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IDEAS OF WALLACE STEVENS:

FREDRIC JAMESON'S VIEW OF THE POET

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ABSTRACT

This dissertation focuses upon Fredric Jameson's essay 'Exoticism and Structuralism in Wallace Stevens', which concerns the American poet's writings and their relevance to contemporary culture. Critical attitudes towards Stevens have tended to contextualize his work chronologically, thereby aligning it with the aesthetic and political values of High Modernism. On the contrary, Jameson's article suggests that a greater affinity exists between Stevens's poetry and the cultural and philosophical values that have emerged since the nineteen-sixties. This paper assesses Jameson's claims on three fronts. In the first chapter, a survey of how critical attitudes towards Stevens have developed over ninety years provides a sense of how his work has been understood by critics in different eras. In the second and third chapters, the critical analysis of several poems illustrates the chief similarities and differences between Stevens's poetics and the methods employed by his major predecessors and contemporaries. In the final chapter, the relationship that Fredric Jameson imputes between the ideals expressed in the poetry and post-modern theory is examined in depth. An attempt is made to establish Wallace Stevens's place within the broader framework of twentieth century thought. This paper ultimately supports Fredric Jameson's assertion that Stevens cultivated a style that favours impersonality and abstract universality over the Romantic individualism that is typical of Modernist poetry in English. Accordingly, the conclusion of this essay recommends that his poems can be better understood in the context of the second half of the twentieth century rather than as a body of work that epitomizes the culture of Modernism. A clear implication of this argument is the idea that Western art on the whole has, since the beginning of the nineteen sixties, begun to gravitate away from a traditional emphasis on individualism and authenticity towards a more global ethos. As such, this interpretation portrays Wallace Stevens as one of the first American poets to explicitly anticipate and embrace this development.

CHAPTER ONE: PUTTING WALLACE STEVENS IN PLACE.

Over the last fifty years, Wallace Stevens has been recognized as a central figure in American Modernism (Gelpi 1987:4.) This judgment based on a purely retrospective assessment of his achievement. The ranking of Wallace Stevens at the forefront of Modernist Poetry fails to acknowledge the fact that he was not a well-known or influential poet prior to the Second World War. Stevens received little critical acclaim or encouragement until the period we think of as Modernism was already drawing to a close. The 1940s and 50s saw a re-evaluation of his reputation that was so extensive that the *Collected Poems* would be awarded the Pulitzer Prize for Poetry in 1955 (Doyle 1985: 4.) He died within a year of receiving this honour at the age of seventy-five, having lived long enough to experience the final vindication of his life's work. Interest in his poetry was sustained thereafter with the publication of the *Opus Posthumous*, a collection of uncollected poems, prose and lectures in 1957. Nine years later, *The Collected Letters*¹, a selection of correspondences edited by his daughter Holly Stevens, became available to the public. These posthumous publications brought previously unexamined texts to the fore and compelled critics to reconsider their earlier interpretations of his work.

In the early 1960s, critics came to view Wallace Stevens's poetry as the culmination of the Modernist aesthetic (Jameson 2007a: 207.) Now that his work has been fully assimilated into the American literary canon, it is easy to forget that Stevens had been an obscure writer for a large part of his career. While he wrote numerous poems between the wars that would later be considered genuine masterpieces, his original reviewers were generally dismissive of his work. In part, these reviews suggest that the mainstream tastes and standards of the 1920s and 30s were unsympathetic to Stevens's worldview and aesthetic. Likewise, one can say that the latter day veneration of his writings was possible due to the infusion of new values into the critical idiom. Within a decade of Stevens's passing, the political and

intellectual movements of the counterculture began to challenge the conventions that had regulated life in the first half of the twentieth century. The emergent generation of thinkers and poets generally viewed Modernist works as part of an outdated establishment (Jameson 2008: 553.) Despite this apparent hostility, his popularity as a writer continued to grow within the context of this new cultural consciousness. Like his near contemporary William Carlos Williams (1883-1963), Wallace Stevens has become more widely read and influential in the second half of the 20th century than he had ever been in the heyday of Modernism (Pritchard 1997: 204.)

In his book of criticism, *Lives of the Modern Poets*, William Pritchard notes that 'the Williams boom was relatively short lived. But the rise of Stevens to a commanding position as *the* modern American poet has been more gradual and is likely to prove more enduring' (Pritchard 1997: 203-4.) This apparent 'Stevens boom' represents the dramatic reversal of the writer's longstanding failure to find a substantial audience. While he had submitted poems to literary magazines during his undergraduate days at Harvard, Wallace Stevens was not able to concentrate his energies on creative writing. Following the directives of his father, who refused to give financial support to his son's literary endeavours, the young Stevens poured his efforts into the cultivation of a career in business law. Although these business ventures ultimately provided his family with a secure source of income, he could afford his creative pursuits only limited time until he was further advanced in age. Another factor that likely curtailed his ambitions as a poet was his desire not to be construed as a bohemian by his rather conservative circle of acquaintances (Pritchard 1997: 218.) Despite his talent and his general fascination with art of all kinds, Stevens became accustomed to writing in secret. It seemed as if creative writing was a compulsive habit that he could not shake. Drafts of many of his early poems can be found in his intimate, early letters to Elsie Moll, the young woman whom Stevens was to marry in 1909.²

The amount of time that had to be devoted to business practices and family life likely kept Stevens from publishing a collection of his poetry while he was in his twenties and thirties (Longenbach 1991: 16-17.)

Poetry occupied a small but crucial place in his young life, a fact that is made evident in his personal letters and journal entries. Stevens, like William Carlos Williams, managed to produce an enormous amount of poetry while maintaining an independent professional life. His first complete collection of verse, *Harmonium*, was published in 1923 when he was already forty-four years old.³ Sales of *Harmonium* were dismal with around one hundred copies of the first pressing sold. He later wrote that he had earned total profits of \$6.70 from it (Cook 2007: 6.) Only the most astute readers and friendly poets paid attention to the first edition of this collection. Although Stevens never displayed much overt dismay concerning the disastrous sales of *Harmonium's* first pressing, he must have felt some reluctance to produce a second collection, for it was to be another fourteen years before another book of poetry, *Ideas of Order*, was released.

Considering these initial dates, it might seem odd for anyone to classify Wallace Stevens as anything other than a Modernist writer. *Harmonium* was published within a year or so of two key texts, T.S. Eliot's *The Wasteland* and James Joyce's *Ulysses*, but, chronology aside, I think it would be grossly inaccurate to describe any of the early verse as having had a comparable influence on the Modernist ethic as the accomplishments of these contemporaries. Stevens's stature as an artist before the Second World War was essentially negligible; in fact, this dissertation will seek to demonstrate that he wrote on the fringes of High Modernism for most of his life. The reassessment of Stevens in the forties and fifties did more than belatedly defend the elderly poet's lifework. Its gaze swept backwards, rescuing his early work from a state of neglect. Against attempts to pigeonhole Stevens as a part of the Modernist movement, the impressive level of activity of his final years together with the attainment of an increasingly substantial cultural significance, suggests that his most rewarding period as a poet came near the end of his life. As

such, it seems that Wallace Stevens was either one of English literature's greatest late bloomers or he was a kind of visionary who exceeded the capacity of his audience by several decades.

It may be unsurprising that one consistent source of contention amongst critics is the issue of how to frame Wallace Stevens in terms of period. William Pritchard, for instance, writes: 'as for Stevens, he may be placed where one chooses to lay the emphasis, or he can be claimed to elude all categories' (Pritchard 1997: XV.) Despite the fact that this remark seems to encourage a relativistic attitude, it quickly becomes apparent that Pritchard aspires to 'rescue Stevens from his more uncritical disciples' (Pritchard 1997: 205.) Therefore, on the one hand, Pritchard recognizes that the poems can be understood in a variety of ways and put into multiple different categories depending on what aspects of it are emphasized. On the other, he maintains that not all interpretations that might be advanced should be considered equally valuable. After surveying several recent essays on 'The Snow Man', Pritchard argues that the exhaustive attempts by contemporary critics to explicate all of the theoretical implications of the short poem is 'out of scale' with its simple, melodic efficiency (Pritchard 1997: 215.) He proceeds to denounce what he sees as an excessive and repetitive pronouncement of theoretical statements in the late poems (Pritchard 1997: 208.) Above all, Pritchard reserves the lion's share of his disapproval for critics who would prioritize Stevens's philosophical thought over the musical qualities of his language or the freshness and power of the images that pervade his writing.

Although the nature of Wallace Stevens's achievement may be difficult to determine in an entirely uncontroversial way, it is not possible for us to simply bypass the problems of classification altogether. Given that there is a wide variety of ways in which his legacy might be understood, we must decide amongst ourselves precisely *which* Stevens could be considered an important figure within our current intellectual epoch. At the same time, as Pritchard contends, we should be wary of fashions in criticism

that draw one's attention too far away from the primary texts themselves. Critical depictions of his thought and contribution to literature must be accountable to textual evidence in his poetry. However, an awareness of the points of controversy that arise between critics should disincline one from hastily developing an all-encompassing idea of or his writing. I will begin by developing a more detailed summary of how his poetry has been treated by certain representative commentators across several decades. It is possible for one to delineate several basic groupings of widespread critical stances. At first glance, it may even appear to be possible to organize these attitudes into discrete chronological phases – the original formalist reading⁴ could be said to give way to philosophical readings informed by existentialism or Marxism, and so on. However, one must be careful not to oversimplify trends in analysis. After all, critics continue to put forward supposedly 'Classical' formal evaluations of Stevens even in relatively recent times⁵ whilst certain commentators managed to appreciate the theoretical slant to his poetry as early as the 1930s. Despite this, I would maintain that the overall spirit of criticism has evolved considerably from the earliest reception of his work to the present day. The clearest way to expose these developments would be to present a concise, chronological narrative that demonstrates how critical opinion has evolved over the years.

In general, the original reviewers of *Harmonium* felt that Stevens's impressive command of imagery and memorable phrasing was not sufficient to save the volume from its overriding emotional and intellectual vacuity. The influential literary critic Edmund Wilson summed up the generally mixed response to *Harmonium* with his description of Stevens as a 'master of style, devoid of emotion' (Wilson 1985: 61) while G.B. Munson's well-known article 'The Dandyism of Wallace Stevens' opines that his 'impeccable form lacks worthy content' (Munson 1985, 82.) Munson's portrayal of *Harmonium*, though it is relatively even-handed, famously labelled its creator as a 'dandy', an impression that would prove difficult to dispel. Likewise, John Gould Fletcher's review compliments Stevens on his skillful use of language but ultimately

denounces him for being 'out of tune with life' (Fletcher 1985: 46.) A fourth reviewer, Percy Hutchinson wrote an especially damning review entitled 'Pure Poetry and Mr. Wallace Stevens', which appeared in *The New York Book Review* in 1931. Hutchinson's article states, 'unpleasant as it is to record such a conclusion the very remarkable work of Wallace Stevens cannot endure... the achievement is not poetry; it is *a tour de force*, a stunt in the fantastic and bizarre' (Hutchinson 1985: 88.) In the radically politicized 1930s, the charges of dandyism took on a more serious tone and certain politically minded commentaries targeted Wallace Stevens, portraying him as an exemplar of artistic aestheticism. These critics understood him to be a socially insular writer who would not confront the fundamental disorder of his time.⁶ His work was disregarded as decorative art that could not face up to the pressures of the modern world. This unsympathetic interpretation was most brutally expressed by the Marxist critic Stanley Burnshaw in a review of Stevens's 'Ideas of Order.' Writing from a Marxist perspective, Burnshaw depicts Wallace Stevens as a bourgeois dilettante who was stubbornly unconcerned with social problems.⁷ In general, the various reviews of the 1930s continued to take a somewhat positive view of Stevens's skill with language while deeming the poetry an intellectually, emotionally and socially irrelevant exercise in form.

One might date the beginning of the reappraisal of Wallace Stevens to a 1940 edition of *The Harvard Advocate* that paid homage to his work.⁸ This tribute inspired the reading public to take a generally more sympathetic attitude towards the poetry. It was able to direct attention onto previously underemphasized aspects of his first two volumes, such as their concern with the concept of order. The arguments countered Stanley Burnshaw's claim that *Ideas of Order* lacked a political perspective (Stern 1966, 14.) The once widespread impression of Stevens as a formidable stylist whose poems lack worthy content was effectively challenged at this time. Favourable essays by writers such as R.P. Blackmur (Blackmur 1985: 217-222) and Robert Lowell (Lowell 1985: 284) did much to undo the damage done by earlier

reviewers. These positive estimations of the poetry created an environment that was more open and sensitive to Stevens's characteristics as a writer. Ultimately, the campaign to redeem his reputation as major American writer came to fruition in the 1950s. Several publication dates reflect his growing stature across this decade: a collection of his prose entitled *The Necessary Angel* was released in 1951, his poetry was published in Great Britain for the first time in 1953 and full-scale collection of his poems was released one year later. The final volume of Wallace Stevens's poetry and prose entitled *Opus Posthumous* became available in 1957. The publication of *The Collected Letters* in 1966 was an especially significant addition as it offered insight into the poet's personal life, a subject that had been under-explored in criticism.

The 1960s ushered in period where new and comparatively radical perspectives on Stevens's poetry were adopted by many critics. James Baird views this phenomenon favourably in his book *The Dome and the Rock* published in 1968. In his preamble, Baird praises the inventiveness demonstrated by critics throughout the 1960s, which he describes as a new 'mode of scrutiny' that 'has been applied to Stevens over the last decade' (Baird 1968: xi.) He writes, 'one is grateful for it. The fortunes of Stevens with the critics when one traces these across a span of some 30 years are impressively erratic' (Baird 1968: xi.) He then proceeds to argue that this qualitative improvement in criticism is attributable to a newfound willingness for younger critics to look at Stevens's work from an explicitly philosophical or theoretically angle. He cites the essays of J. Hillis Miller, Joseph Riddel and R.A. Mackey (who wrote one of the first articles that focused explicitly on Stevens's affinity with phenomenology) as particularly excellent examples of theoretical criticism (Baird 1968: xi-xii.)

In ensuing decades, certain critics have continued to see Wallace Stevens's poetry as representing aspects of Modernism⁹ while others have preferred to stress his continuity with Romanticism. A more

recent grouping of critics has chosen to emphasize his visionary qualities, presenting his ideas in the context of post-modern thought. An alternative to these ways of historicizing the poet would be to suggest that he, like a great painter, progressed through phases of personal development. While this last option has perhaps the greatest appeal to an ordinary reader, it offers scant reply to the central problematic of whether his works are better read in terms of tradition, radicalism or as some kind of reconciliation of old and new ideals. Certainly, there can be little doubt that his writing style underwent permutations. However, I would argue that the relevance of the whole discussion of period ought not to be biographical but historical in nature. I would prefer to seek to clarify Stevens's absorption of literary tradition and the nature of his influence on other writers. Deferring the question of period too far towards biography would neglect these overarching considerations. While the biographical approach provides a valid framework for the study of Stevens's development as a writer, it need not prevent one from confronting questions of period and influence. However, it is worth noting that substantial controversies invariably arise whenever one tries to put Wallace Stevens into historical context. This stems from the fact that his poetry is especially difficult to pigeonhole for a number of reasons: Stevens wrote a great deal of poetry across several decades and clear sociological commentary in his work is sparse. In addition, his writing only addresses historical, social and political issues tangentially (when it acknowledges them at all.) As his later critics have noted¹⁰, Stevens's poetry is oddly silent in response to pivotal events like the unfolding of two World Wars, the Great Depression and the beginning of the Cold War. Furthermore, one must recognize his preference for abstract language. Each line of his poetry tends to be couched in an abundance of possible meanings.

As we shall see in the next chapter, the pervasiveness of abstract language in Stevens's work often obscures the links between his words and his historical situation. Yet, despite these obstacles, one need not deny that every piece of poetry is essentially a product of a particular time and place. I think it might be

better to substitute 'time and place' with one of Stevens's favourite nouns: *climate*. One difficulty that Stevens's critics must face is the problem of defining the true climate to which his poems belong. In this vein, Harold Bloom laments what he sees as the endless capacity for critics to get Wallace Stevens completely wrong:

When I was young, critics saw Stevens as a kind of poetic dandy, addicted to finicky language. This yielded, during my middle years, to Snow Man Stevens, endlessly negative, and perceiver of "nothing that is." Now in old age, I am offered a newly historicized Stevens, socially overdetermined. But none of these is, was, or will be the poetry of Wallace Stevens, who followed, evasively and with massive resistance, the genius of the poems of our climate, which is Emersonian-Whitmanian.

(Bloom 2002: 368)

Harold Bloom maps out the different characterizations of Wallace Stevens that have been popular throughout his life. He dismisses each of them offhand as faddish, inadequate readings that have been followed uncritically and without proper recourse to the poems themselves. In place of what he perceives to be endless misconceptions, Bloom introduces his own thesis, which contrasts Stevens's poetry with the national masterworks of the past (Bloom 2002: 368.) The actual social and political climate of Stevens's own life is therefore largely irrelevant to criticism – one must interpret the modern writer's aesthetic as a response to his local predecessors. Bloom does not go to great lengths to convince readers of his premises. Instead, he cites poems wherein Ralph Waldo Emerson or Walt Whitman's influence must be acknowledged. While these comparisons are convincing in and of themselves, they do not necessarily invalidate the many other connections that might be made. Despite Harold Bloom's efforts to keep Stevens purely in the sphere of literary tradition, one is left wondering whether his work cannot be

put into a larger context than the 'Emersonian-Whitmanian' tradition. Nevertheless, conservative interpretations of Stevens (like those advanced by Prichard and Bloom) remind us that one cannot simply historicize poetry as one might attach a date to an artefact. Any assessment of his legacy will inevitably imply a judgment of what is worthwhile and enduring in his work.

Simon Critchley's thoughtful book *Things Merely Are*, published in 2008, is a good example of the current state of Stevens's criticism. At the outset, Critchley makes it clear that he wants to analyze Steven's writing from a specific point of view. He writes: 'as a philosopher, what it is about Stevens that interests me is the fact that he found a manner that is wholly poetic, of fully developing thoughts: theses, hypotheses, conjectures, ruminations and aphorisms that one should call philosophical' (Critchley 2005: 15-16.) From the very first paragraph of his book, Critchley makes it clear that he has chosen to focus on theoretical implications rather than formal analysis. This does not mean that Critchley is wholly disinterested in matters of style or aesthetic. Rather, he makes it clear that he considers Stevens to be the 'philosophically most interesting poet to have written in English in the twentieth century' (Critchley 2005: 15.) Accordingly, Critchley takes Stevens's theoretical statements seriously as ideas rather than as aesthetic devices that are meaningful only within the context of the artwork. This explicitly theoretical approach contrasts sharply with the earliest critical impressions of *Harmonium*, who felt that the poet's technical skill masked an absence of ideational content. A few pages into Critchley's book, one comes across an interesting anecdote:

Some years ago, I took part in a workshop on Stevens where the other speaker was Frank Kermode. As many will know, Kermode was largely responsible for the initial reception of Stevens in the UK and the first book that I, like many others, read about Stevens was Kermode's introductory presentation. After listening patiently to my rather philosophical take on Stevens's

poetry, Kermode discreetly admonished me by admonishing Stevens's late verse for being too explicitly philosophical. In Kermode's view, the early poems from *Harmonium* are more successful as poetry than the later verse because they don't wear their metaphysics on their sleeve, as it were.

(Critchley 2005: 3)

Simon Critchley feels that his own arguments have been 'admonished' by proxy when Frank Kermode directs a dismissive comment at the late verse. As such, he equates the validity of his own criticism with the value of these poems. While Kermode's words should not be construed as a denial of the philosophical depth of the poetry¹¹, his words to Critchley do imply that creative writers should conceal their theoretical agendas beneath a suitably artistic form. This story illustrates that Critchley is aware that he has taken the principles of one field (philosophy) and transposed them onto a medium that is already governed by its own particular paradigms and practices. A tension arises between two ways of treating the poetry: as an artwork with certain intellectual dimensions or as a body of text that conveys valid theoretical statements that might pertain to reality. In the second half of the twentieth century, the traditional boundary lines between established types of critical discourse are becoming increasingly porous and it is no longer incongruous for a critic to treat Stevens as though he were a poet-philosopher.

In his essay 'Structuralism and Exoticism in Wallace Stevens', Fredric Jameson performs his analysis from the point of view of contemporary cultural criticism. Jameson argues that Stevens effectively anticipates many of the new orientations that the western world was to undertake as it moved into the so-called 'post-modern epoch' (Jameson 2007a: 208.) Jameson supports this argument with several interesting observations. Firstly, he points out that the countercultural movement that arose in the 1960s

did not exhibit the same level of hostility towards Stevens as was displayed towards most Modernist writers and artists (Jameson 2007a: 208.) Near the beginning of his paper, Jameson writes:

the canonization of Wallace Stevens is not merely a kind of ultimate conclusion and ending for the Modernist aesthetic generally: although it is that too, and Stevens's belated triumph over all his Modernist rivals (Pound, Eliot, etc) is consecrated by his institutionalization in the University...But if that were all that was involved, the afore-cited objections would have much merit, that Stevens's monumental work is at best to be taken as the canonical and hegemonic values of the ending 1950s, as that which the poetry and cultural thought of the 1960s must desperately break if it is to breathe and to 'make it new.'

(Jameson 2007a: 207-208)

Fredric Jameson doubts that Stevens's poetry unambiguously reflects what we take to be Modernist values. The fact that his poetry was championed by a new generation of critics (who largely positioned themselves in opposition to traditional values) indicates its progressive qualities. Rather than dwelling on literary tradition, Jameson's paper considers the new interpretations of the work that have become available since the poet's death. At the same time, he reminds us that the close-minded fixing of Stevens in place will invariably conceal as much as it illuminates:

This Stevens – the theoretician of poetry, rather than the poet, insofar as this distinction can be retrained – will come to dominate the whole first moment of the emergent 1960s as well; and if in that case one wishes to say that what concerns us here is less the 'historical' Wallace Stevens of the poetry than the "idea" of Wallace Stevens who came to be a critical fetish in this period, then the formulation may be pragmatically acceptable, even though it neglects the diachronic

transformations of Stevens's own poetry (the emergency of a seemingly distinct and more philosophical-existential 'late' Stevens) as well as the whole nature of the dialectic itself, for there must necessarily be a constant interaction between subject and object, between the "idea" of a thing and the historical "thing itself."

