toward the abstract; they fulfill the same purpose, though the imagination and Supreme Fiction are more useful to Stevens because they don’t fall into the Kantian ethical trap of refusing change. The “light,” the space created, is named in the last stanza as “the central mind,” a very God-like concept except that it is within this mind that “We make a dwelling in the evening air.” Echoing “the growth of the mind / Of the world” in “Papini,” the emphasis is placed less on the social, group benefits of the mind and more on the interior enjoyment of this one paramour: the playful space, carved out in the poetic, is the only place “In which being there together is enough.” The use of “together” takes on a double meaning here, helping to illuminate the puzzling choice of a soliloquy that only speaks as “we.” In this poem “together” can mean both being with someone else (hence, paramour), something else (the imagination, the elements of the weather), and being together within one’s self. This play of orientation is possible only through the transcendental position of poetic thought and its ability to allow a pleasure in poetry that refers only to itself.

We have seen throughout this chapter that Stevens values poetic thinking as one kind of thinking, particularly in that it separates itself from the metaphysical grounding of science, philosophy, and religion, offering instead a means of playing with and enjoying the world without having to get involved with its ethical condition. What poems like “Final Soliloquy” suggest is that Stevens saw the poetic as a place in which all of his different ways of thinking, his selves, found a togetherness, albeit a temporary one that is predicated on a central fiction. From *Harmonium* until the end of his career Stevens was operating with this idea of poetic thought in mind. Though it certainly evolved and changed focus over time, the poetic was always seen as a place to stop, rest, and dwell on one’s reality. Perhaps even more importantly, the progress of Stevens’s formulation of poetic thought demonstrates that reality is never something evaded or confronted in poetry; rather, it is poetry which adds to reality, which increases its perceptive effect and forms new temporary bonds of meaning.

Conclusion

That's it. The lover writes, the believer hears,
 The poet mumbles and the painter sees,
 Each one, his fated eccentricity,
 As a part, but part, but tenacious particle,
 Of the skeleton of the ether, the total
 Of letters, prophecies, perceptions, clods
 Of color, the giant of nothingness, each one
 And the giant ever changing, living in change.
 -"Primitive Like an Orb, XII" (1948)

The “fated eccentricity” of each figure of imagination in “Primitive” is both what dooms it to be “but tenacious particle” of “the giant of nothingness” and what frees it to claw at the change, to capture it through its own slanted thought. Poetic thought is necessarily slanted, and for that reason it is no different than any other kind of thought. As I have aimed to demonstrate through each chapter, Stevens regards the slant of poetry to be a particularly valuable one, and one that deserves great recognition for its ability to refresh our perspectives on the world. In the last of Schiller’s letters, he summarizes aesthetic play’s place within other parts of life:

The instinct of play, not satisfied with bringing into the sphere of the necessary an aesthetic superabundance for the future more free, is at last completely emancipated from the bonds of duty, and the beautiful becomes of itself an object of man's exertions. (Letter XXVII)

Though Stevens aligns with Schiller in that they both emphasize the desire of the aesthetic as something that is found only when the world can be perceived aesthetically (for Stevens, poetically), Stevens argues that even within such a structure of play, the poet is still oriented toward an expression of his time, his society’s Supreme Fiction.

Though this study has focused on defining Stevens’s poetic orientation from topos to ontology and demonstrating how Stevens’s work does not benefit from ethical analysis, his use of a turning topos always oriented around *his* field and *his* center directs us toward another form

of literary critique. Rancière's critique of ethics, in which he argues for an understanding of ethics as a system which requires the full inclusion of all its elements (thereby erasing those elements which cannot be fully included), orients ethics as something which 'turns' in a very similar way to poetry's turning. Stevens continually emphasizes the brevity and ephemeral nature of poetic turns on reality, but the turning topos's role as a means of engaging with poetic thought remains as constant as the permanent gesture behind the ethical turn. Rancière's main thesis in *Aesthetics and its Discontents* is to demonstrate that the political act of aesthetics is voicing a position outside of the polis. In his essay "On a Philosophical Ethics" Gadamer argues that a valid ethics is more likely located in the Aristotelian notion of ethics based on the polis rather than the Kantian universal, because the structure of the polis requires some flexibility, change, and self-determination. Rancière demonstrates that this still does not free us from the systematic exclusion that occurs when people are not recognized within the political. If they are not recognized as voices then they cannot be heard.