(Jameson 2007a: 208)

In this winding, labyrinthine sentence, Fredric Jameson highlights the anxieties familiar to any student of Stevens. The word 'fetish' gives an impression of the stubborn attachment that critics display towards their theories. Every critic may develop a personal idea of Wallace Stevens as a poet but (as Jameson reminds us) these ideas must be answerable to historical reality. Nonetheless, Jameson concedes that it is necessary to limit the scope of one's investigations if one is to develop any understanding at all. This self-imposed narrowness of vision will always exclude various factors that fall outside its specific focus. Yet, Jameson concedes that one cannot pay equal attention to every aspect of the poetry or make use of every possible perspective that might be adopted. This implies that any worthwhile investigation into Wallace Stevens's work will have to be either fundamentally incomplete or excessively general. As we shall see, Fredric Jameson's short article proves to be of particular value precisely because he is aware of this difficulty and does not insist that his own interpretations are conclusive.

In line with Fredric Jameson's acknowledgement of our limitations as readers, Charles Altieri offers a sensible piece of advice when he urges one to adopt an initially 'suspicious' attitude towards all commentaries on Wallace Stevens (Altieri 1987: 87.) He suggests that we must be wary of the concealed assumptions that are latent in any critical stance towards Stevens. Since critics have never attained a consensus as to how to classify Stevens's achievement either in terms of period or genre, Alteri demands that they should be expected to 'take responsibility for their idealizations' (Altieri 1987: 86.) He

recommends a healthy dose of scepticism towards all apparently clear-cut understandings. This important fact is attested to by Abie Willard, author of *Wallace Stevens – The Poet and his Critics*, a thorough account of Stevens's critics. Willard writes:

Stevens's chronological development is so much a part of the changing twentieth century that his poems as well as the changing critical approach to them reveal much about this century's approach to art and literature; about its uneasy juxtaposition of the traditional and atraditional; about its need to create relationships where none are immediately apparent; and about its tendency to place in some historical context that which defies established order.

(Willard 1973: 50)

Abbie Willard's hope is that an analysis of the critical approaches taken towards Stevens can illuminate our habits as readers when we confront particularly challenging, sophisticated works that resist casual categorization. I do not think that labelling Stevens a 'High Modernist', 'Late Modernist' or 'Pre-Emptive Post-Modernist' will enhance our appreciation of his poetry. Nevertheless, a discussion of these labels might allow us an opportunity to reconsider the adequacy of our conventional classifications of literary texts. Rather than speculating on Wallace Stevens's personal development as a writer, I will concentrate on how his audience's perceptions of his writing have changed over the years. I hope to follow the thread of criticism up to the present moment, concluding this essay with a discussion of his relevance to the contemporary intellectual climate. Of course, I do not intend to analyze the essays of Wallace Stevens's critics without confronting the primary texts themselves. It is essential to identify the textual features of his poems that have inspired conflicting interpretations. Through a close study of the poetry from technical, thematic and ideological standpoint, one discovers evidence of both tradition and innovation. My position, sustained throughout this paper, will be that Wallace Stevens carries strains of Symbolist and Romantic

thought through the Modernist era into the contemporary 'post-modern' intellectual environment. In later chapters, I will make use of Jameson's article as a primary resource regarding the connections that might be made between 'Theory' and Stevens's unique theory of poetry.

While Jameson does not present Modernism and Post-Modernism as two completely distinct periods, he does presume that the cultural and intellectual developments of the 1960s embody a spirit of 'discontinuity.'¹² The bisecting of the twentieth century sections depicts the exceptional changes in consciousness that occurred in the 1960s and 70s. The cultural changes of the period include technological innovations, major social and political reorientations and – in intellectual terms – the emergence of a new direction in intellectual discourse that might be referred to as Theory. Fredric Jameson perceives a special affinity between the ideas suggested in Stevens's poetry and the principles of Structuralism. His essay compares Stevens's assertions regarding poetry with the theories of language developed by Claude Levi Strauss and Jacques Lacan. Jameson finds a basis for comparison between Wallace Stevens's supposedly Modernist verse and the radical concepts introduced by Theory in the decades after the poet's death.

With respect to the appearance of the word 'theory' at a climatic point in 'Notes towards a Supreme Fiction', Jameson writes: 'Stevens's anticipation of this term may well be taken as a warning that the Stevens phenomenon may involve some initial lifting of the old barriers between 'poetry' and 'theory' and may involve the emergence of some new and yet unclassifiable form of discourse' (Jameson 2007a: 207 – 208.) With these remarks, Jameson raises the possibility that Stevens's work is part of the cultural changes that have opened up a 'new discourse' that blends aspects of poetry and philosophy. A better understanding of this 'new discourse' might allow one to install a bridge between the radicalized Theory of the 1960s and the Modernist aesthetic. Of course, this ambition should be tempered by a healthy amount

of caution. Rather than expounding the implications of this new discourse, Jameson claims that it is still fundamentally 'unclassifiable.' Ironically, given that we seem to be more aware of Stevens's nuances as writer than previous generations of readers, Jameson's remarks suggest that we are still too complicit in the developments that we are trying to define to attain the necessary perspective.

This survey of Wallace Stevens's critics in this introductory chapter is not merely intended to provide contextual background. I believe that the fundamental uncertainties and disagreements we find amongst Stevens's critics concerning the nature of his achievement is itself a problematic that must be acknowledged. We will endeavour to keep this sketch of the main critical debates surrounding in mind as we begin to explore the poetry itself. I hope to offer some resolution to these critical disputes by drawing attention to the continuities that underlie earlier and later strains of criticism. In the next chapter, I will make a technical analysis of Stevens's literary style. In so doing, a detailed conception of his general aesthetic will be established before focus falls on the themes and philosophical ideas that are conveyed in his writing. With this general objective in mind, I would propose that we begin with three related tasks: first, to elucidate Stevens's impersonal poetics; second, to define his epistemology or worldview and, third, to analyze his concept of 'Supreme Fiction.' In developing each of these themes in turn, I will consider textual evidence, invite intertextual comparisons and indicate the wide range of arguments that have been put forward by critics of Wallace Stevens's poetry over the years.

CHAPTER TWO: WALLACE STEVENS'S AESTHETIC

My immediate concern in this chapter is to distinguish Wallace Stevens's style of writing from his Modernist contemporaries and from French Symbolist influences. I will continue to make use of Fredric Jameson's commentary as well as Gyorgy Vadja's useful explanation of Symbolist methodology¹³. In addition, I will work towards a precise definition of Stevens's concept of 'decreation' through the close analysis of passages from his poetry. I will make reference to the opinions of a diverse selection of commentators including the poet Randall Jarrell, J. Hillis Miller and the British philosopher Simon Critchley. Finally, this chapter will conclude with a brief examination of Stevens's depiction of landscape, which I believe shares much in common with the ideals professed by Ralph Waldo Emerson in his classic essay *Nature* (1836.) In the third chapter, I will further examine the apparent influence of American Romanticism on the development of his poetic voice. I will argue that his work presents a twentieth century reformulation of Walt Whitman's vision of selfhood and the sublime. The fourth chapter will return to the challenges that Stevens's writing presents to the critical community. I will attempt to demonstrate ways in which his poetry could be interpreted from the viewpoint of 'theory', here construed as a framework explicitly informed by German Idealism, psychoanalysis and contemporary political thought.

As we saw in the previous chapter, Fredric Jameson is particularly interested in the idea that Stevens may have anticipated intellectual developments that only took place after his death. The title of his essay ('Structuralism and Exoticism in Wallace Stevens') conveys the basic thrust of his argument but it would be misleading to claim that Jameson is interested only in producing an ideological critique. On the contrary, a considerable portion of his article is devoted to stylistic analysis. Jameson draws attention to the essential ambiguity of the poetry by noting that it gives off two seemingly contradictory impressions: it conveys a sense of over-abundance as well as vacuity. Jameson writes: 'Any evaluation of Stevens' work

must start from an initial axiological paradox, which is surely more intense with Stevens than with any other major modernist figure. It must somehow be able to accommodate the seemingly irreconcilable impressions of an astonishing linguistic richness on the one hand and an impoverishment or hollowness of content on the other' (Jameson 2007: 208.)

As can be seen in these words, Jameson is prepared to defer the resolution of the theoretical problems that are in play until his argument has reached a point where the 'paradox' of Stevens's literary style has been properly accounted for. In my opinion, this sensitivity to stylistic dynamics is one of the great strengths of Jameson's article. In this case, one might begin by appreciating that Stevens was an exceptionally self-aware writer in the sense that he thought deeply about the medium of poetry, its tradition and possibilities. Like the abstract art movement of the post-war period, it has been said that the chief subject of Stevens's writing is the nature of its own construction. (Frye 1967: 16.) In later years, he came to develop an ideal of poetry as the 'Supreme Fiction'; a term that replaced his earlier, hazier notion of the Grand Poem (Riddel 1961: 21.) As its name implies, the notion of supreme fiction represents the ultimate aspiration of Stevens's poetics. It is a hypothetical discourse that would bring separate views, parts, 'ways of looking', descriptions, emotions and thoughts into harmonious unity (Riddel 1961: 24.) A key concept in his aesthetic, harmony must be understood as an ongoing relationship and not as a conclusive end-point. It is a fluid, temporary state of affairs where several forces act in unison even as they undergo change. Harmony amounts to an integrating and unifying process whereby individual parts find their appropriate place in the grand scheme of things. The title of many of Wallace Stevens's volumes of poetry *Harmonium*, *Ideas of Order* and *Parts of a World* evoke this theme.

Fredric Jameson argues that Wallace Stevens was both a poet and theoretician. He developed a mode of expression whereby he could write literature and theorize it at the same time. There is a long tradition in

the English language of poets expressing their views of poetry through essays, interviews and lectures¹⁴. In this vein, Stevens wrote several essays on literary theory, which were collected in the 1954 collection *The Necessary Angel*. In many cases, these essays can act as a guide to the verse but, in my opinion, the poetry itself provides a better explication of his ideas than his prose works. I do not think that his theories of poetry are intended to be separate and supplementary to his creative work. A symbiotic relationship exists between the theoretical and the aesthetic dimension in many of his poems. In these cases, a theoretical concept will influence his formal choices and the aesthetic qualities of his poems will affect how his ideas appear to the reader. Since form and theory in meta-poetry are mutually dependent elements, it is important to pay adequate attention to both aspects of when studying his work. In this chapter, an examination of the poet's formal tendencies will bring several of his key epistemological and literary theories into sharper focus.

The injunction to begin with formal analysis, however, implies that one should study Wallace Stevens in a similar fashion as one might approach any of the great Modernist writers. That is, one would presume that his merit as a poet is due to his creation of a unique style of self-expression. Jameson quickly dispels this illusion. He argues that Wallace Stevens distinguishes himself from his early to mid-twentieth century contemporaries through his adoption of an impersonal mode of address when it was standard for modernist poets to cultivate a signature style (Jameson 2007a: 213.) The notion of signature style is not simply a matter of technical competence (the cultivation of a good ear, vivid imagination or a wide vocabulary.) It is related to the belief that a personal, semi-secret language must be innovated before a poet can express him or herself truthfully. While 'authentic' poets initially estrange themselves from their readers in order to present their own private experiences, they possess a capacity to seduce the reader with their unflinching honesty.

The authentic poet makes an appeal to be understood not only as a writer of poems but as a singular human consciousness. Consequently, the reader is challenged by the text to overcome the strangeness of its dialect and to submit herself to the bewitching 'inner life' presented by the speaker. Ideally, a reasonably empathetic reader will come to appreciate the universal themes that may be implicit even in highly personalized, insular, individualized experiences. Yet, the 'authentic' poet's insistence on the irreducibility of individual consciousness precludes universality in the stricter sense of the word. While the relationship between a reader and an individualistic poet may be rewarding on many levels, there will come a point in the work where the writer will suggest that there is a dimension to his or her experience that cannot be expressed in words or comprehended by others. This creates a gap in the text where the full meaning of the poet's statements seems to resist interpretation and demystification. When this retreat from the reader takes place, one cannot dispel the feeling that the words belong wholly to their individual creator and come to us second-hand through the approximations of public language. Jameson contrasts this ideology of authenticity, which is pivotal to the typical aesthetic ideology of Modernist art, with Wallace Stevens's scrupulously impersonal voice:

This is what accounts for the peculiar impersonality of Stevens's poetry and imagination: no sense of the urgent need to forge a private and uniquely personal style to wrest one's individual *Pensées sauvage* as an act of revolt from the standardized culture surrounding those last places of the authentic. Stevens's imagination situates itself at once in the universal, thus forfeiting the peculiar glamour of the modernist poet as *poète maudit*, genius and unique stylist: style being above all the ambiguous and historical category in which, in high modernism, the specificity of the individual subject is expressed, manifested and preserved.

(Jameson 2007a: 21-213)

Jameson touches on a crucial point when he notes that Wallace Stevens apparently does not display the same hostility that most other Modernist poets directed towards 'degraded speech' (Jameson 2007a: 212.) While Stevens was certainly able to make words and phrases come to life on the page, he never displayed an antagonistic attitude towards conventional language. He displays an unwillingness to treat the text as a medium for the recording of biographical episodes or for the preservation of individuality against alienation. It is ironic that this insistent impersonality can be thought of as a mark of distinction. At times, this de-personalized mode empowers his poems to get around the traditional framework of Western discourse, which tends to arrange a single experiencing subject and its objects within a concrete environment (Jameson 2007a: 210.) While Stevens does not always eschew the traditional 'I' as speaker-narrator, I think it is fair to say that he consistently avoids even the slightest indulgence of confessional impulses. The speaking 'I' becomes a neutral position like a camera in a naturalist film that endeavours to make the audience forget its contrivance and limitations.

Stevens sustains the semblance of an impersonal perspective through the use of various techniques, such as the employment of surrogate personas (for instance, 'Crispin' in 'The Comedian as the Letter C' or 'The Man with the Blue Guitar') and through the adoption of a generally detached, abstract perspective in his writing. 'One' and 'someone' are the usual protagonists in his poems and even the occasional 'I' that does appear tends to swiftly dissolve into the background (as in, for example, 'Anecdote of the Jar' or 'Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird.')

The impersonality of Wallace Stevens's poetry becomes especially apparent when one reads his letters, which expose the kind of passionate interior life that one might expect to discover in his creative writing. In Stevens's poetry, the Cartesian 'inner man' is never permitted to dominate the free flow of abstract ideas, colours, settings and sensations. Generally speaking, one does not find in his lines either the personal quality that is so characteristic of High

Modernism nor the gritty, confessional realism that became popular in the post-war climate. One of his *adagia* states that 'poetry is not personal' (Stevens 1957, 159.)

Helen Vendler has claimed that the suppression of the 'I' in Stevens's poetics is related to a larger strategy of 'secrecy' or concealment (Vendler 1980, 48.) In her view, Stevens's secrecy allows him to conceal the autobiographical origins of the poems as well as to hide his allusions to writers that influenced him (Vendler 1980: 44-45.) It is startling to realize how little biographical information can be found anywhere in *The Collected Poems*. Oddly enough, this program empowers Stevens rather than stifling his creativity. It is conceivable that Stevens might have denied himself his characteristically fluent style of expression if he had thought his work would be read as confessional poetry. This theme will be explored in depth in the last chapter of this essay where we will consider how contemporary theory might be employed to suggest personal, aesthetic and ideological reasons why Stevens might have wanted to suppress his own perspective in his work. This apparent lack of disclosure would have struck some as a failure to give himself fully over to his vocation. A fellow American poet, Randal Jarrell, felt that this aspect of Stevens's work constituted its greatest failing. The following criticism is quoted from a review published in 1951:

The poet's medium, words, is abstract to begin with, and it is only his unique organization of the words that forces the poem, generalizations and all, over into the concreteness and singularity that it exists for. But Stevens has the weakness – a terrible one for a poet, a steadily increasing one in Stevens, of thinking of particulars as primarily illustrations of general truths, or else as aesthetic, abstracted objects, simply there to be contemplated; he often treats things or lives so that they seem no more than generalizations of an unprecedentedly low order. But the poet has to treat the concrete as primary, as something far more than an instance. (Jarrell 1985: 334)

Several other poets of this period, including Howard Nemerov, echo Jarrell's criticism of Stevens. Like Jarrell, Nemerov observes what he calls a breakdown of Stevens's 'poetic pact with the world.' With respect to the later poems, he comments that 'particulars were now being treated as though, so to say, they were already dissolved in generality' (Nemerov 1957: 13.) As a result, he argues that the later works are excessively abstract. Both Nemerov and Jarrell's remarks imply that Stevens failed to depict concrete situations, preferring to mediate on metaphysical content rather than confronting his readers with something immediate and personal. His apparent need for privacy and detachment is so pronounced that it is difficult for a reader to draw connections between any of his poems and the events of his life. Equally, one would struggle to find much correspondence between his work and the major historical events of his age. However, for Nemerov and Jarrell, the aura of timelessness and universality cultivated by Stevens is problematic not because it neutralizes his political point of view but it because it makes it all the more difficult for a reader to engage emotionally with his work. Certain critics, such as Edmund Wilson, have argued that there is an emotionally sterile, inhuman quality to Stevens's aesthetic. While the thriving reputation of his poetry in later years (discussed in the previous chapter) might cast doubt on these judgments, it is not altogether implausible to claim that a reader could be impressed by the beauty and intelligence of a poem without empathizing with its creator.

Randall Jarrell's protests underline the main differences between Stevens's ideas about poetry and the typical aesthetic ideology of poets at the start of the 1950s. Jarrell writes that the purpose of the modern poem is to 'treat the concrete as primary.' Jarrell contrasts Stevens's vocabulary of generic examples with the 'true nature' of poetry, which he defines through Goethe's words: 'he who grasps the particular as living essence also encompasses the universal' (Jarrell 1985: 334.) The implications of this quotation are hard to miss: in Jarrell's view, Wallace Stevens's style fails to grasp things as they are in actuality and therefore is unable to achieve universality. While he may be more interested in the evocation of

generalities than in the rendition of concrete particulars, emotion and sensuality (generally construed) remain of great importance to his artistic sensibility. Exactly how he manages to accommodate affective content within a style of supreme impersonality is a question that goes to the heart of the 'axiological paradox' that Jameson mentions in the opening stages of his paper. Through these various critiques, one can obtain a characterization that emphasizes three essential formal qualities that are apparent in his poetry. My account will proceed in stages, focusing firstly on Stevens's incorporation of Symbolist compositional methods into his overall style of writing. Secondly, I will describe the techniques of abstraction, decreation and integration that are evident in his work. Finally, I will conclude my technical analysis by considering the origin of Stevens's symbolic lexicon and its pertinence to themes of nature and universality.

We might begin by clarifying what 'abstract' writing might entail. Like Randall Jarrell, Fredric Jameson describes Stevens's work as having an 'abstract' quality that detaches the poetic perspective from concrete experience. Given the relative brevity of his paper, Jameson does not discuss the older or contemporary models that may have been influential in this respect. He disregards, for instance, the alleged similarities between the jarring nature of Surrealism and Stevens's altogether more elegant poetic language (Jameson 2007a: 210 -211.) Of greater interest to Jameson is the link between the *mundo* (the imaginative, symbolic space opened up by his poetry) and historical reality. Jameson writes that Stevens's aesthetic involves the 'automization' of 'image from thing, idea from image, and name from idea.' (Jameson 2007a: 220.) This process of cumulative detachment allows the poet to distance his poetic expressions from its original subject matter or inspiration.

At first, this interpretation may seem to reassert Jarrell's charge of excessive abstraction but it becomes clear that, in attempting to discover an appropriate ideological and historical context for the poetry,

Jameson is also trying to reconstruct the original links between Wallace Stevens's words and the historical reality that must have inspired them. The meaning of names, images and words can only be grasped if one is able to find a way to relate these abstract concepts to concrete experience and standard language use. The dictionary definition of a word, for example, provides it with a relatively abstract and general meaning. However, before we can understand what a word means in practice we must relate it to something that we can recall in our own experience. Along these lines, one of the better known *adagia* reads 'reality is only the base but it is the base' (Stevens 1957:160.) Words that lose all connection to real experience can no longer convey meaning. At the same time, a poet who remains entirely focused on concrete reality will confine herself to the most elementary level of creative writing. How Stevens strikes an uncertain balance between abstraction and realism is the primary issue that I will consider in this chapter.

The terms 'abstract' and 'symbolic' are often employed as oppositions to what is 'concrete.' Nevertheless, an abstraction of any kind must always retain a connection, however remote, with empirical objects and processes for it to be sensible. If we consider the field of mathematics, which is an exceptionally abstract discipline, we can still conclude that mathematic symbols and formulae are sensible only to the extent that they can correspond with physical phenomena. Abstract poetry is dissimilar to naturalist writing insofar as it does not privilege the mimetic function of language. While orthodox realism involves the rendition of finite occurrences within a specific and identifiable context, abstract or symbolic poetry tends not to present detailed, lifelike content to the reader at all. Instead, it communicates ideas through generalities and striking images. It is more directly reliant on inference and connotation than painstakingly recreated experiences. Prior to the advent of Surrealism and related avant-garde movements, the boldest departure from realistic and naturalistic speech came in the form of the French Symbolist movement of the late 1800s, a group of artists that are often cited as precursors to the great modernist writers.¹⁵ If we

were to define the French Symbolist concept of symbolism too broadly, we would have to cite the Symbolists as a major influence on all 20th Century art. I think that this would be to overrate the impact of the French Symbolists to the point where it becomes impossible to isolate any conclusive evidence of influence.

Fortunately, literary theorists have developed more precise accounts of the French Symbolists' actual practices. One impressively detailed example of this is a short but comprehensive article by Gyorgy Vajda entitled 'The Structure of the Symbolist Movement.' In this paper, the author argues that the Symbolist Movement's use of symbols was simply a means to enact what Vajda calls a 'methodology of abstraction' (Vajda1982: 34.) Vajda defines the poetic symbol as a formal device through which a process of abstraction can be performed. Words or images can only be thought of as symbols once they achieve some distance from the objects at which they were originally directed (their ostensive referents.) He claims that the Symbolist movement made use of two types of symbol: intellectual symbols and mood-impressions (Vajda1982: 31.) In the first case, he asserts that text may be abstract due to the fact that it is fundamentally concerned with conceptual ideals and not with concrete entities.

On the other hand, a piece of writing may be abstract in the sense that it presents a 'mood-impression' or distillation of an experience. Concerning the first class of symbol, Vajda compares intellectual symbolism to the use of markers in mathematics and science (Vajda1982: 30 -31.) The Symbolist poet draws elements from his or her personal experience and places them within the domain of theoretical knowledge. Images come to represent philosophical ideals rather than objective entities. As in Platonic philosophy, it is clear that ideals are not representation of concrete objects but rather stand for abstract conceptions that cannot be manifested in the context of normal life.

Once established, these intellectual symbols can be formulated into a system of thought that expresses the worldview of the poet. This system cannot be totally new and unprecedented. Any effective symbolic system requires that the writer and reader share common reference points, associations, experiences or beliefs. Following Vadja's commentary, one can posit two functions of symbolism in poetic discourse: the idealizing function and the internalizing function. The internalizing function treats words or images as if they were distillations of experience. In addition to intellectual value, poetry tends to elicit an emotional response from a reader or listener. While we tend to think of emotional reactions to art as something intuitive or instinctive, mood-impressions qualify as symbols in the sense that a poem can give us the emotional semblance of an experience without recreating the experience in all its particularities. Reference to the colour red, for instance, might convey an abstract mood-impression of anger. However, only a reader who is able to make the same tonal associations as the poet would be able to grasp the meaning of this symbolism. Radically unconventional symbols either have to be explained (which deprives them of their radicalism) or else they will fail to convey ideas and feelings to the reader. Thus, the challenge laid before the French Symbolist poets was to motivate conventional words and symbols so that they could be a fitting medium for authentic self-expression. Stephane Mallarmé understood the symbolic function of poetic language in a very particular way, as summarized by Gerard Genette:

To say flame to designate flame, love to designate love is to subject oneself to the language by accepting the arbitrary and transitive words it suggests to us; to say flame for love is to motivate one's language (I say flame because love burns), and by that very fact to give it the density, the relief and the weight of existence which it lacks in general, everyday circulation.

(Genette 1982: 94)

When Mallarmé writes 'flame' to mean 'love' he implies how he personally experiences this emotion. The external image of the flame is connected to the internal world of the poet. In this regard, Vajda is able to define mood-impressions as a symbolic 'condensations' of life, where the feelings that accompany lived experiences are projected onto an abstract marker' (Vajda 1982: 35.) 'Flame' may be an abstract term when it refers to a general type of object but the word 'love' is abstract in a different other sense for it refers to something that is always intangible and subjective. At any rate, 'flame' when it is used in the context of a Symbolist poem is not equivalent to the ordinary meaning of either word but adopts a new sense that can be seen as a metaphoric coupling of the two initial concepts. This particular technique allows Mallarmé to express a precise feeling without having to use conventional or degraded speech. He cannot use the word 'love' because he believes that he does not experience it in the standard way that common people love. He gets closer to his own unique feeling when he attaches a sensation of burning to it. The French Symbolists tend to disguise the origins of their symbols, presenting them as ideals that emanate directly from the imagination rather than from quotidian experience (Benamou 1972: xv.)

Stéphane Mallarmé's poetics requires that he constantly devise innovative ways to increase the displacement between conventional and literary uses of language (Genette 1982: 92.) Through stylistic and typographical eccentricities, Mallarmé constantly sought to disconnect his poetic vocabulary from regular discourse. He subscribed to the principle that pure poetry should not efface itself by attempting to draw its legitimacy from its ties with everyday life (Wooley 1942: 241.) An example of Mallarmé's aestheticism can be found in the last stanza of his short poem 'All the Soul Resumed' (translated by Grange Wooley):

Thus the choir of love-songs

Flies to your lip

Exclude from them if you begin
 The real because it is base
 The too precise meaning
 Overscrawls your vague literature.

(9-14. Wooley 1942: 243)

These lines assert that poetry must not be servile to reality. There is much here that would be at home in one of Wallace Stevens's poems, such as the representation of a monologue that is simultaneously the harmonious song of a choir. Still, I must concur with Michel Benamou that Mallarmé gravitates towards precisely the type of solipsism that Stevens wished to avoid (Benamou 1972: 48-51.) Mallarmé's poetic style upholds the Romantic prejudice that imaginative fantasy is superior to naturalism and to other literary styles that cannot conceive of anything beyond 'base' reality. Gerard Genette describes this aspect of Mallarmé's theory of poetry, in 'Poetic Language, Poetics of Language':

Speculation on the sensuous properties of speech, the indissolvability of form and meaning, the illusion of resemblance between the 'word' and the 'thing' were for Mallarmé, the very essence of poetic language: 'the power of a line of poetry stems from an indefinable harmony between what it says and what it is.' So we see the poetic activity closely bound up for certain thinkers, including Mallarmé himself...with a ceaseless imagination of language that is fundamentally a motivating daydream, a daydream of linguistic motivation, marked with a sort of semi-nostalgia for some hypothetical 'primitive' state of language.

(Genette 1982, 92)

I believe that this is precisely this view of everyday language as degraded that Jameson points out is not shared by Wallace Stevens. Mallarmé felt that a writer's style must either side with 'realism' (which he felt was decidedly anti-poetic) or with the imagination. Where Stevens differs from Mallarmé is in the fact that he apparently did not see the task of poetry as involving the reinvention of language per se. He was more interested in determining how the imagination plays a part in life. Stevens frequently begins a poem with the rendition of a somewhat realistic scene. Nevertheless, almost as soon as an isolated moment of human experience is portrayed he typically abstracts from it. He will thereafter tend to develop the theme on a theoretical level. As with the French Symbolists, he communicates predominately through associative systems that are modelled on the natural world. (Jameson 2007a: 209.) The French Symbolists trusted in the reader's capacity to mediate upon an unclear line or verse. As Jameson indicates (Jameson 2007a: 220), Stevens's writing typically enacts a series of 'slippages' towards increasingly distant reflections of the original experience. This tends to lead to a more compact language: a realistic representation of a singular object requires enormous detail while the evocation of a generic example requires less specificity. He continues this process of compression until words (as opposed to images or descriptions) become the most basic expressive units used in poetry.

This technique amounts to a superb economy of phrasing. The living, concrete content of human experience is whittled down to its universal structures. Towards the end of his life, Stevens himself identified this way of thinking as 'decreation', a term drawn from a rather different theological usage in the work of Simone Weil (Critchley 2005: 43.) Decreative writing has the effect of drawing the reader away from what apparently exists towards that which pre-exists it. There are many examples wherein Stevens adopts the decreative angle while mediating on reality. We might consider, for instance, the final stanza of his mid-career masterpiece 'Esthétique du Mal':

And out of what one sees and hears and out
 Of what one feels, who could have thought to make
 So many selves, so many sensuous worlds,
 As if the air, the mid-day air, was swarming
 With the metaphysical changes that occur
 Merely in living as where we live.

(xv.19- 24. Stevens 2006: 285-286.)

We can trace, in these remarkable lines, a kind of cognitive reverse engineering from 'mere living' towards its primal origins. There is nothing explicitly personal about this description of 'what one sees and hears...and feels.' This wellspring of experience (called the 'first idea' by Stevens) serves as a source for individual creativity; it acts as *materia poetica* that can be shaped into personalities and into imaginary worlds. Decreation moves therefore in the opposite direction from normal creative thought. It starts with already constructed selves and imaginings and travels backwards to contemplate their unconstructed, pre-existing state. If one were to describe this process through a simplistic analogy, one could say that decreation is a way of looking at a painting that construes the jars of paint that the artist brought into the studio. The chief problem is whether such a naïve, undifferentiated and impersonal (or pre-personal) vision could ever be successfully portrayed in language. Joseph Riddel, in an article on 'Notes towards a Supreme Fiction', outlines Wallace Stevens's program for getting at the first idea:

The poet's "first idea," which in its engulfing absoluteness appears to be what Whitehead calls an "abstraction" turns out to be the philosopher's other sense, an "abstraction from actuality," for it is the idea of the "ignorant man" with an "ignorant eye," the unreflective, non-rational, intuitive feeling of unity within conceived through the world without... The poem, he proposes,

approximates the first idea by imposing a unity upon life's confusions, refreshing the moment in its act of creation. It is thereby a spiritual act, a movement from the concrete toward the unity of the absolute, from the single poem to its innumerable plural.

(Riddel 1961: 27-8)

Wallace Stevens's decreation has the effect of shifting focus from the particulars that are manifest in 'mere living' to the abstract substance that underlies all of our views of reality. As Riddel's insights convey, the process of decreation involves the deemphasizing of individual creativity by focusing on the 'innumerable' plurality of forms. It is here that the invariable structures of experience – and not the finite details of occurrences – can be illuminated. The raw material that is needed for poetic creation often appears to interest Stevens more than the particular works that can be made out of it. In order to think decreatively, we have to imagine the absence of our own particular imagination before we can discover universal truths. Unlike the vast majority of Romantic and Modernist poets, Stevens did not necessarily think of reality as a type of personal space that had to be defended from convention (he used the term *mundo* to designate a self-made world as opposed to independently existing reality.) Stevens can be seen as rather unique amongst poets for he does not insist that ordinary language must be rescued or purified before it can qualify as poetry (Jameson 2007a: 212.). On the contrary, he felt that language ought to 'adhere to reality' but doubted that Imagism, 'hard' realism or naturalism are able to do so any better than nonsense verse or Surrealism.

The wish to puncture both romantic and positivistic idealizations of language accounts for his tendency to switch between an extremely sophisticated register (often involving French words) and onomatopoeic babble that is reminiscent of Edward Lear and Lewis Carroll. In so doing, he implicitly questioned the definition of poetic language as an aestheticized form of ordinary speech. Nevertheless, he was willing to

make use of elevated registers when he felt it was appropriate, a detail which makes his work sound different from his closest Modernist peers Robert Frost and Williams. His composition choices reflect an apolitical attitude when compared with many of the other writers of his time who felt that a simple lexicon was of paramount importance to honest self-expression.

One can find little evidence to assert that Stevens wanted to write exclusively in the common parlance of the modern American. He did not, at any rate, wish limit himself only to everyday words and images. By the same token, Stevens's poetry does not endorse the Symbolist assumption that regular discourse is ill-suited to poetic statement. As we shall see in the study of several poems in this chapter, his preference was to alternate between pared-down and effusive styles of writing. He wanted to prove that a harmonious arrangement of fantasy and realism was achievable in modern times. This faith in the capacity of language contrasts with the insecure spirit of much early twentieth century art, which was unsure of how to indulge the imagination without turning away from reality. Stevens's aesthetic is frequently compared with the visual arts¹⁶ because of his passion for landscapes and still-life pieces (see, for instance, 'Study of Two Pears.'). He identified himself as an admirer of Impressionism and delivered lectures on the links between visual art and literature.

While comparisons between Wallace Stevens and the Abstract Expressionists may have much to offer, I think a few sensible words need to be said on the differences between abstract art and abstract poetry. The word 'abstract', if used as an adjective, might refer to a text that is preoccupied with general principles. The abstract poem, as we have seen, is based on the use of symbols, which in turn requires the establishment of a system of shared associations. The Abstract Expressionist movement of the nineteen-forties and fifties aspired to create works of art with a non-representational character. A work in the mould of Abstract Expressionism can be admired without the viewer being able to recognize the

depiction of any discrete figures or shapes. These artworks are deemed abstract in the sense that discrete objects cannot be identified within them. The desire for the artwork to inspire unlimited interpretations was so pronounced that certain artists of this movement, notably Jackson Pollack, chose to number their canvases rather than giving them titles. This practice in itself implies the irresolvable incompatibility of language with the theoretical tenets of non-representational art.

I think it is clear that no written text can ever be plausibly described as non-representational. Even the most outwardly nonsensical poetry is comprised of smaller linguistic units that, when taken independently of the whole, are sensible to a reader. All poetic texts make use of a logically structured representational system. Despite its name, 'Asemic writing' (scrawl that resembles written language without containing actual words) cannot be considered a species of writing at all. As Structuralism has shown, no language system can be considered a product of individual innovation but, to an extent, must be based on already existing commonalities between people. One's familiarity with a specific language, therefore, always implies some understanding of an existing culture. Any relationship that might be construed between the poetry of Wallace Stevens and the Non-representational Abstract Expressionism of the forties and fifties can at best be described as a similarity of intent. In paint, unlike poetry, it is possible for mood-impressions to be separated from concept. Abstract Expressionism presents colour, line, tone and texture without foregrounding recognizable figures or objects.

On the other hand, the Cubist Movement of the early twentieth century can be said to be concerned with symbolism since it is based on a methodology of geometric abstraction. Cubist artists work with recognizable, readable shapes and icons as opposed to objectless mood fields. Although Cubism is still a genre of representational art, it does not make a fetish of objectivity. Cubist painters do not adhere to the belief that an artwork needs to imitate actual objects in the world, at least not in the same way that a

photograph captures images. Stevens's familiarity with Cubism is made explicit in his poem 'Man with the Blue Guitar', a tribute to Pablo Picasso's 1909 oil painting 'The Old Guitarist.' The poem deals with the problem of solipsism, an issue which would be familiar to any artist who dispenses with realist conventions:

They said, "You have a blue guitar,
You do not play things as they are."

The man replied, "Things as they are
Are changed upon the blue guitar."

And they said to him, "But play, you must,
A tune beyond us, yet ourselves,

A tune upon the blue guitar,
Of things exactly as they are."

(1.4-10. Stevens 2006: 143)

In the first stanza of the 'Man with the Blue Guitar' we are made to see that the expression of reality in an unusual form is still an affirmation of reality itself and does not necessarily invoke philosophical idealism. The blue guitar does not deny that the audience's reality exists. It compulsively alters reality whenever it tries to recapture it in an artwork. The call for 'a tune beyond us, yet ourselves,/ a tune upon the blue guitar,/ of things exactly as they are' seems to ask too much. In these lines, perhaps, Stevens is playfully pointing how the modern audience vacillates between desiring total verisimilitude on the one hand and

'sublime' transcendence on the other. The poem does not credit the guitarist with the ability to change reality but depicts the guitar as an almost magical device (Picasso's painting renders the old musician's face blue rather than the instrument.) Stevens's preference for creative writing to be less concerned with the artist's particular subjectivity can be seen in this distinction whereby the guitar is given greater prominence than the player, who is identified merely as 'the man' who plays it. The guitar could be said to symbolize the workings of the imagination as its blueness is unconventional and rankles with the organic 'green' day of the poem. Since the guitar alters whatever it represents, its tune can only approximate the original:

I cannot bring a world quite round,
 Although I patch it as I can.
 I sing a hero's head, large eye
 And bearded bronze, but not a man,
 Although I patch him as I can
 And reach through him almost to man.

(2.1-6. Stevens 2006: 143)

The section presents a rebuttal of sorts to the audience, apparently in the voice of the guitarist himself. He argues that he can sing a 'hero' (a symbol of a man) but 'not a man.' The guitarist claims that he can reach through his heroic tune 'almost to man' even if he cannot fully recreate a living individual. The tune is therefore *almost* able to depict things as they are through symbolical representations. However, to try and fully portray a human being in an artwork devoid of any idealizations is an appalling act:

Ah, but to play man number one,
 To drive the dagger in his heart,
 To lay his brain upon the board
 And pick the acrid colors out,

To nail his thought across the door,
 Its wings spread wide to rain and snow,
 To strike his living hi and ho,
 To tick it, tock it, turn it true,
 To bang it from a savage blue,
 Jangling the metal of the strings...

(3.1-10 Stevens 2006: 144)

This stanza illustrates the violence of attempting to reduce an actual person to a representation. The blue guitar butches 'man number one', his insides are extracted and his private life is laid bare. The 'man's' thoughts are exposed and fixed in place. We are told that his life becomes like the ticking of a clock. These descriptions might be taken to apply to the life of the common man in the twentieth century. Written in an age where human psychology was held under the microscope like never before, 'The Man with the Blue Guitar' posits a scene where a human figure is treated merely as an object for study. As a whole, the stanza demonstrates how some forms of realism view the human subject as a lepidopterist might look upon an entombed specimen. Alternatively, a less precise, symbolic representation of the individual would not diminish the original person ('man number one.'). Stevens's tacitly admits that his methods of abstract representation are not able to recreate a human being exactly as he or she is. In the next stanza, the speaker considers the potential universality of symbolic art:

A million people on one string?
 And all their manner in the thing,
 And all their manner, right and wrong,
 And all their manner, weak and strong?
 And that's life, then: things as they are,
 This buzzing of the blue guitar.

(3-10. Stevens 2006: 144)

The speaker finds 'things as they are' by viewing things in the macrocosm but these generalities amount to an inconsequential 'buzzing.' As such, we might be equally sceptical about this kind of poetry and what it actually contributes to our understanding of the world. While the decision to focus on the experiences of the millions rather than 'man number one' perhaps provides a style of poetry that less intrusive and more in tune with life, it is also less distinct and dramatic as a consequence. The final stanzas focus on the task of poetry as a medium that might be able to enhance our grasp of real life without distorting it. Stevens writes in the seventh stanza:

Detached from us, from things as they are?
Not to be part of the sun? To stand

Remote and call it merciful?
The strings are cold on the blue guitar.

(7.11-14. Stevens 2006: 146)

I think these lines highlight the central differences between the Symbolists and Wallace Stevens. Stevens cannot turn away from 'things as they are' and give himself over entirely to the imagination. I will address these basic themes through an analysis of several poems of more manageable length ('The Man with the Blue Guitar' is a work of over thirty stanzas.) The effect of these meta-poems is to imply the need for a supreme poetic form that achieves harmony between realism and symbolism.

The tension between mimesis and symbolism reflects a larger dynamic within the intellectual climate of the late 19th Century. The Symbolists pushed against the rise of naturalism, inspiring a spirit of anti-realism in the arts. There came to be a discord between the prioritization of scientific objectivity and an enduring compulsion towards mysticism. This conflict reverberated into twentieth century Modernism –

one can detect, between the two World Wars and thereafter, a definite resurgence of interest in abstract and avant-garde styles of writing. On the other hand, there was a countermovement in English language literature towards realism in writing. One of the best depictions of the contest between objectivity and subjectivism is 'The Snow Man', a famous short poem by Stevens, dating back to the 1920s. Here is the poem in its entirety:

One must have a mind of winter
 To regard the frost and the boughs
 Of the pine-trees crusted with snow;

And have been cold a long time
 To behold the junipers shagged with ice,
 The spruces rough in the distant glitter

Of the January sun; and not to think
 Of any misery in the sound of the wind,
 In the sound of a few leaves,

Which is the sound of the land
 Full of the same wind
 That is blowing in the same bare place

For the listener, who listens in the snow,
 And, nothing himself, beholds
 Nothing that is not there and the nothing that is.

(1-15. Stevens 2006: 8-9)

Given the enormous critical heritage that surrounds 'The Snow Man', it is not vital for me to mount another full-scale analysis. I do wish, however, to elaborate on the interpretative difficulties that might arise from this poem. I would argue that, if one studies 'The Snow Man' as an individual piece (apart from

any presupposed 'ideas of Stevens') it is able to support at least two equally valid, though contradictory, readings. From the first word to the last (barring perhaps the central word '*misery*') Stevens seems to be either endorsing or undermining an objectivist approach to poetry. One must decide which argument Stevens actually intends to advance. Let us divide the poem into two sections. The first part reads:

One must have a mind of winter
 To regard the frost and the boughs
 Of the pine-trees crusted with snow;
 And have been cold a long time
 To behold the junipers shagged with ice,
 The spruces rough in the distant glitter
 Of the January sun

(1-7. Stevens 2006: 8-9)

For the sake of argument, let us imagine that these six-and-a-half lines constitute the entire work. In this case, its meaning would be quite uncontroversial. Stevens's speaker would be clearly expounding the notion that one needs to gain a perspective that corresponds with the world around it in order to perceive things as they are. The impersonal 'one' is able to 'behold' and 'regard' features of the landscape through the adoption of a mental state that is immersed in the scenery. This hypothetical poem would, therefore, recommend a direct, Zen-like approach to existence, wherein the simple truth about the landscape is available only to a 'snow man' (a figure that is quite literally built of his context.) If this was all there was to the poem, it would advocate the imagism that was in vogue at the time. Nevertheless, let us quickly admit the remaining lines of the original text into our discussion:

and [One must have a mind of winter] not to think
 Of any misery in the sound of the wind,
 In the sound of a few leaves,

Which is the sound of the land
 Full of the same wind
 That is blowing in the same bare place
 For the listener, who listens in the snow,
 And, nothing himself, beholds
 Nothing that is not there and the nothing that is.

A new reading becomes available by the end of the poem. The second half of 'The Snow Man' can be read as a conceit that exposes objectivist poetics as hollow and dehumanizing. In this context, the final three lines describe the 'snow man' as being 'nothing himself.' The totally objective viewpoint may give one the ability to perceive reality (the 'nothing that is not there') without error but it is also unable to discover any meaning in what is perceived ('the nothing that is.') Stevens asserts that the Objectivist mentality amounts to seeing life through the coal eyes of a snow man. Since it does not want to impose human understandings onto nature, it divorces all thoughts of misery from the desolate landscape. Yet, Stevens names the very thing which is supposed to be excluded, heightening its presence and cancelling out its omission. When reading this poem how can one not think of misery?

The stream of negations professed at the end of the poem suggests a rather bleak assessment of pure objectivity as a mode in modern poetry. However, it cannot be said that these climatic lines force us to give up our earlier interpretation but, recalling the hermeneutic circle, the last sentences effectively reshape our earlier understanding of the poem's meaning. Now, we might read the 'must' of the first line as an explanation rather than as an imperative. It is as if the speaker means to say 'one would have to have a mind of winter not to acknowledge human feelings when experiencing the world.' Running with this reinterpretation, it would be simple enough to argue that Stevens felt that poetry should retain its subjective perspective without trying to be completely objective. However, this conclusion is just as inadequate as the first. We come to recognize that Stevens could be arguing in either direction depending

on how one groups together the various clauses of the poem and where one chooses to place inflection when reading it aloud. The poem could either be saying that one cannot perceive the external world without first overcoming one's obsessive fixation upon oneself or, alternatively, he could be arguing that one cannot experience anything meaningful without allow one's humanity to be part of experience.

Due to the neutral tone employed throughout the poem there is no real way of knowing whether Stevens wants to endorse or to reject the snow man's worldview. What can be said is that he has mapped out a debate, giving fair expression to both sides. More than this, he has articulated, in a few simple stanzas, what continued be an important dispute in English literature even after the Second World War: the issue of whether or not creative writing should be kept separate from the 'objective' discourses. I do not think one can surmise that 'Snow Man' really falls on either side of pure objectivity or subjectivism. In fact, the poem reveals that this apparent dichotomy is by no means inevitable. Poetry does not have to be either objective or function as a corrective to objectivity. On the surface, 'The Snow Man' intimates that one can behold either junipers or misery but not both at the same moment. It seems to imply that one must see 'nothing that is not there and the nothing that is' or risk imposing human prejudices onto an indifferent world. As readers, we become the 'one' of this poem. We occupy the space that the text reserves for us. I suspect that the poem mentions the word 'misery' precisely in order to impress it into our minds; we are inspired to infuse emotional feeling into our view of the landscape. The reader, therefore, must behold both misery and junipers at once in the mind's eye. Our experience of this artwork – if we visualize the scene that is presented – proves that the objective and subjective viewpoint can be reconciled, for the harmony of these two viewpoints are combined within us as we read the words on the page.