There are moments in Stevens's poetry, especially when the turning topos gives way to vertigo, where newfound experiences and voices enter the poems, though certainly Stevens would be the first to say that he, as poet and as man, is limited by his time and his climate, and this is a fact we cannot forget. His continual insistence throughout his career that poetry is a special kind of thought opens possibilities for thinking that go beyond literary criticism and beyond his own climate, but it does not give us any way of getting away from the necessarily exclusionary tactics of turning.

Searching for the meaning of Stevens's poetic "mumbles" mirrors the search within his own work for what appears again and again as the "centre of all circles."⁵⁷ Both Stevens and his critics are always caught trying to determine not what he is encountering but *how* he was able to

⁵⁷ "From the Packet of Anacharsis"

encounter it. Though it initially appears a meaningless tautology, William York Tindall's reminder that Stevens's poems are "Not philosophies, his poems are poems" (12) is well worth keeping in mind if we want to get at the heart of Stevens's poetic encounter. Tindall continues the thought by adding "but it is easier to say what poems say than what they are" (12). We can glean two significant claims from this statement. First, the conditions under which meaning is expressed in poetry are elusive. In some cases a reader can glean the plot or central idea of a poem without fully understanding its processes. In Stevens's case, however, "his poems are poems," meaning that we should not be looking for philosophical statements about the conditions of reality, but rather for poetic statements about the ontological condition of poetry. Ideas are expressed poetically in his poems, and an equally poetic critical approach is required to elucidate them.⁵⁸ Second, though along the same vein, a reader of Stevens should never lose sight of the potential for a set of rules to be played with, altered, or even reorganized within a poem. For Stevens the poet does not assume, as the philosopher does, that communication requires a common language with inflexible terms; on the contrary, the flexibility of terms, and calling attention to this flexibility, is a definitive element of his poetics.⁵⁹ Stevens presents a particularly interesting example in that before one can fully engage with his poems 'as poems', the reader must be prepared to follow these poems all the way to the limits of thought. In order for any piece of writing to be understandable it must follow at least some accepted rules of communication, but what Stevens points to through his use of poetic play is that these rules need

⁵⁸ One could argue, along the lines of Northrop Frye's theory of literature, that this is the nature of all literary criticism. Stevens stands out in this regard, however, because he does not gesture toward a single theory of poetry or of literature. To say that Stevens's "poems are poems" is to draw attention to the complex ontological condition that Stevens understands his poetry to be operating in. This circular definition demonstrates the closed, autonomous nature of Stevens work, and aids our critical approach in that it forces us to simultaneously search for meaning and genre. It also seems to require a greater delicacy is required when comparing Stevens to other poets or when reading his work through the recurrence of tropes and symbols.

⁵⁹ Stevens is certainly not the first or last poet to approach poetry or language in this way. In *The Senses of Nonsense*, Alison Rieke demonstrates the prevalence of idiosyncrasy and nonsense in the work of Joyce, Stein, Zukofsky, and Stevens, arguing that these modernists be understood as continuing (albeit, in a new fashion) the longstanding tradition of literary nonsense.

not be the priority. Rather, the priority in poetic play is idiosyncratic, constituted by contingent properties of relation between objects that do not exist outside of the poem. The possibilities for these relations are infinite, yet their patterns direct us toward a larger climate, whose weather orients experience because the turning topos is generated through it. Just as the climate is revealed by what it produces, so is the Supreme Fiction revealed as the ultimate generating principle of climate. We have seen how these conceptual moves mirror those made in the ethical writings of Kant, Schiller, Gadamer and Levinas, and how this structural isometry is more than mere coincidence: Stevens demonstrates that poetry's grounding in poetic thought requires that we give it an equal status to ethics because they both operate through a transcendental gesture.

Stevens's orientation around a playful center demands we resist the ethical turn as a form of criticism of his poetry, but also that we maintain a critical eye to how his structures of thought indicate absences and new possibilities. His demand is worth adhering to, I believe, because he makes the demand only on the grounds that poetry does not redefine, correct, or even explicate experience, but rather adds to it. It is an addition that exists as a part of our experience of the world whether it is recognized or not, but if it is recognized it can not only give a pure, autonomous pleasure, but also the means through which our ways of thinking can be refreshed and reconfigured.

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