In this respect, the 'Snow Man' proves that one can (with just the right balance) pay equal attention to both human sentiments and 'things exactly as they are.' This leads us towards a fuller account of Stevens's dialectic of reality and imagination. It is crucial that we do not assume that the term 'impersonal' when it is applied to Stevens's style necessarily equates to the word 'inhuman.' It means treating individual people as examples of humanity and specific feelings as examples of universally accessible emotions. It does no good to assume that a single person and her singular emotions bear nothing in common with people and feelings in general. Decreation is the activity of tracing these commonalities rather than a technique of denying subjectivity.

'The Snow Man' is a perfectly calibrated poem because it achieves an uneasy truce between two seemingly contradictory styles of writing. The word 'misery' is first used as the antithesis to the detached mind of winter. Nevertheless, it becomes clear that we cannot exclude our emotions without first recognizing that they are *there*, already present in the moment. Once we admit this to ourselves, the exclusion of emotion because a distortion of real experience. Earlier in this chapter, I tentatively suggested one 'idea of Stevens' that situates his genius in his ability to harmonize opposing forces. He often establishes set of logical antimonies before showing how they might be reconciled into abstract unities through metaphor. This poetic dialectic transforms concrete 'things' into symbolic content that is increasingly abstract and distant from its origins. At the same time, subjective sentiments like feelings or moods seem to become tangible when they are put across through this same language. Private thoughts and emotions become publically observable features of the world (misery, for instance, becomes something that can be heard.) In this way, from opposite positions, our inward sentiments and the empirical objects around us can appear within the same space. Juniper trees and the feeling of misery both can exist harmoniously alongside each other in the same landscape.

In my view, the dialectical side to Stevens's art is best expressed by drawing attention to the prominence of seasonal imagery in the poems. The four seasons themselves are abstract markers that organize recurring experiences: one may live through many winters and summers but never the same season twice. The conceit of the changing seasons is a key part of his symbolism. As in Japanese haiku, Stevens evokes the seasons as a way of refurbishing a tonal environment. He utilizes the iconic images and scenarios that epitomize each of the seasons (at least for a person who lives in the northern hemisphere.) Many of poems are filled with rather trite seasonal markers such as snow men, piles of autumn leaves, fields of flowers and the like. I doubt that Stevens was unaware of the patent unoriginality of these images; in fact, I suspect that they are chosen precisely because of their total conventionality. He happily employed such unoriginal emblems as a type of cultural shorthand. The abundance of commonplace images in his writing has the added effect of further detaching the poet's individual personality from the proceedings. The way in which seasonal change implies thematic shifts is, likewise, a relatively unoriginal idea. From a local point of view, springtime signals the end of winter but this kind of change can be understood in terms of an ongoing cycle: the end of winter is also the beginning of winter's slow return and so on.

Wallace Stevens constantly renews his perspective, detaching his viewpoint from the short-sighted, lived-in attitude with which we habitually experience the world. In various poems, this method is applied in order to undermine various dichotomies. Thus, the traditional dichotomy set up between the inner and the outer realm, for instance, may be poetically resolved by taking on the abstract-universal perspective of humanity, the gods or the earth itself. The leitmotif of seasonal change can be seen as an artistic representation of the dialectical process. Here, I would argue that his work tends to present a circular and not a linear narrative. Stevens's dialectic should not be thought of as a forward progression towards a conclusive end as in the once-standard 'Hegelian' formula wherein a thesis statement encounters its

negation and culminates in a conclusive synthesis. Stevens's meditations never amount to any undisputed, final verdict but generally demonstrate a new way of engaging with timeless themes. The questions that are encountered in the context of a poem are never completely resolved and come to be recognized as perennial uncertainties. He is far more inclined towards pondering irresolvable problems than dealing with the more manageable quarrels that might arise between classes, generations, nations and schools of thought. If the problems explored in his first collection, *Harmonium*, were 'solved' in that book, he would not be inclined to reconsider the same ideas for a further thirty years.

Wallace Stevens can be considered a relatively narrow poet in that he is only interested in a handful of topics and draws from a rather limited pool of images and metaphors. He was not prepared to mine his own life for neuroses or dramatic memories; he was more akin to the reclusive Mallarmé than decadent poets like Paul Verlaine or Arthur Rimbaud whose colourful personal lives fuel much of what is interesting in their verse. An enormous amount of Stevens's poetry depicts the mind's adherence to nature and the dualisms that emerge out of humanity's relationship with the world. His composition method causes two or more contradictory notions to come into contact (in several poems these are referred to as 'contrary theses.') Thereafter, these conflicting views might be brought into harmony through the adoption of a more enlightened and holistic perspective.

In 'Wallace Stevens's Poetry of Being' J. Hillis Miller argues that the process involves a rhythmic oscillation caused by the alternation between decreation and creation (Miller 1964: 92 -93.) Miller states that these stages of the dialectic seem to correspond with Stevens's evocations of autumn and spring respectively. The endless, cyclic regeneration of poetic impetus, however, cannot lead to the elimination of the original binaries: they are fated to return in new guises to demand fresh investigation. Even in a harmonious arrangement, oppositions gather on the horizon like a coming storm. Simon Critchley puts

forward a similar interpretation of the significance of the seasonal model in his study *Things Merely Are*. Critchley sees winter and summer as positions of materialism and idealism; 'what is interesting about the seasons of late autumn and early spring is that they are a denial of both the worlds of winter and summer, both the contradiction of hard reality and its full transfiguration in imagination' (Critchley 2005: 67.) Critchley rightly takes spring and autumn as being especially important seasons within Wallace Stevens's aesthetic as they represent a compromise between the Symbolist denial of concrete reality and the Imagist distaste for excessive subjectivity. Critchley states that 'in these transitional seasons, we have to accustom ourselves to more minimal transfigurations that turn us to things in their ordinariness. Sparseness and hardiness, the very Americanness of the sublime.' (Critchley 2005: 67) Wallace Stevens's voice is frequently caught up in these metaphorical sequences where the imagination must bloom or wither away.

In 'The Snow Man' the poetic speaker tacitly admits that it is legitimate for human beings to attach concepts and emotions to things observed in nature. At the same time, he implies that one ought to be able to appreciate nature from its own point of view. The first word of the 'Snow Man' introduces the hypothetical 'one' that is crucial to any reading of the text. Yet the anonymous 'one' is never invested with an identity, life history or personality. Stevens does not attribute to it the power to do anything other than 'regard', 'hear' or 'behold' the world. Much of his poetry challenges the traditional depiction of the transcendental 'I' as an entity that could exist separately from its context. Several critics have pointed out that this strategy recalls Edmund Husserl's phenomenological method (Nemerov 1957: 7), a mode of inquiry where the mind is understood as being perpetually in contact with a target of some kind. I will discuss this argument and its relevance in the final chapter. Fredric Jameson defines the essence of Wallace Stevens's epistemology as involving a 'constant interaction between subject and object, between the 'idea' of the thing and the historical, empirical 'thing itself.' (Jameson 2007a: 208.) In light of this

apparent prioritizing of metaphysics over social intercourse, Jameson states that the abstract subject of the poetry must 'construe' an 'equally abstract world.' (Jameson 2007a: 209.) Since Stevens rarely presents a realistic human protagonist in his work, his style cannot move beyond the words employed to get at a more immediate, concrete response to historical reality (Jameson 2007a: 209.)

In this respect, language becomes an increasingly abstract and self-contained system that, having accounted for the general structures of experience, ceases to require the empirical universe at all. When Jameson's quote is read in the context of his Marxist sympathies, his argument can be taken as a pointed criticism of Stevens's neglect of social issues. Hegel and Marx thought that writing should be productive and that 'concrete universals' were more important than 'abstract universals' (Jarrell 1985: 334.) Marxist theory generally holds that no real thinker grounded in a concrete historical context could find much practical use for purely abstract or theoretical thinking. A committed Marxist like Stanley Burnshaw might therefore agree with Randall Jarrell's complaints regarding Stevens's failure to deploy 'living particulars' in his work. For the poet himself, however, I suspect that materialist criticisms amount to the same as an audience demanding that the old guitarist 'play a tune beyond us yet ourselves.' While these criticisms are accurate, we should not assume that all poets must respond to their historical and political situation in an explicit way. It might be useful to consider a more charitable interpretation of the epistemology suggested in his poems. Take the following quotation from J. Hillis Miller's article, 'Wallace Stevens' Poetry of Being':

Imagination is the inner nothingness, while reality is the barren external world with which the imagination carries on its endless discourse. Stevens' problem is to reconcile the two. But such reconciliation turns out to be impossible. This way and that vibrates his thought, seeking to absorb imagination by reality, to engulf reality in imagination, or to marry them in metaphor...One

part is committed to the brute substance of earth, things as they are, and the other just as tenacious holds to its need for imaginative grandeur.

(Miller 1964: 88)

Miller predicts that Stevens's foremost ambition – to reconcile the imagination and reality – must end in failure or limited success. For Miller, as we have seen, Stevens's dialectic is destined to oscillate endlessly between decreation and recreation without ever achieving its ultimate goals. This eternal vacillation becomes a struggle between competing urges and Stevens seems to get caught between his belief that poetry must be abstract and his need to develop a discourse that adheres to reality. For Miller this seems to be nothing other than a resurrection of Platonic dualism as indicated in his references to *brute* reality and *imaginative* grandeur. In my own analysis of 'The Snow Man', I resisted this way of interpreting Stevens. I argued that the objective and subjective viewpoints can be reconciled when one takes the reader's experience of the poem into account. One hears both the cold wind and one's own misery at the same time since they are mixed together in the scene opened up by the text. Fortunately, a few pages further into his article, Miller revises his earlier charges of dualism:

Stevens comes more and more to discover that there is after all only one realm, always and everywhere the realm of some new conjunction of imagination and reality. Imagination is still present in the most absolute commitment of the mind to reality, and reality is still there in the wildest imaginary fiction...If this is the case, then there is no real thing that which is transformed into various imaginary aspects. The real thing is already imagined, and 'imaginative transcripts' are as much a part of reality as anything else is. "What our eyes behold," says Stevens, "may well be the text of life but one's meditations on the text and the disclosures of these meditations are no less a part of the structure of reality." This discovery of the identity of all elements of life means a

redefinition of poetry. Words are not pictures of reality. They are part of the thing, tangled inextricably with the event they describe.

(Miller 1964: 97.)

As in Jameson's article, J. Hillis Miller's chapter concludes his argument with the claim that Stevens's work demands a radical redefinition of poetry. Miller suggests that our practices of criticism must develop to the extent that Stevens has exceeded the traditional limits of poetic discourse. His writing frequently illustrates how we might learn to recognize the 'imaginative transcripts' that reside beneath the surface of experiences. In Miller's opinion, Stevens's cyclic dialectic occasionally comes to occupy a harmonious state where there are no longer any essential distinctions between imaginings and concrete objects. Decreation is part of a larger process that also includes integration or 'putting together' ideas and corporeal things. A wooden cross, for instance, can certainly be seen as a solid object that exists independently of one's thoughts of it. However, one may also see in these bits of wood ideas of salvation or the story of the crucifixion (or any other associations that might be attached to it.)

The crucial point for Stevens is that we must passively notice these connotations in the cross rather than forcing them upon it. These 'imaginative transcripts' must not be imposed on the object by the imagination of any individual but experienced as symbolic facts. A crucifix does not only suggest Christianity to me but to the greater part of humanity who is familiar with Christian iconography. As an individual, I am powerless to either deny or to change the connotations that have been attached to this object. I can only recognize or overlook these latent meanings. When decreative thinking achieves a 'momentary harmony' – a phrase belonging to Stevens's mentor George Santayana (Beckett 1974: 76) – the sight of an object itself is simultaneously the recognition of the abstract meanings that reside within it. This is a reflective action, subtly different from the act of attaching a personal meaning to something (as Mallarmé does with

the word 'flame.')

The overall perception of the crucifix becomes an integration of its symbolic and material qualities. In this spirit, one might read the first section of 'Notes Towards a Supreme Fiction' entitled 'It must be Abstract':

Begin, ephebe, by perceiving the idea
 Of this invention, this invented world,
 This inconceivable idea of the sun.

You must become an ignorant man again
 And see the sun again with an ignorant eye
 And see it clearly in the idea of it.

Never suppose an inventing mind as a source
 Of this idea nor for that mind compose
 A voluminous master folded in his fire.

How clean the sun when seen in its idea,
 Washed in the remote cleanliness of a heaven
 That has expelled us and our images...

(1.1-12.Stevens 2006: 331)

The poem begins with the admission that our sense of this world in which we live in may be an 'invention.' Nevertheless, this situation is only the beginning for beneath the construed world there is a world that is not invented. The second stanza of the extract advises one to see with an 'ignorant eye' to perceive the

sun so that it is not already over-determined by the viewer's egoism. Stevens insists that the world should not be seen as the product of any single mind. The 'voluminous master' mentioned in the third stanza becomes an unnecessary construct. The distinction between 'invention' and 'ignorant' sight is difficult to sustain without employing the concept of decreation. It is through the process of decreation that an ordinary object can be seen in its first idea. It is depicted in relation to its underlying nature. In this sense, decreation becomes an imaginative device that cleans the sun of its connotations. The revitalization of reality is stunningly evoked in the third section of 'Notes towards a Supreme Fiction':

The poem refreshes life so that we share,
 For a moment, the first idea . . . It satisfies
 Belief in an immaculate beginning

And sends us, winged by an unconscious will,
 To an immaculate end. We move between these points:
 From that ever-early candor to its late plural

And the candor of them is the strong exhilaration
 Of what we feel from what we think, of thought
 Beating in the heart, as if blood newly came,

An elixir, an excitation, a pure power.
 The poem, through candor, brings back a power again
 That gives a candid kind to everything.

(3.1-12. Stevens 2006: 333)

This stanza suggests that one function of poetry is to refresh our experience of the world. Poetry as a 'Supreme Fiction' stimulates an unconscious movement between a sensuous experience of life and intellectual reflection. One has to turn away from the inventions that one might take to be reality in order

to imagine life in its purest form. Under this interpretation, the purpose of Stevens's poetry might be taken to be its sustainment of these regenerative cycles. Like a self-charging battery, his work neither exhausts itself in passion nor falls into intellectual solipsism. One takes all the individual pieces out of the world in order to see it in its first idea. The second stage is to reintegrate all of these parts back into reality. A lesser-known poem from *Harmonium*, 'Anecdote of the Men by the Thousand', offers a fine example of how decreation and integration are two sides to the same cyclic process. The poem contains many of the stylistic traits that I have focused on so far in this chapter as well as certain themes (including landscape and authorial perspective) that will be discussed in the next section. As a means of progressing beyond the identification of formal methodology into a more pointed analysis of the use of landscape in Stevens's poetry, let us conclude this chapter with a brief appreciation of this often overlooked text:

The soul, he said, is composed
Of the external world.

There are men of the East, he said,
Who are the East.
There are men of a province
Who are that province.
There are men of a valley
Who are that valley.

There are men whose words
Are as natural sounds
Of their places
As the cackle of toucans
In the place of toucans.

The mandoline is the instrument
Of a place.

Are there mandolines of western mountains?
 Are there mandolines of northern moonlight?

The dress of a woman of Lhasa,
 In its place,
 Is an invisible element of that place
 Made visible.

(1-21.Stevens 2006: 46)

Stevens employs the anecdotal form here in order to explore the relationship that might be construed between the individual part and the whole. The first line is the converse of a quotation from Ralph Waldo Emerson's essay *The Poet* (1884), which states 'we stand before the secret of the world, there where Being passes into Appearance, and Unity into Variety. The Universe is the externalization of the soul' (Emerson 1844: 5.) Tony Tanner in his excellent study *The Reign of Wonder* (1977) examines Emerson's theory of perception in depth. Tanner notes that Emerson 'wants the eye to be washed clear of those selective and interpretative schemata which prevent us from an original relation to the universe' (Tanner 1977: 31.) He then argues that the desire to face the universe with a 'naïve eye' would become an important theme in later American art, literature and philosophy. Similarly, the poem cited above compels the reader to perceive objects from unusual angles. The abrupt equation of two separate entities (such as men and the valley) compels one to find commonality between them. In Stevens's poem, we are introduced to a 'He' that is never properly identified and disappears altogether from the poem after the first three lines. 'The cackle of the toucans' is an example of the early preference for exotic flora and fauna. The word 'mandoline' refers to a kitchen utensil used for shaving off bits of vegetables but in this context it can be read as a pun on 'mandolin' (a type of a musical instrument.) The mandolines evoked in the poem, like the harmonium, the clavier or the blue guitar, seem to symbolize artistic expression. The double-meaning of the word suggests that these mandolines shave off a small portion of the landscape.

In this case, the mandoline is said to be *the* instrument of *a* place; the syntax of this line implies that individual locations have a characteristic way of expressing themselves.

There may be endless different locations but they will each have a mandoline of some kind that a sensitive listener can detect. Each reader must decide what these symbols are meant to represent, though, if these statements are taken too literally, the poem could frustrate understanding entirely. A single remark therefore becomes a metaphoric combination of discrimination and universality. This inspires the reader to make sense of this metaphor. The whole process becomes an affair of breaking things down and reintegrating them. It is a perpetual activity that unsettles and refreshes the mind's grasp of reality. We are able to see the woman's dress because the invisible element of it has been disclosed. As such, the imagination does not need to construct reality but it should reveal latent aspects of it. As in Martin Heidegger's idea of truth as *aletheia* or unconcealment, knowledge is gained when what is already present is revealed. (Heidegger 2002: 35) Lest this interpretation sounds excessively Post-Modern, one might sketch out a comparison between this epistemology and the claims made by Emerson in his essay *Nature*. Emerson states that 'it is not words only that are emblematic; it is things which are emblematic. Every natural fact is a symbol of some spiritual fact. Every appearance in nature corresponds to some state of the mind, and that state of the mind can only be described by presenting that natural appearance as its picture' (Emerson 1983: 20.) This argument corresponds exactly with Miller's depiction of epistemology in Stevens's later verses. Emerson thought of symbolic language as process whereby one could externalize spiritual content. However, in Emerson as in Stevens, this symbolism is conceived of as a social rather than personal process:

Man is conscious of a universal soul within or behind his individual life, wherein, as in a firmament, the natures of Justice, Truth, Love, Freedom, arise and shine. This universal soul he

calls Reason: it is not mine, not thine, or his, but we are its; we are its property and men. And the blue sky in which the private earth is buried, they sky with its eternal calm, and full of everlasting orbs is the type of Reason. That which, intellectually considered, we call Reason, considered in relation to nature, we call Spirit.

(Emerson 1983, 21)

Emerson points out that the words we use to speak about abstract ideals are drawn from the natural world and from a 'universal soul' that is greater than our individual existence. Following these observations, we might agree with Jameson's assertion that 'in Stevens, nature is nothing but a given, a ready-made occasion for speech' (Jameson 2007a: 209) and with Adelaide Morris's observation that Stevens builds his own symbolism out of other, already established systems (Morris 1974: 34.) The presentation of natural landscapes in his work is further complicated by the fact that he mixes references to abstract places with reference to actual place names. According to Jameson, nature functions as an abstract 'storehouse of images.' At the same time, Stevens's mention of real world places anchors his poetry in the concrete world. In 'Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird' for instance, one would tend to view the 'snowy mountains' of the first stanza as a rather abstract evocation of place while the mention of 'Hadim' and 'Connecticut' in the same text undeniably refer to actual locations. Nevertheless, I would argue that such places are still being employed as symbols. The associations in this case are not drawn from nature but American culture. Stevens wants to harness the associations that are conventionally connected with certain place names. For instance, one could guess that the reason he mentions Connecticut in 'Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird' is because he intends for the reader to take it as signifying prosperity, old-world culture and learning.

In an especially interesting passage of his paper, Fredric Jameson considers how such allusions to what he calls 'culturally marked' places are suggestive of an ideological program in Stevens's work. (Jameson 2007a: 214-215.) He explores the poet's usage of prototypically American spaces: 'Stevens's only content, from the earliest masterpieces of *Harmonium* to the posthumous *Rock*, is landscape; and that not even in the visionary sense of the great nature poets, for whom the momentary epiphanies of place and object world are rare events, to be persevered against the encroaching destruction of Nature as well as the alienating features of city or man-made environment' (Jameson 2007a: 209.) Jameson correctly notes that almost all of Stevens's poems make reference to natural landscapes. Nevertheless, to assert that the poetry's *only* content is landscape based on the ubiquity of flora and fauna in his poems is simply to highlight a single set of patterns. I do not think that Jameson wishes to imply that the writing contains nothing other than scenic descriptions. His reading is accurate insofar as it appreciates that landscapes usually provides the content (sights, sounds, scents and so forth) from which he can harvest the material he requires for symbolic language. However, there are other instances when the poems draw symbols from other systems including religious and cultural iconography, art, philosophy and history. Such associations have become basic to modern life and are inescapably embedded in cultural consciousness. It is likely that his own symbolism is based on such content because it is impersonal and relevant to the experience of the average reader.

I have argued that a notable absence of a personal quality in Stevens's poetry distinguishes it from other great works of the early twentieth century. This brief examination of the main features of his aesthetic has shown how it differs in fundamental respects from the sensibilities of his main precursors and contemporaries. Technically informed by the French Symbolists, Stevens's style of writing is generally weighted towards the abstract over the concrete. On the other hand, his view of poetry is premised on the belief that the real world must act as a foundation for poetic expression. J. Hillis Miller argues that

Stevens's case calls for a redefinition of poetry whereby words become 'part of the thing, tangled inextricably with the event they describe.' We saw this dynamic unfold in 'The Snow Man' where the initial tension between interiority and exteriority, in fact, demonstrated the need for artworks to integrate objectivity and emotional understanding. At this point, a new interpretation of Stevens's poetry becomes possible. When imagination and reality enter into equilibrium there ceases to be a clear distinction between ideas about something and the thing itself. It is important to remind ourselves that this perfect equilibrium cannot be sustained forever. As with any cycle, the resolution of one conflict is the genesis of another. With this basic understanding of Wallace Stevens's symbolism in hand, we will now pay closer attention to the themes of his work and their relation to the broader context of American literature.

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CHAPTER THREE: WALLACE STEVENS ON THE SUBLIME.

The Sun still rises, and it still goes down, going wearily back to where it must start all over again.

The wind blows south, the wind blows north – round and round and back again. Every river flows into the sea and back again. Every river flows into the sea and the sea is not yet full.

- Book of Ecclesiastes 1.5

The French Symbolists and the American Transcendentalist poets are often cited as Wallace Stevens's primary literary precursors.¹⁷ The influence of Symbolist poetics was discussed to some extent in the previous chapter. It was argued that, while parallels could be drawn between Wallace Stevens and Stephane Mallarmé's compositional methods, there were profound differences in the way the two writers conceived of poetry. If Stevens's formal methodology generally draws on Symbolist models then one can say that the influence of the American Romantic tradition is most evident when one focuses on the thematic content of his poems (Riddel 1967:30.) Quotations in the previous chapter suggested how the depiction of landscape in several poems recalls Ralph Waldo Emerson's notion of the natural world as symbolic. Similarly, his constant evocation of the American countryside is routinely compared with Walt Whitman's vision of the natural world (Riddel 167: 32-5.) Efforts to ground Stevens in the Romantic tradition have tended to emphasize his interest in what can be thought of as 'Adamic' themes, including mankind's loss of innocence, the possibility of imaginative self-definition and the development of a non-theological concept of the sublime (Willard 1973: 54-5.) Of these themes, Stevens's twentieth-century recuperation of the sublime from Romanticism will be a focal point in this section.

I will provide an account of how the sublime is expressed in Wallace Stevens's work through the full analysis of three of his poems, each of which deals with this subject in a different way. I will begin with

close readings of 'Sunday Morning' and 'Peter Quince at the Clavier', two poems that predate *Harmonium*. Thereafter, I will focus on his depiction of nationalistic sentiment in 'The American Sublime' from the second volume of poetry *Ideas of Order*. My investigation into his reformulation of the sublime in this chapter will play groundwork for the concluding chapter of my essay, where 'post-modern' critiques of his poetry will be discussed. Critical opinion is divided as to whether his work exemplifies continuity, change or a mixture of conventional and experimental impulses. Using 'Sunday Morning' as an example, one can observe several conflicting accounts of its significance. Frank Lentricchia, for instance, considers the poem to be an unremarkable work of its type. He argues that 'the preponderance of scholarship is ample testimony that 'Sunday Morning' with its atmospherics and its ideas is a conventional poem, very much of its intellectual period' (Lentricchia 1989: 148.) On the other hand, Herbert Stern begins his analysis by acknowledging the Romanticism inherent in the poem before advancing the opinion that 'Sunday Morning' is a key poem around which Stevens built his entire body of work. Stern considers the poem to be 'the ultimate projection of the Romantic vision into the twentieth century...the remainder of his work would be devoted to the attempt, at times comic, at times ironic, at times heroically triumphant, to create a poetry of exaltation' (Stern 1966: 10.)

Clearly, Stern's view of 'Sunday Morning' is that it provided a kind of core model that would be followed, in different ways, by Stevens throughout his career. Though this may be a somewhat hyperbolic assessment of the importance of 'Sunday Morning', it cannot be denied that this poem has received an enormous amount of attention from critics over the years (Kermode 1960: 41.) 'Sunday Morning' was first published in *Poetry* magazine in 1916. As one of the earliest poems, it is often treated as a general introduction to the poet's style and concerns. Since the release of the last of the unpublished writings in the mid 1960s, it has become possible for critics to treat his body of work as though it is one, immense project wherein several core ideas are endlessly refined. As such, each poem might seem to shed light

on another work. This makes the reading of his *Collected Poems* a constantly illuminating experience. Frank Kermode describes *Harmonium* as the start of a lifelong project:

First *Harmonium* and later more of *Harmonium* but with more rhetoric and more meditation. 'One poem proves another and the whole.' Stevens wanted to call the collected edition of 1954 *The Whole of Harmonium*. This is a little too simple; *Harmonium* is not without its meditative poems and it contains in the germ a great deal what might be called the doctrine of Stevens, although that word suggests an assertiveness absent from his world.

(Kermode 1960: 41.)

I would tend to agree with the position taken by Kermode here as opposed to the alternative view that Wallace Stevens graduated through several, distinct phases of development wherein his approach to writing underwent significant changes. There are certain problems that arise, however, when one commits to this impression of the poetry as a whole. Since the interpretation of one poem anticipates the next and so on, one must be especially wary of confirmation bias. It must remain viable for critics to retract or reformulate cursory interpretations rather than ignoring all factors that might contradict their hypotheses. Beyond its usefulness as a way of investigating Stevens's early absorption of influences, I would attribute a large amount of popularity of 'Sunday Morning' to the fact that it is relatively straightforward work to understand. Herbert Stern points out that 'Sunday Morning' delivers a linear argument in response to an easily identifiable central problematic (Stern 1966: 90.) The conflict staged between spirituality and religious doctrine in this piece is a well-worn theme in American poetry. In 'Sunday Morning' traditional religious belief is challenged by an intuitive, modern scepticism (Riddel 1967: 35.) In this poem (as in Walt Whitman's immensely influential 'Song of Myself') conventional ideas of divinity and the sublime are gently interrogated. Viewed from this angle, 'Sunday Morning' can be seen as

an extension of tropes that have been part of the American literary idiom since the days of Ralph Waldo Emerson and Walt Whitman.

In this chapter, through a close reading of three of Stevens's earlier poems, I hope to develop my own account of the relationship between his poetry and American Romanticism. The sublime has been an important theme in philosophy and literature since antiquity, though it is the development of this concept in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries that will concern us here. The German philosopher Immanuel Kant provided a rationalist account of the sublime which divided it into two subcategories: the mathematical and the dynamic sublime. The mathematical sublime is the experience of one's reason discovering its limitations while the dynamic refers to one's appreciation of the limitlessness of thought (Wenzer 2005: 107 – 110.) In an essay on Kant's theory, Paul De Man compares the Kantian mathematic understanding of the sublime with Romantic poetry (De Man 1996: 82.) De Man is interested in how Kant and Wordsworth conceive of the same theme in different terms. The pursuit of pure reason, associated with the philosophical thought of the enlightenment, threatened to strip the world of its ambiguities. Its wish was to reduce the mysteries of the universe to quasi-mathematic formulae (De Man 1996: 80.) In contrast, De Man describes Wordsworth's poetic vision in the following terms:

[it involves] the constant exchange between mind and nature, of the chiasmic transfer of properties between the sensory and the intellectual world that characterizes his figural diction... no mind is involved in the Kantian vision of ocean and heaven. To the extent that any mind, that any judgment intervenes, it is in error – for it is not the case that heaven is a vault or that the horizon bounds the ocean like the walls of a building.

(De Man 1996: 82)

With respect to Kant's vision, on the other hand, he stresses a 'flatness devoid of any suggestion of depth...this vision is purely material, devoid of any semantic depth and reducible to the formal mathematization or geometrization of pure optics.' (De Man 1996: 83.) De Man then juxtaposes this extremely objective presentation of the sublime with an excerpt from William Wordsworth's 'Tintern Abbey':

And I have felt
 A presence that disturbs me with the joy
 Of elevated thoughts; a sense sublime
 Of something far more deeply interfused,
 Whose dwelling is the light of setting suns
 And the round ocean and the living air
 And the blue sky, and in the mind of man.

(94-100. Wordsworth 1969: 163-5.)

De Man investigates how this theme - the 'sense sublime' that arises from an encounter with the sea or sky - is encountered in very different ways by the two figures (both of whom may be taken as central to the formation of Romanticism.) Wordsworth's sublime involves the interaction between the consciousness of the poetic speaker and a natural landscape. This is dissimilar to Kant, who presents the mathematical sublime without emphasizing its experiential shadings. De Man rightly sees Kant's view as a materialist depiction of the sea and sky. However, Kant's efforts to produce an appropriately objective account of the sublime are undermined by the suspicion that it effectively begins where reason is transcended. Even as he provides an account of what is essentially a heightened emotional state, Kant upholds principles of disinterestedness rather than basing his understanding on subjective impressions

(Ward 2006: 190.) On the other hand, it befits the Romantic poet to distrust the intrusion of reason into an imaginative experience. This is where Paul De Man observes a tension between the philosophy of the Enlightenment and Romantic 'fancy.' If Immanuel Kant's mathematic sublime stands for a feasible, reasoned account of what 'is the case' and not 'error' then William Wordsworth's views could be interpreted as a distorted, irrational and even hostile attitude towards social reality. 'Tintern Abbey' reveals a great deal of Wordsworth's personality and biography. For this particular person at this moment in time, it may well be true that the ocean *seems* to be round and the air seems to be alive. The truth or falseness of these lines becomes a matter of judging their sincerity and not their objective correctness.

As a creative artist, Wordsworth need not advance factual, propositional claims about the world in his poems. His statements, unlike a metaphysician's claims, cannot be proven or disproven through logical inquiry. His words merely record his personal thoughts and imaginings. In 'Tintern Abbey' Wordsworth's speaker recounts an epiphany that is passionately felt for a short time and then lost. He draws parallels between this transcendent moment and the loss of innocence that often occurs when one leaves a particular stage of one's life behind. Paul De Man notes that a poetic mind must always be present in Romantic poetry to bear testament to nature. An important aspect of the poetic sublime is reflected in the uncertainty that this stipulation implies. Although Wordsworth's sublime must be witnessed and personalized, its magnitude can never be fully comprehended by the human mind. The sublime in Romantic poetry is the shock of the mind as it attempts to conceive of something that transcends sight and imagination but as soon as the witness surrenders and accepts his or her own fundamental inadequacy as a witness, he or she directs attention away from the unknowable immensity of nature into solitude and introspection. The Romantic poet ceases to praise the boundlessness of Nature and begins instead to meditate on the limitations of the Self. In so doing, the sublime of the natural world is converted

into a backdrop as the poet's self-examination becomes central to the text. In these cases, quite organically, the concept of the natural sublime mixes with the Romantic ideology of radical inwardness.

This inward turn is not exactly a retreat from the immensity of nature but a way of forming a relational bond with it. The witness is able to be moved by the limitlessness manifested in the cosmos because of the corresponding depth of their own consciousness. Therefore, the Romantic lyric is able to convey the idea that - just as our understanding of the universe is limited - the external world is unable to comprehend of the enormity of the human soul (Wilson 1991: 5.) For the Romantic egoist, the fact that we are unable to effectively master, consume, quantify or objectify our consciousness links the mind with the trope of the sublime. De Man strikes at the heart of Wordsworth's aesthetic in framing the poet's use of the sublime as a kind of 'transfer.' The inward-outward facing vision requires that the poet commune with nature. Ultimately, nature becomes a tutor that teaches a poetic witness the truth of his or her own divinity. In 'Tintern Abbey' Wordsworth claims that the changes in his life have altered the meaning that the place holds for him. Insight into his own psychology becomes possible when he embeds himself in nature. Finally, he claims to be:

well pleased to recognize
 In nature and the language of the sense,
 The anchor of my purest thoughts, the nurse,
 The guide, the guardian of my heart, and soul
 Of all my moral being.

(108-112. Wordsworth 1969: 163-5)

The surroundings of Tintern Abbey remind Wordsworth of his maturation since his first visit to the spot as a young man. Amongst other things, nature is personified here as a 'guide', which leads the speaker to discover the truth about himself. Wordsworth's speaker becomes, by the final lines, a devout 'worshipper of Nature.' He learns to understand himself through the lessons taught to him by sea and the sky. The sublime landscape reminds him of all that is divine within his own 'moral being.' He recognizes the best aspects of himself in the natural world. In these lines Wordsworth displays both a self-centered attitude and an awareness of the inferiority of the human mind when encounters nature. What is not made explicit (although it is an extremely important aspect of Wordsworth's sublime) is the fact that he is aware that he is really studying himself whenever he contemplates the natural world. This realization allows us to move our attention smoothly over to Walt Whitman, whose work can be said to epitomize the concept of the sublime self. Diane Middlebrook describes the difference between the two Romantic poets' conception of personal identity: 'The form Whitman created resembles Wordsworthian poetic autobiography but is freer of interpreted recollection. For want of a better generic term, Whitman's poems on the identity of the imagination might be called autobiography as myth' (Middlebrook 1974: 18.) Although Whitman, like Wordsworth, is a lover of nature he does not require its guidance. He holds within himself everything he needs to know.

Consequently, he boldly reinterprets the sublime so that the singular 'I' of the speaker-narrator becomes a universal 'I' (Wilson 1991: 5.) He emphasizes the self to such an extent that nature and the rest of humanity becomes part of his identity. The egoism implied within Wordsworth's stance towards nature is intensified in turn by Whitman. His invention of the sublime 'I' (the singular which contains multitudes) represents the birth of a uniquely American strain of Romanticism (Peckham 1995: 185.) The major subject of Whitman's poetry is really himself though he equates his sense of self with his compatriots and with the material landscape of the United States. Introspection in the poetry is therefore a vehicle through

which he might contemplate the world around him. 'Song of Myself' remains the definitive statement of this self-mythologizing ideology. In this great work, the speaker emphatically denies that any division can be imposed between the authentic human being and the universe.

Despite his faith in the universality of being, I would argue that Whitman never gets far beyond his preoccupation with his own personality, which is an overwhelming presence in every one of his poems. His style is not one of detachment, impersonality or even abstraction but of constant self-celebration. For Whitman, the unity of the human being with the world finds its purest manifestation in the principles of American democracy. When a true democracy is realized, the individual citizen will serve as a representative of the state and the state shall reflect the will of the individual citizen. Although his poetry professes unconditional love for his fellow human beings, this love is reflexive given that other people are viewed as extensions of himself. While there are few poets that can match his exuberance, there remains something disconcertingly solipsistic about Whitman's idealization of the 'Real Me.' Middlebrook, for instance, points out his tendency to treat all human experience as if it belonged to him: 'many of the things experienced by Whitman the myth-maker verifiably did not happen to Whitman the man but were culled from pictures, books, newspapers or conversations – or invented' (Middlebrook 1974: 21.) Generally speaking, his poetry fails to differentiate the lives of others from his own experiences. Consequently, he could construe almost any event as an episode in his autobiography. With this emphasis, the self's inner diversity becomes an inexhaustible source of material for creative writing. If Wordsworth saw himself as a 'worshipper of nature', one might argue that Whitman's supreme belief was in democracy. This ideal is upheld in almost every single poem of *Leaves of Grass*. Democracy is a struggle for integration and harmony, drives that we have already found to be central to Wallace Stevens's work.

If America did not exist, one suspects that Whitman could have constructed it out of thoughts and emotions. Whitman's faith in the virtues of self-sufficiency was most likely kindled by Emerson's influence but his total dedication to his fellow countrymen would become a personal trademark (Wilson 1991: 38.) His poetry rejoices in the affection he feels for his fellow Americans. Few poets can match the outpouring of brotherly love and altruism that Walt Whitman displayed in his life and writing. Nonetheless, it is important to note that other people occupy an ambiguous position in this system of thought. It is true that Whitman continuously espouses love for humanity but this sentiment is tempered by the underlying sense that other people cannot offer him anything that he does not already possess within himself. This dynamic is evident in the lines from 'Song of Myself' when he memorably declares 'I resist anything greater than my own diversity.' I would argue that all of Whitman's pronouncements, including his ideological support for democracy, actually stem from his proclivity for endless self-analysis. Whitman defended democracy at time when the United States faced divisive social issues that would bring the Union to the brink of collapse. His political convictions (he was a staunch abolitionist and a firm supporter of Abraham Lincoln) were never shared by all of his American compatriots. During his lifetime, the United States endured its most radical period of political upheaval, war and social reform. These harsh lessons in the failings of camaraderie were learnt firsthand by Whitman during his service as a field nurse in the civil war.

One can find in his corpus many of the rough templates that American literature was to follow: the emphasis on motion and travel, the unshakeable belief in the common man and so on. Furthermore, his work is an important source of inspiration for modern American ideas of spirituality. Whitman depicted transcendence as being a normal part of everyday life. 'Tintern Abbey' may capture a moment of exceptional lucidity in Wordsworth, where superhuman forces possess the mind of the poet for a brief, epiphanic moment. 'Song of Myself' on the other hand simply finds Walt Whitman relaxing on a lawn. He does not encounter his soul in any house of worship but it arises in his heart as he loafs in a field of

grass, surrendering to corporeal pleasure on an ordinary day. While loafing on the grass, he becomes attuned to the divinity that he feels within himself: 'I am the mate and companion of people, all just as immortal and fathomless as myself. (They do not know how immortal, but I know.)' In 'Song of Myself' Whitman attempts to combine the hyperbolic declarations of his own immensity with the concession that he remains:

Walt Whitman, a kosmos, of Manhattan the son
 Turbulent, fleshy, sensual, eating, drinking and breeding
 No sentimentalist, no stander above men and women or apart from them
 No more modest than immodest.'

(497-500. Whitman 1950: 43.)

In this cheerful preamble, one can find the blueprint for the humanist project to achieve paradise on earth rather than simply awaiting it in afterlife. Following his example, one often assumes that Great American Literature always reflects the lives of millions of citizens ('a million people on one string') by fully representing the life of a single personality in all its dimensions. This principle underscores Whitman's concept of poetry, evident in his claim that the United States are essentially the greatest poem (Wilson 1991: 146-7.) Rob Wilson, in his book 'The American Sublime' (a title that is taken from a poem by Stevens) claims that a new genre was born when the trope of the sublime was exported to the United States:

Crossing the Atlantic, the Sublime underwent an ideological sea-change. If the Enlightenment Sublime had represented the *unrepresentable*, confronted privation and pushed language to the limits of imagining the vastness of nature and stellar infinitude as the subject's innermost ground,

the Americanization of this Sublime rhetoric represented, in effect, the interiorization of rational claims as the Americanized Self's inalienable ground.

(Wilson 1991: 6.)

According to Robert Wilson, the limits of language and perception suggested by the sublime evolved into problems of self-knowledge. The sublime comes about when the human ego is forced to recognize something far greater and more powerful than it was able to understand. In his study, Wilson notes that various American poets have discovered the sublime not only in the Whitmanian trope of the 'immense self' but also in evocations of empty space, the infinite iterability and accessibility of mass produced goods as well as in the sheer size and opportunity presented by the countryside itself, such as the frontier mythos (Wilson 1991:43-6.) Here we get a clearer picture of Wilson's conception of the American sublime: it is the translation of one cultural concept into a separate idiom. Wilson speaks of the sublime 'crossing the Atlantic' and in so doing tacitly compares the spreading of literary values with trade and colonization. The homeland's commodities are shipped out to the 'new world' including its cultural tropes. For Wilson, these new renditions of the sublime offer a glimpse into basic truths of the American psyche.

The American sublime – under this definition – becomes a feeling of transcendence that must be produced and reproduced like any other commodity. The artist is no longer allowed to wait for a muse, a god or an idealized nature to guide them towards the sublime. If 'stellar infinitude' and the like are rejected as sources for the American sublime because they position it well beyond the earth and ordinary human existence, how can the sublime be depicted as part of ordinary existence? Wallace Stevens' participation in the overarching narrative of American literature is sometimes taken for granted despite the fact that the majority of his poems are conceptual pieces that do not directly address national problems, modern historical events or his personal struggles. While appreciating the contribution that 'Sunday

'Morning' has made to America's national literature, I will argue that Stevens proposes a new form of the sublime, one that surpasses Whitman's Romantic vision in its sophistication and force.

In 'Sunday Morning' Stevens searches for a new form of faith that can replace the vacuum left by the decline of traditional religious belief (Riddel 1967: 34 -5.) He works towards a reimagining of paradise that might supplant fading images of heaven. The opening lines of 'Sunday Morning' are unabashedly sensual. They establish a lightness of tone that will act as a counterweight to the serious tone used in the rest of the poem. Here, Stevens prefers the word *peignoir* over *night-gown* (a word that carries a surrealistic effect in 'Disillusionment at Ten O'Clock'), perhaps, because French words typically signify sophistication for an American audience. The opening lines introduce a female protagonist who has chosen to spend Sunday morning in leisure rather than in religious observation. With impressionistic detail, Wallace Stevens builds a scene out of scattered observations, foregrounding certain colours ('green freedom'), scents and tastes ('coffee and oranges.') We then encounter the sight and the sound of water as the woman drifts off to sleep and begins a restless daydream. Like 'Leaves of Grass', 'Sunday Morning' does not begin with divine imagery but with an ordinary day. The first stanza invites the reader to enter into sympathy with this unnamed woman. In her mind, the perception of the day before her is 'like wide water' which then deepens and grows calm as she departs from complacent mood and begins to mull over the Christian significance of the day ('that old catastrophe.') The wide water can be said to be symbolic in two senses: it is associated with the passage of time in her dream but it also provides a mood-impression of her placid feelings as she dozes off. The objects that surround her are suddenly infused with a morbid tone: 'the pungent oranges and bright green wings / seem things in some procession of the dead.' At this point, the focus of the poem broadens: 'the day is liked wide water, without sound,/ Stilled for the passing of her dreaming feet/ Over the seas, to silent Palestine,/ Dominion of the blood and sepulchre' (1.9-15. Stevens 2006: 58)

The sleepy, domestic atmosphere created in the opening lines subsides as a sudden awareness of her own mortality permeates her dreaming mind. Words such as 'death' and 'blood' have their usual effect and the mood of the poem quickly darkens. At the beginning of the second stanza, we follow the poem's speaker away from the female figure who served as a poetic focalizer in the first stanza. Several rhetorical questions gradually carry our focus out of the experiential field of the day-dreaming woman. We are brought thereafter into a direct engagement with the themes of the poem. In so doing, Stevens follows the characteristic course that we have defined as 'decreation' - the poem draws several abstract ideas from a relatively finite, specific situation and follows up on the theoretical problems implied by the opening scene. We are drawn out of her dreams and invited to meditate on the broader questions that her predicament implies: 'Why should she give her bounty to the dead?/ What is divinity if it can come / Only in silent shadows and in dreams?' I would, therefore, concur with the notion that the woman introduced in the first stanza acts as a synecdochal representation of those who have lost faith in religion but continue to be haunted by it (Stern 1966: 92.)

The third stanza concludes with the lines: 'And shall the earth / Seem all the paradise that we shall know? / The sky will be much friendlier than now, / A part of labour and a part of pain, / And next in glory to enduring love, / Not this dividing and indifferent blue' (3.10-15. Stevens 2006: 59.) The female figure does not need to stand before the heavens or ocean for images of the sea and sky to impose upon her dreams. She is able to access these grand vistas through her imagination even from within the solitude of her home. Yet, for the modern subject the traditional vision of the afterlife is a cause for anxiety not self-celebration. It reveals the emptiness of a faithless world where traditional theistic beliefs are no longer as believable as they once were. Stevens's solution is to try to bring the idea of heaven back into a human context. As in Whitman's poetry, 'Sunday Morning' asserts that divinity must be part of regular living, whether one is at work or at rest, present both in times of happiness and suffering. The sublime becomes

an invisible yet omnipresent part of life itself. Divinity pushes itself into the dreams of those who no longer attend Sunday mass. The speaker argues that 'all pleasure and pains' are possible only in a finite world. This suggests that traditional religious depictions of paradise are unsatisfactory. The orthodox vision of heaven as an immortal and unchanging paradise is recast as a frozen, staid landscape:

Is there no change of death in paradise?
 Does ripe fruit never fall? Or do the boughs
 Hang always heavy in that perfect sky,
 Unchanging, yet so like our perishing earth,
 With rivers like our own that seek for seas
 They never find, the same receding shores
 That never touch with inarticulate pang?

(6.1-7. Stevens 2006: 60)

The paradox implicit in certain orthodox representations of heaven is exposed in this sequence. We are shown fruit trees overburdened with immortal fruit that can never ripen and a perverse river that flows without a source or destination. In the following stanzas, the poetic voice steadily develops the idea that the earth and not heaven must be seen as the home of the divine. In this respect, Stevens evades Romantic tendencies and does not project the sublime into the depths of the ocean or the infinity of the sky. It remains unclear how one could conceive of the sublime as something that is already part of life and not beyond it in images of limitless depth or expanse. Whitman's poetry is famous for its themes of fellowship and homoeroticism, which, if we continue to draw comparisons, Stevens seems to satirize in the seventh stanza of 'Sunday Morning.' The opening lines could be read as a direct parody of Whitman (Riddel 1967: 35): 'Supple and turbulent, a ring of men shall chant in orgy on a summer morn / Their

boisterous devotion to the sun.' Whether this is homage or mockery is unclear. The choir described in this passage can be seen as a symbol of poetic legacy for the songs of perishable men echo after they have disappeared. The world itself is marked with traces of their wanderings ('whence they came and wither they shall go / The dew upon their feet shall manifest.') It seems that Stevens is not willing to conclude with the belief that immortality is attainable through supreme artistic achievement. The final stanza of 'Sunday Morning' begins with a brief return to the female character, implying that her dilemmas remain unresolved:

She hears, upon that water without sound,
 A voice that cries 'The tomb in Palestine
 Is not the porch of spirits lingering.
 It is the grave of Jesus, where he lay.'
 We live in an old chaos of the sun,
 Or old dependency of day and night,
 Or island solitude, unsponsored, free,
 Of that wide water, inescapable.

(8.1-8.Stevens 2006: 61-2)

These lines suggest that the myth of achieving immortality through supreme artistic achievement (a belief that is widely perpetuated in Romantic poetry) is not enough to resolve the doubts of the sleeping woman. She must again confront the wide water and the strange voice that articulates her discomfort. In a series of slightly nihilistic thoughts, the 'first idea' of life on earth is shown to be nothing more meaningful than an 'old chaos of the sun or old dependency of day and night.' The poem threatens to dissolve into the purest

of generalities. Understood as a stage in a dialectical progression, the climax of 'Sunday Morning' might be seen as the presentation of a new vision of the sublime:

Deer walk on our mountains, and the quail
 Whistle about us in their spontaneous cries,
 Sweet berries ripen in the wilderness,
 And, in the isolation of the sky,
 At evening, casual flocks of pigeons make
 Ambiguous undulations as they sink,
 Downward to darkness, on extended wings.

(8.9-15.Stevens 2006: 62)

This conclusion, evocative as it is of the natural order of things, might strike the reader as something of an anticlimax. Given that the preceding stanzas denounced various visions of divinity, one might expect the final moments of the poem to provide an answer to the significant questions that have arisen. Clearly, 'Sunday Morning' does not advocate Christian ideals of the afterlife nor does it endorse the usual literary alternatives to it. Like the daydreaming woman, we are deprived of the consolations that sincere faith or piety could offer us. Stevens chooses to end his inquiry into the idea of heaven with the modest description of a landscape. The mountains are not viewed from a metaphysical nor Romantic angle. The height and magnitude of the mountains are not emphasized nor are they filtered through the subjectivity of an individual witness. The sublime seems, at first, to be entirely absent from these final images. The mountain scene is tranquil when contrasted with the fire and motion that enlivened the preceding stanzas. Unremarkable language and straightforward descriptions are employed to depict a landscape that belongs equally to all of humanity: 'deer walk on our mountains, and the quail whistle about us.' The

grammar of this statement makes it clear that humanity should be considered an enduring presence in the world and not as something alien or separate from it. Similarly, the classification of the berries as 'sweet' presumes the necessity of a mouth to taste them. The quail could either be 'whistling about us' in the sense of flying past us or they could be discussing mankind amongst themselves. Either way, the stark morbidity of the last sentences reminds us that death is always a necessary presence even in a world that teems with life.

At the close, Stevens relinquishes the omniscient perspective of the 'frame narrator' that acts throughout 'Sunday Morning' as a kind of authorial voice. The mountains are framed as '*our*' mountains. This shift in deixis, where the first-person plural form ('*our*') is adopted for the first time is a profound turning point in the poem. I would go so far as to claim that this grammatical shift constitutes the point where Stevens surpasses the traditions that inspired him and breaks new ground. It seems to me that the 'us' that the poem adopts is also the perspective of all time periods and is not simply a contemporary vision. What is apparent is that the final passage of 'Sunday Morning' invites us to give up on the afterlife promised by religion. It suggests that one might find comfort, instead, in the realization that life on earth will endure after personal death. From an abstract and impersonal point of view, nature and humanity can be understood as permanent entities that are unaffected by the death of the individual. The soul does not transcend the world but rather the universe outlasts all individual horizons.

One can understand this final description of the mountains as a hymn to the regenerative capacity of life on earth. We are encouraged to perceive the mountains with a collective vision and to view ourselves as links within a chain of being that connects the past and the future. We discover transcendence through the recognition of a common humanity and a deeper feeling of belonging to the world. As well as dwelling within 'the old chaos of the sun', we dwell in a time between morning and night where the sun slowly sets

over personal horizons. 'Sunday Morning' effectively conveys the idea that infinite unborn life is always waiting in reserve to replace us as once we perish. The images of deer, birds and so forth, are manifestations of a life-force with unlimited regenerative power. 'Sunday Morning' directs the reader to recognize the existence of something greater than ourselves in the form of an abstract ideal of humanity. As such, Stevens deviates from Whitman's universal 'I' and develops what one might call the universal 'we.' In my opinion, his sudden adoption of the plural form makes the poem a more legitimately democratic work than Whitman's poetry, which is premised on the idea that the cosmos could be contained within his own consciousness.

Frank Kermode cleverly calls this particular aspect of Stevens's poetry the 'chameleonic sublime' to indicate that its purpose is to attain a kind of anonymous universality (Kermode 1960: 51.) One critic, Susan Weston, expresses this reading particularly well: 'Stevens's idea of the poet belongs to the Romantic tradition of Shelley's poet as 'unacknowledged legislator of mankind'. But Stevens's Romantic aesthetic shares a great deal with modern psychology, especially with Jung's collective unconscious. Jung claims that the artist is the 'collective man', one who carries and shapes the unconscious psychic life of mankind' (Weston 1974: 63.) I will spend time assessing the relevance of psychoanalytic views of the sublime in the next section. It is helpful to note that the peculiar mysticism displayed here seems to pre-empt the popularization of the non-denominational understanding of the word 'spiritual' that has become widespread since the 1960s. We can see this, for instance, in the separation of the meditative practices of Zen from commitment to Buddhist cosmology or law. As we shall see in the next chapter, this spirit of universality is, moreover, a contributing factor in the ongoing ascendance of globalization over parochial forms of nationalism. Over the last fifty years, one can observe the emergence of a widely accepted notion of spirituality that is not based on adherence to doctrines but appears as a vague awareness of divinity as it reveals itself in the routine of normal life. 'Sunday Morning' implies that our desire to

celebrate ourselves as unique individuals is the source of our fear of death. However, if we could find a way to overcome our limited viewpoints, as Stevens does in the final stanza, this fear might be diminished. We must look at things from a wider perspective in order to appreciate the relative permanence of human existence within the natural world. The living beings that reside upon the mountainside are presented in sequence. Nonetheless, the final image of pigeons falling into the darkness can therefore be taken as an inversion of the Christian depiction of the afterlife. Death ('the evening') is portrayed as a descent into darkness rather than ascension into heaven.

Before concluding on the topic of the sublime, it might be helpful to compare 'Sunday Morning' with two other pieces, 'Peter Quince at the Clavier' which also predates *Harmonium* and the later poem 'The American Sublime.' Although it is a shorter poem than 'Sunday Morning', 'Peter Quince at the Clavier' touches on the theme of immortality. However, this poem engages with the Romantic ideal of beauty rather than spiritual divinity:

Just as my fingers on these keys
 Make music, so the self-same sounds
 On my spirit make a music, too.

Music is feeling, then, not sound;
 And thus it is that what I feel,
 Here in this room, desiring you,

Thinking of your blue-shadowed silk,
 Is music.

(1.1-8.Stevens 2006: 77)

As in 'Man with the Blue Guitar' the poetic speaker depicts the playing of a keyboard as a symbolic act: 'music is feeling, then, not sound.' A series of sounds cannot be considered music unless they inspire certain sentimental responses from a human listener. The first stanza addresses an unidentified 'you' as is standard practice in love poetry. The reference to 'blue-shadowed silk' implies that the speaker's desire is for a woman, imbuing the experience of music with amorous, even carnal connotations. This stanza is perhaps the closest that Stevens ever comes to writing a traditional love poem (though the rest of the poem is decidedly less direct.) The title makes reference to one of the hapless players of William Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. In an odd mashing together of allusions, the rest of the piece is concerned with the story of Susanna from the Book of Daniel. The first stanza acts an introduction to the biblical drama conveyed in the body of the poem:

It is like the strain
 Waked in the elders by Susanna;
 Of a green evening, clear and warm,
 She bathed in her still garden, while
 The red-eyed elders, watching, felt
 The basses of their beings throb
 In witching chords, and their thin blood
 Pulse pizzicati of Hosanna.

(1.8-15. Stevens 2006: 78)

Susanna inspires similar feelings of desire in the 'red-eyed elders' as are felt by the original narrator, doting on an absent lover. As in the opening stages of 'Sunday Morning', the next sequence uses the experiences of its female protagonist as a platform upon which deeper mediations can be developed. In the second section, Susanna wanders freely into the natural world, unaware of the lecherous elders' plans to ensnare her:

In the green water, clear and warm,
 Susanna lay.

She searched

The touch of springs,

And found

Concealed imaginings.

She sighed,

For so much melody.

Upon the bank, she stood

In the cool

Of spent emotions.

She felt, among the leaves,

The dew

Of old devotions.

(2.1-14. Stevens 2006: 78)

At this point, the poem achieves a momentary harmony - every object on the riverbank overflows with a rich abundance of meanings. Emotions are a physical part of the landscape and take on almost corporeal form of shadows and dew. This stanza reaffirms J. Hillis Miller's theory that Stevens, at times, presents symbolic and imaginative content as being unified within reality and not as elements that are imposed upon nature by the mind of an external subject (Miller 1964: 97.) Recalling our interpretation of 'Anecdote of the Men by the Thousand' it seems that Susanna is able to unearth the hidden content that abounds within the natural world. As in 'Sunday Morning' and the later 'Ideas of Order at Key West' we are shown

the image of a woman bathing, immersed in water, a mood-impression that connotes a spirit of surrender. It strikes me that Stevens favours the word 'green' over all other words whether it appears in the form of 'green freedom' or 'green going.' The 'dew of old devotions' mentioned in this part of the poem might recall both the 'old catastrophe' of traditional faith and the transient dew that wets the feet of pagan poets. The experiences of Susanna are gorgeously reminiscent of Romantic poetry though the second part concludes on a darker note:

Soon, with a noise like tambourines,
Came her attendant Byzantines.

They wondered why Susanna cried
Against the elders by her side;

And as they whispered, the refrain
Was like a willow swept by rain.

Anon, their lamps' uplifted flame
Revealed Susanna and her shame.

And then, the simpering Byzantines
Fled, with a noise like tambourines.

(3.1-10. Stevens 2006: 79)

The elders ensnare Susanna, interrupting her free-spirited enjoyment of nature. This part of the poem is made up of rhyming couplets. It seems to me that this section's cadence, which mimics the doubling rhythm of the tambourine, evokes the aural impression of a parade. The use of the word 'Byzantine' makes for an effective rhyme even if it confuses the historical setting of the tale. These lines bring us back to the key themes suggested in the opening passages of the poem. If music is feeling, we must question whether beauty actually exists in the object or within the viewer. The elders seek to possess the object of their longing. They want to satisfy the 'strain waked' in them by Susanna's beauty. It seems that the original experience of beauty cannot be sustained; it is inevitable that the enjoyment of a beautiful object will wane over time. The elders are wrong to desire Susanna's physical form since it really a particular feeling that they want to possess rather than a beautiful object. The alleged immortality of the artwork was a popular ideal in pre-modern literary circles and a truly beautiful work was considered to be an everlasting accomplishment. Stevens calls this old-fashioned ideal into question by suggesting that a poem is nothing without a living, breathing reader. The stage is set for the final section:

Beauty is momentary in the mind –
 The fitful tracing of a portal;
 But in the flesh it is immortal.

The body dies; the body's beauty lives,
 So evenings die, in their green going,
 A wave, interminably flowing.
 So gardens die, their meek breath scenting
 The cowl of Winter, done repenting.
 So maidens die, to the auroral
 Celebration of a maiden's choral.
 Susanna's music touched the bawdy strings
 Of those white elders; but, escaping,
 Left only Death's ironic scrapings.

Now, in its immortality, it plays
 On the clear viol of her memory,
 And makes a constant sacrament of praise.

(4.1-16. Stevens 2006: 79)

These lines remind the reader not to be overhasty in characterizing Wallace Stevens as a proponent of philosophical idealism. The expressionist theory of poetry introduced in the opening lines is transformed into an inverted Platonism. The body is not merely ambassador for the soul but is the essential core of the person. However, the flesh is beautiful only as long as a viewer is on hand to appreciate it; thereafter it is whittled down to 'death's ironic scrapings.' The presence of death is part of the enjoyment of art. We are reminded of the line from 'Sunday Morning', which declares that 'death is the mother of beauty.' At the end of the poem, Wallace Stevens reintroduces the image of nightfall as a symbol of impending death. We are told that evenings pass and that all the flowers of the garden are doomed to perish in the winter season. Yet, we cannot forget that a fresh crop will grow out of the withered plants in the spring. New forms of beauty will replace the decaying forms of the past. In asserting these points, Stevens challenges the Romantic representation of beauty or the sublime as being locked in a state of eternal perfection like the choir of 'maidens' whose perfection is frozen as a kind of monument to feminine charm. If a poem might be considered a thing of beauty then this logic would suggest that it must be perpetuated in an ongoing regiment of aesthetic production. The text must be reprinted, re-created and reinterpreted by new readers. A literary work that inspires no feeling in a reader cannot qualify as beautiful object; it is as sterile as sound that provokes no sentiment in a listener.

According to my reading, the final stanza might be taken as another example of the structure of Stevens's poetry mimicking the four seasons. The final lines affirm the necessity of death as a force that drives the cycles of life (depicted in this instance as a 'wave interminably flowing.')

As he attempted to secularize the

concept of divinity in 'Sunday Morning', Stevens's aspiration here is to rescue the concept of beauty from Romantic ideology. In 'Peter Quince at the Clavier' the concept of immortal beauty is undermined by the claim the aesthetic experience is not immortal but an essentially fleeting emotion. A thing of beauty does not last forever but exists only as long as a person is on hand to bring it to life.

In addition to traditional aesthetic and religious notions of transcendence, a third ideal of the sublime can be detected in American nationalism. While I will attempt a thorough ideological critique of Stevens in the next chapter, let us briefly address his poem 'The American Sublime.' In this short piece, he isolates the moment when General Jackson's legacy as an American hero is literally set in stone:

How does one stand
 To behold the sublime,
 To confront the mockers,
 The mickey mockers
 And plated pairs?

When General Jackson
 Posed for his statue
 He knew how one feels.
 Shall a man go barefoot
 blinking and blank?

But how does one feel?
 One grows used to the weather,
 The landscape and that;
 And the sublime comes down
 To the spirit itself,

The spirit and space,
 The empty spirit
 In vacant space.

What wine does one drink?

What bread does one eat?

(1-20. Stevens 2006: 112)

Once again, the sublime is counterbalanced by a bleaker evocation of emptiness and human mortality. Jackson's awareness of his own greatness is presented in an ambivalent way. The speaker is at a loss to describe how one might feel when one becomes part of culture and history. These problems are too large to be decisively answered in this slight riddle of a poem. After briefly sketching the figure of Jackson, the text concludes with an enigmatic question: 'the empty spirit in vacant space. What wine does one drink? What bread does one eat?' These last words imply that the nationalistic concept of transcendence requires an exaggerated form of impersonality. The sublime is epitomized in the image of an empty spirit brought into a vacant place. The invention of an American identity demands the cultivation of a new brand of sublimity with a unique, national inflection. One can find in Whitman, for instance, that the sublime self asserts itself as an overabundance of personality and enthusiasm. Before this stereotype came into being, however, Whitman's mentor Ralph Waldo Emerson had formulated a rather different evocation of the American sublime:

Standing on the bare ground – my head bathed by the blithe air and uplifted into infinite space - all mean egoism vanishes. I become a transparent eyeball; I am nothing, I see all; the currents of the Universal Being circulate through me; I am part or particle of God. The name of the nearest friend sounds then foreign and accidental; to be brothers, to be acquaintance – mast or servant, is then a trifle and a disturbance.

(Emerson 1983: 10)

I do not think this is a prelude to 'Song of Myself' but take it instead as its antithesis. This passage presents the American sublime as an experience that arises through self-annihilation rather than self-aggrandizement. Certainly, if 'The American Sublime' is any indication, one could claim that Stevens is more in line with Emerson's worldview than he is in agreement with Whitman's beliefs. The question becomes a matter of defining how one might achieve this empty state. 'The American Sublime' is an effective poem because it conveys the idea that sublimity can only be achieved at the cost of what Emerson calls 'mean egoism.' The particular subjectivity of the individual must be stripped away before the universal and timeless aspect of the sublime can be understood. One can observe an anti-Romantic streak in Stevens's writing insofar as it recognizes that proper universality can only be attained by moving beyond the singular into a generic perspective.

While this realization may be obvious on many levels, his acceptance of it distinguishes his work from the ethic shared by many of his predecessors who felt that artistic individuality needed to be preserved at all costs. I have argued that the concluding verses of these three poems by Wallace Stevens are intended to portray any human being's experience. It is the transcendence of a personal frame of reference that allows the mind to attain a more universal viewpoint. This progression beyond the self offers much consolation against the fear of death (a fear that can be seen as an important motivation behind many religious, aesthetic and nationalistic ideologies.) Each poem suggests that we might do well to conceive of reality as a cyclical affair that includes death and the forgetting of the self. However, we should ask ourselves whether this conclusion is plausible or, whether we ought to admit that most people are too self-centred to take much solace in this realization. Stevens provides an answer in many of his other poems, which addresses the problem of how an individual perspective might be integrated into a universal vision. Universality of this type, furthermore, is emphatically envisioned as a *human* perspective and not a theoretical stance devoid of emotion and imagination. Since Kant's aesthetics emphasizes

disinterestedness, we can assume that his view of beauty or the sublime is not the attitude that Stevens has in mind. A better comparison might be found in the work of G.W.F. Hegel who argues that the artwork is able to unify two aspects of experience, namely internal, individual self-consciousness and the external world (Hegel 1916: 314-6.) With respect to language use, Hegel writes:

For soul-life, heart, feeling, however self-contained and spiritual they remain, have none the less a bond of affiliation with the sensuous and material, so that they are able also on the outside show of things through the bodily members themselves, through a look, the facial expression, or in a still more spiritual way through the voice tones or a word to disclose the inmost life and existence of Spirit.

(Hegel 1916: 310)

Spoken utterances provide one avenue for the externalization of inner life. Through language, it becomes possible to put one's feelings and perceptions into a shareable form. All language makes imagined objects material to some extent and, through signification, makes singular things appear to be commonplace or relative by representing them with words that are in general circulation. Hegel, for instance, goes beyond semantic choice (the wording of a statement) and considers tonality and facial expressions to be important aspects of effective communication. He claims that the way one utters a phrase reveals a great deal about a person's 'soul-life, heart, feelings.' As a result, these forms of communication enable the subjective spirit to be expressed within intersubjective discourse.

However, Hegel felt that the true function of art is not simply to externalize the inner thoughts and feelings of an individual but ought to tap into and to express a collective-cultural vision (Eldridge 2003: 107.) This conviction leads his understanding of art away from the Kantian and Romantic preoccupation with

individual genius towards an aesthetics that takes the highest purpose of art to be the representation of the values shared by a culture (Eldridge 2003: 108.) Historically speaking, the universal spirit of a community can be said to have been best reflected in a culture's religious artworks – in the chapels, cathedrals, temples and murals that would have been accessible to the ordinary person. In general, religious art is intended as a selfless expression of humanity's dedication to spiritual ideals and not as a reflection of a single artist's consciousness or ability. Hegel postulates a theory of devotional art in the *Phenomenology of Spirit* (1807) that emphasizes devotional art's ability to make individuals feel that they are part of a greater whole without forcing them to relinquish their intrinsic humanity. His theory is most directly explained in a section of *Phenomenology of Spirit* entitled 'The Hymn':

The hymn keeps within it the individuality of self-consciousness, and this individual character is at the same time perceived to be there universal. Devotion, kindled in every one, is a spiritual stream which in all the manifold self-conscious units is conscious of itself as one and the same function in all alike and a simple state of being. Spirit, being this universal self-consciousness of every one, holds in a single unity its pure inwardness as well as its objective existence for others and the independent self-existence of the individual units.

(Hegel 1807: 3)

The devotional work of art manages to preserve both inwardness and universality. The hymn allows the two spirits to be inscribed into harmonious alignment. I would argue that the 'spiritual stream of devotion' theorized by Hegel in this passage resembles the collective consciousness that is represented at the end of 'Sunday Morning.' The devotional artwork attempts to capture the sublimity of God and his creator and to cast an aura of divinity upon the congregation. For Hegel, the hymn is, furthermore, a means of forging a connection between people, a function of art that is sometimes made secondary to the artist's desire to

disturb conventional views. As in the Hegelian concept of national identity, which will be explored at a later point in my argument, the hymn tends to solidify feelings of solidarity within a particular community.

Wallace Stevens most widely quoted adage states that 'after one has abandoned a belief in God, poetry is that essence which takes its place as life's redemption' (Stevens 1966: 158.) This credo implies that his poetry intended to mirror the format of the hymn. In fact, Wallace Stevens was not entirely hostile towards religious institutions despite the unorthodox ideas about God and the afterlife that are voiced in 'Sunday Morning' and elsewhere in his work (Morris 1974: 18.) In a letter to his future wife Elsie Moll, in the March of 1907, Stevens reveals a complex attitude towards Christianity. In this long and affectionate correspondence, he describes his loneliness as he splits time between humdrum legal work and solitude in his small New York apartment. The letter turns to the topic of religion, with Wallace Stevens urging Elsie to join a congregation while at the same time writing 'I am not in the least religious...Churches are human – I say my prayers every night – not that I need them.' (Stevens 1966: 97.) Cast in this light, prayer becomes a superstitious, irrational formality. Nevertheless, I would associate the young Stevens's defense of the church with his persistent efforts not to allow his breeding to turn him into a dry intellectual. In this respect, it seems that he recognized that hymns were a way for the sublime to be part of daily life. His letter states:

There are other things in life besides the Truth upon which everybody of any experience agrees, while not two people agree about the Truth. I'd rather see you going to church than know that you were as wise as Plato and Haeckel rolled into one; and I'd rather sing some old chestnut out of the hymn-book with you, surrounded by 'stupid' people than listen to all the wise men in the world.

(Stevens 1966: 95 -97)

Stevens's somewhat nostalgic attitude towards Christianity may well have had something to do with his bourgeois upbringing. Elsie Moll belonged to a somewhat lower station and, if this letter is any indication, probably had a less light-hearted perception of the church. Stevens may not have taken Christian theology seriously in 1907 (if he ever did subscribe to it) but he writes, with palpable sincerity, that the church makes 'a man into a man' (Stevens 1966: 96.) Stevens makes it clear that he sees value in the church not in spite of the 'stupid' people that attend services but because of them - he hopes that the parish might offer him succour from the usual company of businessmen. The compound force of these biographical details suggests that Stevens, despite his astute understanding of religion's failings, was willing to idealize the religious experience to some extent, especially its capacity to bring people together. He praised the benefits of religion while insisting that the church itself was nothing more than a human institution. Stevens shows affection for religious doctrine despite his lack of belief in the existence of God. His unusual ability to believe in something despite accepting that it is not true will be fleshed out when we come to discuss his theory of Supreme Fiction in the next chapter. We should bear in mind that the letter was written when he was still a young bachelor, a great length of time before he would publish any significant literary works. Stevens's thoughts on religion - which awkwardly combine a bohemian disregard for Truth and a conservative trust in the power of the church to 'make a man' - are related to an especially intimate correspondent in an obviously confidential tone. Though his opinion on religious matters would surely undergo alteration over the next fifty or so years of his life, it is clear that his poetry would continue to draw inspiration from the model of devotional art.

Against my argument, the 'us' spoken of at the culmination of 'Sunday Morning' could just as easily be read as a rather unremarkable use of the first-person plural. In this case, we would have nothing more than example of someone speaking on behalf of others and would not constitute any advance on Walt Whitman's sublime 'I.' Throughout this essay, I have argued that Stevens differentiates himself from the

general ideologies of Romantic and Modernist poetry by either undermining or suppressing the primacy of the personal viewpoint. It is true that most Modernist and Romantic poetry tells us more about the poetic speaker as it does about its subject-matter. Against the grain, Stevens seems to assert that good poetry adheres to nothing more than to total reality and that this 'reality' is comprised of both mental and physical content. Poetry is not the province only of creative geniuses but should be seen as an epiphenomenon that arises naturally out of human life. Fredric Jameson is correct to emphasize that Stevens did not see himself as an outsider. He apparently did not think that activism or social commentary (in a narrow sense) was the primary function of art. In addition, he did not apparently see poetry as a defence against modern life but as a process of renewing and refreshing everyday existence.

Wallace Stevens was not explicitly antagonistic towards the commercial sphere nor did he attempt to challenge mainstream societal values. Nevertheless, as we saw in these three poems, he was interested in how one might reformulate our beliefs and traditions. Much of his work asserts the idea that poetry might become a more important aspect of human life in the future, eventually occupying some of the traditional territory of religion and philosophy. As suggested in the introduction, it is my opinion that Stevens's artistic values fit more comfortably with the cultural ethos of the second half of the century than the first. Fredric Jameson intimates that we might better contextualize his work within the intellectual climate of the 1960s (Jameson 2007a: 222.) The characterization of the poet can be paralleled with Jameson's description of the intellectual post-individualism of this era. In an essay entitled 'Postmodernism and Consumer Society' Jameson puts forward the following argument:

Today from any number of distinct perspectives, the social theorists, the psychoanalysts, even the linguists, not to speak of those of us who work in the area of culture and cultural and formal change, are all exploring the notion that that kind of individualism and personal identity is a thing

of the past; that the old individual or individualist subject is 'dead'; and that one might even describe the concept of the unique individual and the theoretical basis of individualism as ideological.

(Jameson 2008: 545)

Following on from this claim, I would argue that Stevens's 'chameleonic' or 'de-individualized' sublime has supplanted older tropes of transcendences that were once dominant in art and thought. The logic that would associate Wallace Stevens simultaneously with Romanticism and post-modernism can be justified once we understand precisely how post-modernism has reacted against the central tenets of Modernism. John McGowan outlines one important point of correspondence between the ideals of Romantic and post-modern artists in his book *Postmodernism and its Critics*:

Postmodernism revives the early romantic vision of a unified world but experienced this time as a frightening reality...The Western world has achieved what the high romantics wished for: a monolithic world in which everything is subsumed under a universal principle. But this monolith is capitalism itself, utterly triumphant in the West and almost completely triumphant (through economic imperialism) throughout the rest of the world. Within this monolith, wilful Modernist self-exclusion, the claim to stand aside, is only a delusion; the postmodernist insists that everything is included, that nothing can achieve autonomy or distance in which the modernist found their last defence against all-encompassing capitalism.

(McGowan 1991: 13)

McGowan rightly notes that the universal principle provided by capitalism is probably not what the Romantics had in mind when they venerated uniting forces in the form of God, Nature, the Self, beauty,

the Imagination or in national spirit. As we shall see in the following section, global capitalism is something explicitly different from these traditional artistic values. Since we will draw on broader contexts in the next chapter, let us retain our focus on artistic ideology for the time being. The veneration of God or Nature led to a type of devotional art characteristic of some strains of Romanticism. The assertion of the self as a sublime principle in Whitman brought the public (other people's lives) into the private domain (other people are subsumed into the Real Me.) The question then arises: what kind of art would exemplify the theme of capitalism as an all-powerful, inescapable and unifying force? The most obvious example of this aesthetic would be Andy Warhol's 'pop art' movement, which stressed a view of the artwork as a mass-produced, recyclable commodity.

It is unsurprising that Jameson's description of post-modern art resembles his critique of Wallace Stevens's poetics in certain respects. In a separate chapter of 'The Modernist Papers', Jameson describes Andy Warhol's famous paintings with the following description: 'Digression, on the brushstroke, the very fingerprint of private style, of the unique and incomparable individuality of the modern "genius." No wonder a post-individualistic art like Warhol's paints it out, not merely for the purpose of mass reproduction...but above all as a sign that the individual subjectivity is irrelevant, that we are now beyond all that, somewhere else' (Jameson 2007b: 256.) Perhaps the post-modern subject is 'somewhere else' but, nevertheless, the ideology of post-individualism seems to be closer to the Emersonian image of the transparent eyeball than to Whitman's 'Real Me.' It cannot escape attention that Jameson's comments concerning pop art are remarkably similar to his evaluation of Wallace Stevens. An aesthetic of anonymity exemplifies the passing of modern art into a new period where personal genius and technique are of lesser importance.

In attempting to determine the role of the artist in Stevens's poetry, I am reminded of the last lines of 'Men Made out of Words': 'the whole race is a poet that writes down / the eccentric propositions of its fate' (9-10. Stevens 2006: 310.) This sentence might be taken as saying that the poet's words show us the destiny of humankind. While the poet is equated with 'the whole race', his propositions are described as 'eccentric.' Thus, humanity as whole is not simply an intellectual construct but a constantly regenerating collective that is no less partial to idiosyncrasies and failings than is the individual. The poet is equivalent to the whole of humanity. In the final part of this essay, I would like to evaluate Jameson's claim that Stevens's innovative conception of poetry represents the birth of a new discourse. This task will serve as a conclusion to my argument, which has so far focused on Stevens's aesthetic, his favoured thematic content and the various ways he has been understood by his critics. I have suggested that, while studying Stevens in terms of his affinities with American Modernism, French Symbolism or Romanticism will clearly yield fruitful interpretations, to insist that any of these juxtapositions offer a fully conclusive portrayal of his own poetry would be to suppress an array of equally valid readings that could be realized. The first three chapters of this paper have allowed us to develop a sharper understanding of Stevens, his poetry and its reception. My aim in the ensuing section is to carry these ideas forward whilst paying greater attention to more recent interpretations of the poet and his work.

CHAPTER FOUR: PHILOSOPHY AND IDEOLOGY IN WALLACE STEVENS.

In my loneliness
 From my humble home gone forth.
 When I looked around,
 Everywhere it was the same:
 One lone, darkening autumn eve.

- Ryozen Hoshi¹⁸

In order to situate Wallace Stevens's poetry within the context of modern literature, we must acknowledge his absorption of influences and account for his ongoing relevance to the contemporary intellectual milieu. We have accomplished the first part of this task to some extent through detailed comparisons with the French Symbolists and American Romantics. The next step in this process must be to consider his achievement in relation to the emergence of post-modern thought. In the previous sections, I have indicated the broad spectrum of critical opinions and presented a general account of how these perceptions have changed over the years. As we saw in the introduction, the first wave of reviewers tended to focus on poetic style rather than theoretical issues. On the other hand, Fredric Jameson has suggested that the idea of Stevens as a theoretician of poetry is central to later criticism of his work. (Jameson 2007a: 208.) Following the emergence of 'Critical Theory' in the 1960s, literary critics began to contrast the theories advanced in his writing with the ideas espoused by latter day intellectual movements such as Existentialism, Structuralism and Deconstruction. Since Wallace Stevens did not live long enough to become familiar with most of the main theorists of these movements, the drawing of parallels in this case is a matter of locating similar themes in their work. That said, his poetry is likely to strike one as being metaphysical or contemplative in tone. A reader will typically find herself vacillating between casual

enjoyment and the desire to engage intellectually with the theories that are articulated in the poems. Although his strongest pieces may be able to elicit a balanced mixture of aesthetic pleasure and theoretical contemplation, there have been many critics who admire Wallace Stevens's poetics while decrying what they consider a penchant for amateur philosophizing. If recent critics can take issue with the early reviewers for their tendency to separate form from meaning to an excessive degree, one might point out that an excessively literal account of his work is apt to miss a large part of what makes it worth reading.

Stevens's poems are filled with elaborate wordplay, ambiguity and parody. Readings that prioritize content over form may fail to appreciate the polysemous nature of his poetry. This method leads to several problematic assumptions: firstly, that the ideas asserted in one poem are consistent with claims made elsewhere in his writing. Secondly, his statements are invested with an analytical character that is devoid of irony or playfulness. We must not forget that Stevens was under no obligation to formulate a practical system of philosophy. An advantage of his writing might be that he creates memorable and powerful expressions of ideas that are, in fact, more rigorously established and defended elsewhere in orthodox philosophy. Up to this point in the argument, I have avoided making excessive references to modern philosophical thought. In this chapter, I will explicate the connections that can be drawn between Stevens's theoretical notions and contemporary aesthetic, intellectual and political views.

The Wallace Stevens 'boom' experienced in the nineteen forties and fifties brought a neglected writer to the forefront of the American Modernist canon. Nonetheless, his poetry always had a small but committed following. His original critics have, on occasion, taken issue with the way his poetry has been portrayed in later reviews and academic studies. Elder Olson, for example, makes the following complaint: 'the startling transformation of a good poet into a bad philosopher suggests that criticism has gone off the rails

somewhere' (Olson 1955: 191.) Olson wrote these words in 1955, the year of Wallace Stevens's death. At that moment in time, perhaps, this opinion would have amounted to common sense. The poet's theoretical assertions would have amounted to 'bad' philosophy given their lack of rigor, clarity and consistency. Even at a time when Existentialism was coming into fashion, literature and philosophy were thought of as distinct disciplines with incompatible goals, methods, standards and principles. Olson chastises critics who he feels have emphasized the wrong aspects of the poetry. He makes these arguments, no doubt, out of a desire to protect Stevens's legacy as a writer. However, we cannot forget that a reader must inevitably encounter both the 'good poet' and 'the bad philosopher' when reading the poems. Even if it were still possible to separate these two personas, the arrival of a new conceptual paradigm in the form of cultural theory was to challenge preconceived ideas of what constitutes either good poetry or bad philosophy.

Over time, it has become increasingly common for critics to discuss poetry in terms of how the literary text coincides with philosophical or political ideologies. Throughout my argument, I have suggested that Stevens's poetry addresses reality in an imaginative manner without imprisoning it within the life of an individual. In a host of academic studies over the years, the metaphysical slant to his work has been compared with a wide variety of intellectual movements such as phenomenology, Existentialism or with the thought of German thinkers such as Hegel, Marx, Friedrich Nietzsche and Ludwig Wittgenstein. In literary terms, parallels have been drawn between Stevens and the French Symbolist Movement, Surrealism, Imagism, as well as English and American Romanticism. These references make it difficult to argue that Stevens's poetry was entirely original or that his thoughts were unprecedented. On the other hand, these alleged correspondences are not only extremely diverse but seem, in many cases, to cancel each other out (could one writer possibly be an Existentialist-Symbolic-Empiricist?) The variety of influences evoked in criticism ought to dissuade one from hastily applying reductive labels to his writing.

We have already discussed several of these literary comparisons in detail. In this chapter I hope to say a little more on the theoretical side to Wallace Stevens's writing. In 'Exoticism and Structuralism in Wallace Stevens', Fredric Jameson argues that an appreciation of Stevens as a 'supreme theoretician of literary discourse' has already begun to usurp the once popular evaluation of his work as the high watermark of Modernist aesthetics (Jameson 2007a: 208.) Yet, Jameson is careful not to exaggerate this point: 'the preliminary remarks on Stevens should not overhastily, in our present historicist and historicizing contexts, be taken as criticisms, not even yet an ideological critique of Stevens work (we do not even yet, for one thing, know what it is or does in that framework)' (Jameson 2007a: 210.)

This amounts to the admission that we still lack the adequate framework through which we might mount a decisive ideological or historicist critique of Stevens. Certain critics evoke older frameworks as a way of explaining how a text can be fiction and philosophy at the same time. For example, in a short paper titled 'How to do Things with Wallace Stevens', Frank Lentricchia points out that the anecdotal text has long acted as a hybrid of literary and philosophical discourse. (Lentricchia 2003: 141.) Lentricchia states that, insofar as 'Anecdote of the Jar' is biographical at all, it is the life story of the jar rather than the anonymous speaker (Lentricchia 2003: 139.) Hinting that the poetry may be altogether more relevant to social practice than was previously acknowledged, Lentricchia defines the anecdote as 'a social form which instigates cultural memory, the act of narrative renewal, the reinstatement of social cohesion' (Lentricchia 2003: 136-7.) Lentricchia builds towards an understanding of anecdotal writing that brings together many of the various theoretical strains that will be explored in this chapter:

The 'I' who does the initial act of placing gets lost after the first line. The human actor becomes a panoramic onlooker, a distant voice, an innocent bystander: the jar takes on, somehow, an intentional life of its own: "I placed" but "It made" and "It took" and "It did not give." The jar did it.

The Formalist critic, forced to talk about content, and Stevens's form gives him no choice, will quickly move to the humanist's favorite sort of generalization. Human action will be essentialized: with all the specific determinants of history drained off, the activity of jar placing becomes an archetypal human act.

(Lentricchia 2003: 140)

Lentricchia warns us that, in our attempts to understand the poem we risk falling into the habitual patterns of thinking that dominate our era. Stevens mixed the format of the anecdote with the religious parable (Morris 1974: 23) aiming to articulate ideas that could be translated into as many different situations as possible without the fundamental lesson being lost. These poems convey anecdotal evidence rather than factual truth. Parables and anecdotes are defined by their ability to successfully convey ideas regardless of when and where they are read. Unlike most literary works, which have an expiration date of some kind (a play, novel or poetry collection typically enjoys a period of intense relevance before it fades into the periphery) a successful anecdote must constantly renew itself in cultural memory. While Frank Lentricchia's remarks pertain exclusively to the poems written by Stevens which can be identified as anecdotes, his particular concept of the anecdote (understood as a kind of amoral and secular parable) seems to embody the general objectives and procedures used in his poetry. His anecdotal poems are didactic in a limited sense; they do not aim to teach the reader a moral lesson but to demonstrate different perspectives that might be taken with respect to reality.

What we have thus far referred to as his 'aesthetic' can be thought of as the cumulative effect of a handful of typifying, stylistic traits. Through close reading, we have identified recurring features such as the adoption of the impersonal viewpoint, the cyclical movements between the concrete singular to the abstract universal and the idealized 'supreme' vision of reality posited as a harmony of reality and the

imagination. In general, we have found that Stevens displays a marked tendency to de-emphasize the 'I' that dominates the Western lyric in favour of a theoretical 'one' or 'we.' Even when an 'I' is deployed, its attention is directed towards the external world and is not allowed to disclose private content. We are never directly informed of the poet's feelings towards other people, his memories or neuroses. Emotion and internal experience are preserved in his writing but they appear as general content that is shared by all human beings. It is not difficult to list the elements that reappear with greatest frequency in *The Collected Poems*: the colour green, the sun and moon, the seasons and so on. Each of these details can be discovered on a purely grammatical level even before one draws attention their appearance as themes or motifs. Everything that appears in Stevens's poetry (including historical figures and place names) is suspended in a peculiarly abstract space where material objects are slowly loosened from their empirical scaffolding.

One eventually reaches a point where stylistic observations open up avenues of discussion more suited to academic philosophy than to literary criticism. One must, at this point, decide whether or not to follow upon on the theoretical premises that are introduced in the poems. When trying to supply even the slightest measure of context for his ideas, it often becomes necessary to highlight the connections that might be made between his claims and philosophical concepts. Stevens seemed to realize that his theorems would not be read in isolation and states in one of the *adagio* that 'the exposition of a theory of poetry involves a comparison with other theories and the analysis of all' (Stevens 1957: 163.) His work benefits from being read alongside philosophical treatises. In our analysis of 'Sunday Morning', for example, it became apparent that our reading could be enriched through reference not only to its literary predecessors but also to the ideas of German philosophers such as Immanuel Kant and G.W.F. Hegel.

The discussion of these major philosophers is not and cannot be intended as a thorough explication of their work. I will quote certain passages in order to develop an adequate picture of the common principles shared between various systems of thought (Phenomenology, Hegelianism, Psychoanalysis and political liberalism) that have over the past century become central to what we might call 'Theory' or 'postmodern thought.' Although I will quote from these thinkers without distorting the original meaning of these passages as they appeared in their intended context, I wish to make it clear that my use of these quotations at this point is intended not as a means to evaluate or even examine these intellectual movements. On the contrary, my drawing of comparisons is not intended to shed light on these theoretical texts at all. My aim is rather to utilize them as a way of isolating a general sentiment that I feel is central to the aesthetic, political and philosophical thinking of the postmodern era. Ultimately, my belief is that this sentiment – which is given the rather radical title of 'post-individualism' by Fredric Jameson – can account for the growing significance of Wallace Stevens's achievement over the last forty years, As Frank Lentricchia's account shows, Wallace Stevens's work can be thought of as a hybrid genre where traditional poetry is mixed with religious and philosophical texts. In order to determine the nature of Stevens's own intellectual framework, we might start with his theory of language, which can in part be surmised from his essay 'The Noble Rider and the Sound of Words' (1941):

Take the statement by Bateson that a language, considered semantically, evolves through a series of conflicts between the denotative and the connotative forces in words: between an asceticism tending to kill language by stripping words of all association and a hedonism tending to kill language by dissipating their sense in a multiplicity of associations. These conflicts are nothing more than changes in the relation between the imagination and reality... we are speaking, on the one hand, of a failure of the imagination to adhere to reality, and on the other hand, of a use of language favourable to reality. (Stevens 1957: 259)

In this paragraph, Wallace Stevens argues that Bateson's distinction between the denotative and connotative functions of language is really an extension of a deeper metaphysical tension. While language is always both denotative and connotative to some extent, a specific text might be weighted towards one function over the other. The French Symbolists, for instance, relied on a style of insinuation instead of exactitude. They employ a 'hedonist' style of poetry that ignores the primacy of the real. They are summer poets who will never feel the cold. On the other end of the scale, the 'Objectivist' poets (such as William Carlos Williams, Marianne Moore or Ezra Pound) can be said to epitomize the frosty, 'asceticism' that he associates with denotation. As we saw in our analysis of the 'The Snow Man' neither of these extremes appeal to Stevens's sensibilities given that they fail to strike a balance between objectivity and the imagination. The symbolic language of his own poetry (exemplified in 'Thirteen Ways of looking at a Blackbird') prefers to equate ideas with perceptions

As far as Stevens's poetry is concerned, it is vital that one learn to 'see' ideas in the appearance of things rather than to construe or impose them. Perhaps it is for this reason that several commentators, including the British philosopher Simon Critchley, have argued that the epistemology of Edmund Husserl's Phenomenology overlaps with the theoretical underpinnings of this approach to poetic language. Critchley writes: 'Stevens's working assumption, which he owes once again to Romanticism, is that the 'two-in-oneness' of the world is phenomenologically disclosed or reflexively transfigured as a world not in philosophy but through a poetic act, that is to say in an artwork' (Critchley 2005: 20.) As a distinctive perspective that might be taken towards reality, Phenomenology provides a practical method through which one can discover for oneself the universal structures (*eidōs*) that serve as preconditions for conscious experience. This is the great virtue of the second stage of Edmund Husserl's philosophical system as outlined by Terry Eagleton:

Phenomenology varies each object in imagination until it finds what is invariable about it. What is presented to phenomenological knowledge is not just say, the experience of jealousy or of the colour red, but the universal types or essences of these things, jealousy or redness as such. To grasp any phenomenon wholly and purely is to grasp what is essential and unchanging about it.

(Eagleton 1996: 48)

From this standpoint, Wallace Stevens's aesthetic reconciliation of the imagination and reality runs roughly in accordance with the general aims of Husserl's philosophy. Husserl theorized that a thinker must exclude or 'bracket off' all supposed knowledge of reality aside from what is learnt through personal experience. This is the phenomenological reduction through which, Husserl maintains, a thinker can discover essential meaning. The alleged affinity between Stevens and Phenomenology is discussed in greater depth in a paper entitled 'The Vocations of Reason: Wallace Stevens and Edmund Husserl' by Jonathan B. Imber. Like Critchley, Imber ascribes a kinship of spirit between the two figures:

Typically poetry is thought to transform the ordinary meanings of words and everyday life. Philosophy on the other hand, aims to know that life, ordinary and extraordinary, with as great a certainty as possible. For Wallace Stevens and Edmund Husserl the 'supreme fiction' and the 'apodictic' were elements of faith in their pursuits of truth in post-religious western culture.

(Imber 1986: 3)

Jonathan Imber casts Wallace Stevens's work as being (amongst other things) a translation of philosophical thinking into poetic discourse. He draws heavily on Stevens's lecture 'A Collection of Philosophy.' In the lecture, the poet argues that philosophy constitutes an 'official' view of being while

literature provides the 'unofficial' view' (Stevens 1957: 182.) In other words, he defines both philosophy and poetry as mediums for ontological clarification. Whilst certain philosophical notions may qualify as poetic ideas, Stevens argued that most philosophers tend to state their theories in a dull, mechanistic fashion rather than garnering a sympathetic, human response. Gottfried Leibniz's monadology, for example, is admired by Stevens as a 'poetic idea' but he is critical of the way that it is expressed in his work. Leibniz is said to be a 'poet without flash', a thinker with important insights who fails to endow them with sufficient vitality (Stevens 1957: 185.) While readers might be intellectually convinced by the philosopher's views, his theories are unlikely to change their worldviews. Even a minor, cultish religion will tend to have more 'flash' than the average philosophical doctrine. Accordingly, religion often has a powerful effect on how its disciplines actually experience the world. In contrast to these limitations of philosophy, Wallace Stevens's believes that traditional faith in ideals of god, the sublime self, beauty or nationhood must be replaced with a belief in what he calls the 'supreme fiction.'

The reader of creative writing must treat the author's words as pretending to pertain to reality rather than as statements that directly correspond with the actual world. In common parlance, this state of mind is called the 'suspension of disbelief' but I find this clichéd expression grossly misleading. The experience of supreme fiction merely requires the intensification of a different order of belief. As Stevens puts it, 'the final belief is to believe in a fiction, which you know to be a fiction, there being nothing else. The exquisite truth is to know that it is a fiction and that you believe in it willingly' (Stevens 1957: 163.) It follows that all ideologies whether they be personal, philosophical, religious or political can be thought of as fictions that one might decide to believe in even though they are not 'true' in any respect. Poetry has the potential to be superior to other belief systems since the poet and the reader, unlike the nationalist or the religious zealot, are usually more acutely aware that their beliefs are fabricated in certain respects. These beliefs are therefore not taken to be the recognition of objective truths.

Philosophy takes itself to be the 'official' view of being simply because the average philosopher refuses to accept that his or her theories are constructions. In this respect, Jonathan Imber is right to claim that Stevens and Husserl shared certain principles. Husserl wanted Phenomenology to retain a flash of intuitive understanding while remaining within the Cartesian framework. From the start, Phenomenology concerns itself with a thinker's beliefs about reality without judging whether they are true. What is important for Phenomenological Description is merely that the subject experiences something as true, irrespective of whether it is or not. At the basic level of Phenomenological research, subjective and empirical facts are afforded equal status. Nevertheless, I think one can say that Wallace Stevens's poetry transcends the disciplinary boundaries of Phenomenology. I believe this dynamic is evident in 'Theory', a noteworthy short poem from *Harmonium*:

I am what is around me.

Women understand this.

One is not duchess

A hundred yards from a carriage.

These, then are portraits:

A black vestibule;

A high bed sheltered by curtains.

These are merely instances.

(1-8. Stevens 2006: 75)

Written prior to the 1920s, 'Theory' predates Martin Heidegger's major works and the emergence of French Existentialism.¹⁹ The poem suggests that we might think of a carriage as a portrait of a duchess, a

bed as a portrait of the person who sleeps in it. These examples illustrate the basic unities that underlie dichotomies of figure and ground. Inside a carriage, a woman becomes a duchess but outside of it, she ceases to experience herself in this way. In this case, the word 'women' proves to be a more essential, invariable and transcendental concept whereas the word 'duchess' is conditional and context-specific. This opens up further comparison between decreation (as we have understood it so far) and the Phenomenological program of reduction and abstraction. As with eidetic reduction, Stevens wants to illuminate generic aspects of experience. On the other hand, his writing cannot be defined as Phenomenological description in the stricter sense because he too often undermines first-person viewpoint by adopting either a pluralistic or impersonal perspective. Whenever a poem expresses itself through a 'we' or a 'one' rather than an 'I', it effectively opens the brackets that are necessary for Phenomenological research. The objects described in the poem are deemed to be 'mere instances' for they express only the finite truth of particular moments for particular subjects. A deeper engagement with reality will become impossible for us unless we find a means to elevate ourselves above the personal perspective.

For this reason, I consider 'Theory' to be an expression of nondualism. It is an example of how Stevens was willing to move beyond the traditional epistemological models that separate human consciousness from the world. In this example, as in Heidegger's philosophy the human being is perceived as a 'Being-with' (Eagleton 1996: 54.) The duchess and her props have mutually dependent identities. Moreover, experience is portrayed as a situation rather than as content in a subject's mind. However, the poem suggests that to focus on the details of life experience is to remain fixated on insignificant trifles.

Decreation is based on the notion that one must develop a sight that does not stop at 'mere living' but finds ways to perceive the first ideas that are hidden in 'mere instances.'

A version of this theory is put across by the French Phenomenologist Maurice Merleau-Ponty in his groundbreaking 'Phenomenology of Perception.' Merleau-Ponty writes that 'in the silence of primary consciousness, there can be said to appear not only what words mean, but also what things mean: the core of primary meaning round which the acts of naming and expression take shape' (Merleau-Ponty 2005: xvii.) His argument is that (prior to any linguistic articulation or sub-vocalization) things appear in sight as already possessing meanings. When we come to formulate our thoughts in language, the associations that we attach to things are made explicit and communicable. Thus, in addition to 'symbolic language', Merleau-Ponty posits a kind of symbolic sight which perceives things in terms of their relationship with other objects and with abstract ideas. As in Emerson's view of language (cited in chapter two) Maurice Merleau-Ponty states that it is perception as well as language that transforms objects into symbols. Language merely concretizes what is already disclosed through immediate experience. Phenomenology subscribes to the sentiment that we must become what Stevens calls the 'ignorant man', the seer who can perceive the first idea (the *eidos*) hidden behind particular, personalized instances. For Merleau-Ponty, the first idea or essential significance of something can only be discovered when one acknowledges one's own anonymity. He arrives at a theory of anonymity that runs concurrent with Stevens's impersonal aesthetic. The following passage can be found towards the end of Maurice Merleau-Ponty's book, in a chapter entitled 'Freedom':

My life must have a significance which I do not constitute; there must strictly speaking be an inter-subjectivity; each of us must be anonymous in the sense of absolute individual, and anonymous in the sense of absolutely general. Our being in the world, is the concrete bearer of this double anonymity. Provided that this is so there can be situations, a direction of history, and a historical truth: three ways of saying the same thing.

(Merleau-Ponty 2005: 521)

For Merleau-Ponty, existence is fundamentally a double-sided affair. All of us exist both as individuals and as generic types. One half of a person's self-consciousness is informed by her view of herself as a completely unique individual and as the other is constituted by the experience of being an interchangeable 'one' of a crowd. Merleau-Ponty grounds all of our ability to discover anything of 'significance' in this dual anonymity. His concept of double anonymity becomes a pre-condition for intersubjective communication. Like the process of decreation in Stevens, the essential virtue of eidetic reduction is to make one more aware of the basic commonality between things. Merleau-Ponty's account is clearly indebted to Marxism and Phenomenology, both of which depart from the Cartesian understanding of the subject-object relationship. In a moment, we will explicate the Hegelian theory of the double-sided nature of the human character. Thereafter, we will find the same theme (expressed slightly differently) in psychoanalysis and in contemporary political theory.

However, another interesting comparison that might be made is how closely Merleau-Ponty's phenomenological and Marxist perspective comes to resemble a mystical outlook. I am thinking in particular of a passage in Martin Buber's famous work 'I and Thou (1923), a landmark text in latter day Jewish theology. Buber depicts the human condition as involving a constant compromise between the sense of 'I as a person' (a sense based on shared experience and what Buber calls 'reality') and the notion of 'I as an individual' which he equates with 'unreality' and with the need to differentiate oneself from others (Buber 2008: 52.) He states:

There are not two kinds of man but two poles of humanity. No man is pure person and no man pure individuality. None is wholly real and none wholly unreal. Every man lives in the twofold /. But there are men so defined by person that they may be called persons and men so defined by individuality that they may be called individuals. True history is decided in the field between these

two poles. The more a man, humanity, is mastered by individuality, the deeper does the / sink into unreality. In such times the person in man and in humanity leads a subterranean and as it were cancelled existence – till it is recalled.

(Buber 2008: 53)

Needless to say, this description of the conflict between individualism and social cohesion goes to the heart of much of twentieth-century philosophy. I have suggested that the same dynamic is a central element in Stevens's poetry. Buber associates reality with personhood and unreality with individualism and this attitude can be compared with Wallace Stevens's claim that language involves a conflict between reality and the imagination. His poetry, especially the late verses, is generally more concerned with what Buber calls the 'person' than with the individual. The chief difference between the two writers lies in the fact that Buber intends to propose a religious vision while Stevens saw poetry as a secular art form that he felt would ultimately replace traditional theistic devotion.

Similarly, there are several obvious parallels can be construed between Martin Buber's ideas stated above and Merleau-Ponty's theory of double-anonymity, though one must be careful not to assume that their philosophies are entirely compatible. Unlike Buber or Stevens, Merleau-Ponty does not link individualism with unreality or the imagination nor does he see personhood as necessarily involving the acceptance of a shared reality. The main point where the two views coincide is in the idea that both individualism and universality are present in the human situation. While Buber projects a vision of history based on the eternal vacillation between two extremes, Merleau-Pontry claims that a subject can only understand the significance of life by acknowledging the singularity and the commonplaceness of his or her existence. Outside of devotional worship, the concept of nationality is intended to enable a spirit of oneness to develop within a community of separate individuals.

For a fuller account of how the universal will might come to exist in the political sphere, let us consider GWF Hegel's Jena Lectures of 1805. Our quotation from this lecture concerns social organization rather than religion or art but the relevance of this quotation with respect to the passages referenced in the previous chapter should become quickly apparent. Hegel makes it clear that communal spirit (what Hegel speaks of in terms of 'universal will') has a particular cost:

The universal will (DER ALLGEMEINE WILLEN) is the will as that of all and each, but as will it is simply this Self alone. The activity of the universal is a unity (EM EINS). The universal will has to gather itself into this unity. It has first to constitute itself as a universal will, out of the will of individuals, so that this appears as the principle and element. Yet on the other hand the universal will is primary and the essence – and individuals have to make themselves into the universal will through the negation of their own will, in externalization and cultivation. The universal will is prior to them, it is absolutely THERE for them – they [the two wills] are in no way immediately the same.

(Hegel 1806: 2)

As in Merleau-Ponty's account, *der allgemeine Willen* must be conceived of in two ways. On the one hand, we have a unity that precedes the individual and on the other, Hegel describes a unity that must be produced through the practice of self-negation. In order to incorporate oneself into the universal human 'We' one must first undergo 'self-surrender' (note how the surrendered subject comes to resemble the receptive and 'empty spirit' of 'The American Sublime' as well as Emerson's image of the transparent eyeball.) The universal will is not only the 'first idea' of humanity that underlies and is essential to individual consciousness but it is, furthermore, the culmination of human philosophical and religious thinking. Hegel presents universal will as being humanity's past and its present - it is both our origin and

our final destination. In the next part of the lecture, Hegel admits that human beings are typically unwilling to relinquish their individuality. He concedes that, historically speaking, political solidarity has not been brought about through democracy but through the feats of great men who successfully compel others to follow them (Hegel 1806: 2.)

In making this concession, Hegel shows that he does hold an excessively optimistic theory of political organization. One simply has to read a piece of Modernist literature to realize that 'self-negation' can be seen as mindless conformity. We can think of a subject that has surrendered its individuality as having chosen not to preserve its personhood against the demands of society. It has relinquished the egocentric conception of itself as a pure singularity in return for integration into the social whole. In addition to being a product of political unity and self-negation, however, Hegel asserts that the universal will is also our primordial nature: 'the universal will is prior to them, it is absolutely THERE for them – they [the two wills] are in no way immediately the same.' The process of self-surrender, therefore, might be understood as similar movement to Stevens's poetic theory of decreation. It enables the recovery of an earlier state of being prior to the emergence of individualism, a state of nature where a harmonious unity was felt to exist between human beings and the world.

In the classic 'Civilization and its Discontents', Sigmund Freud suggests that one can discover a subjective state in 'certain men' that might grow into religious spirit (Freud 1930: 8.) Freud claims that this state is experienced as a peculiar 'feeling of indissoluble connection, of belonging inseparably to the external world as a whole.' Although Freud claims to have never personally felt this sensation, he admits that he 'cannot on that account deny that it in fact occurs in other people. One can only wonder whether it has been correctly interpreted and whether it is entitled to be acknowledged as the *fons et origo* of the whole need for religion' (Freud 1930: 9.) Freud does not refer to this feeling as the 'sublime' but instead

refers to it as 'the oceanic.' The essay begins with an analysis of this emotion, which Freud attributes to his unnamed friend:

A peculiar feeling, which never leaves him personally, which he finds shared by many others, and which he may suppose millions more also experience. It is a feeling which he would like to call a sensation of 'eternity', a feeling of something limitless, unbounded, something 'oceanic.' It is, he says, a purely subjective experience, not an article of belief; it implies no assurance of personal immortality, but it is taken hold of by the various Churches and religious systems, directed by them into definite channels and also, no doubt used up in them. One may rightly call oneself religious on the ground of this oceanic feeling alone, even though one rejects all beliefs and all illusions.

(Freud 1930: 8)

All religions provide a way of directing, deferring or subjugating the oceanic feeling. Freud goes on to depict the religious spirit as a state in which the boundaries between ego and object, internal and external become unclear. He compares this feeling with love, which he classifies as a heightened, pathological state: 'against all the evidence of his sense the man in love declares that he and his beloved are one, and is prepared to behave as if it were a fact' (Freud 1930: 10-11.) As was his habit, Freud takes a scientific approach to these phenomena, portraying both love and the oceanic feeling as infantile sentiments that originate in immature states of ego development. He writes "it is more correct to say: originally the ego includes everything, later it detaches itself from the external world. The ego-feeling we are aware of now is thus only a shrunken vestige of a far more extensive feeling- a feeling which embraced the universe and expressed an inseparable connection of the ego with the external world" (Freud 1930: 13.) Freud hypothesizes that this desire, when it exists in an individual, can never vanish completely. It remains in a

repressed form even as the adult begins to orientate his or behaviour around egotistical wants, aversions and principles. He avers that there is a connection between this desire for unity and the experiences of early childhood (an association that we have already noted is fundamental to the sublime in William Wordsworth's poetry.) As with the Hegelian notion of universal will, the 'oceanic feeling' is not only a drive towards religious transcendence, it can be understood as one of the underlying psychological motivations behind contemporary ideologies like global cosmopolitanism.

Wallace Stevens's elevation of poetry to the position of 'Supreme Fiction' could be seen as an attempt to fill the vacant ideological space left by the decline of traditional sources of spirituality in the early twentieth century. In one essay, for example, he writes: 'to see the Gods dispelled in mid-air, and dissolve like clouds, is one of the great human experiences...Since we have always shared all things with them and have always had a part of their strength and certainly all of their knowledge, we likewise shared this experience of annihilation' (Stevens 1957: 207.) In a continuation of this thought, he goes on to claim that the withdrawal of the gods 'left us feeling disposed and alone in solitude like children without parents in a home that seemed deserted' (Stevens 1957: 207.) He perceives the rise of atheism in the modern world as a type of abandonment complex. Speaking in the now familiar first-person plural, the slow decline of religion is depicted as a universal experience – as universal, at any rate, as the feelings of any child that has even been away from home, deprived of the consolation of its parents. In opposition to the occasional vilification of Stevens as an antisocial or cold poet, I think this analogy fully exposes his personal aversion to solitude. Poetry becomes a way to integrate the self within the relative safety of an 'us.' It is a means through which one can take one's place within a harmonious choir.

Above all, the 'Supreme Fiction' becomes a medium for the sharing of human strength and knowledge. Wallace Stevens's stated desire to replace the ideal of Christian salvation with a new form of redemption

is itself a fundamentally old-fashioned, religious aspiration. Freud's notion of the oceanic feeling along with Hegel's theory of universal will and Maurice Merleau-Ponty's account of anonymity provide us with three potential rationales for the human desire for unity. Merleau-Ponty's *Phenomenology* holds that any significant realization depends on the tacit recognition of one's interconnectedness with others. On the other hand, in psychoanalytical terms, the urge to transcend solitary individuality is related to the subconscious wish to return to an infantile form of consciousness.

In his groundbreaking essay 'Imaginary and Symbolic in Lacan²⁰' (1977) Fredric Jameson stresses the need for psychoanalysis to confront the fundamental problems of language (Jameson 1988: 75.) He thereafter evaluates Jacques Lacan's substantial contribution to this project. Lacan's essays frequently center on the complex relationships between words, concepts and referents (Lacan 2008: 191.) Above all, his work manages to disturb the traditional assumption (evident even in the quotes drawn from G.W.F. Hegel's *Aesthetics*) that the main function of language is to externalize thought and feeling. Lacan argues that the Symbolic Order, a category that includes language, is not merely a system for the expression of thoughts but is itself a formative influence over individual psychology. There are antecedents to this theory of language in Western poetry (Lacan 2008: 187-90.) The creative writers of earlier eras were frequently hostile towards passé phrases, fearing that the use of clichéd expressions reduced one's capacity for independent thought.

As we saw in the second chapter, the distrust of conventional language was a familiar problematic for the French Symbolists and inspired many Modernist writers to develop their highly experimental modes of self-expression. In Stevens's case, however, we find that the depersonalizing nature of the Symbolic Order is largely embraced rather than contested. It is probable that his acceptance of language as a fully

intersubjective medium is part of the reason why he was once widely thought of as a cold poet and, perhaps, why he has been 'claimed' by Post-Modern theory since the 1980s (McCann 1995: 141.)

This does not entail that we cannot discover any ideological assumptions concealed beneath this supposedly abstract and universal vision. There are three basic courses of action that might be taken. The first would be to find correspondences between the events of Stevens's life and his writing. Frank Lentricchia and Helen Vendler²¹, amongst others, have had success with this form of criticism. Alternatively, one might build upon Sigmund Freud's concept of the oceanic feeling as a way of suggesting that there may have been personal motivating wishes that informed his favouring of a radically impersonal style. A third possibility, which Jameson explores in his article, would be to put this aesthetic into the context of 'Theory', a move that allows for comparisons to be drawn between Stevens's and Structuralist concepts of symbolism. The standard definition of the Symbolic Order is that it is the system of signifiers and symbols (as opposed to the Imaginative Order of signifieds or the "Real" Order of referents.) The Symbolic Order acts as the plane of language, social interaction and culture (Hawthorne 2001: 170.) For Jameson, Wallace Stevens's work remains confined to the arena of language and fiction where sounds and names are disconnected from their origins in the Real (Jameson 2007a: 216.) He writes:

We have suggested that the space of possibility onto which Stevens's imagination for whatever accidents of personal history or inclination happened – that space which unexpectedly opens up a seemingly limitless movement of poetic discourse, without barriers, in all directions – this space is essentially that designated by 'structuralism' or by Theory as the Symbolic Order, or in a different way by Hegel as 'objective spirit,' or by Durkeim as 'collective consciousness': that is, the ensemble of representations, representational systems, and their various levels (concepts,

images, words) in which the individual consciousness must dwell, and about which the thinkers of this period increasingly suspect that, more than a mere element for thought, or even constellations floating in the mind, this whole system may in fact determine and program individual consciousness to a greater degree than hitherto had been imagined.

(Jameson 2007a: 216)

Jameson's way of putting Stevens's poetics into a contemporary context moves our analysis deeper into the realm of critical theory where we must confront the inability of modern man to live freely in a world oversaturated with program-setting influences. Jameson writes that modern consciousness may already be fundamentally 'determined and programmed to a great degree' by conventional values. He suspects that Wallace Stevens's poetry, with its apparent desire to posit a timeless and impersonal vision, taps into a system of thought and language that has become so basic to modern consciousness that it already predetermines and restricts the vicissitudes of human experience. If one accepts globalization as a fact of our time, it follows that the free-flow of information throughout the globe has resulted in a diminished impression of the diversity of the world. Jameson's critique raises the possibility that 'self-negation' is not only a process of finding common ground between oneself and others but often entails a failure to resist the standardizing forces of the Symbolic Order. It is possible that the modern subject's immersion within what Jameson calls the 'supreme representational systems of our time' may have diminished our ability to perceive and express our authentic individuality. Jameson contends that Stevens's poetry can be understood in these terms:

Here we will essentially be content to stress the multiplicity of subsystems in this ideal space, which is closed, if at all, only in the sense that the Einsteinian universe is closed by folding back on itself, such that one never meets anything but contents of the same order, rather than, as in

traditional closure by the arrival at limits beyond which some radical otherness or difference from the system is felt to exist.

(Jameson 2007a: 216)

Jameson draws a depressing picture of a world that contains only 'more of the same.' His point is that our ability to think or speak as free individuals has been constrained by myths of our shared humanity. We no longer even have to consciously conform to social conventions, for, as Jameson asserts, we may already 'dwell' within a system of thought and expression that is shared by virtually everyone. The acceptance of one's own essential anonymity as a human being would not be troubling except for the fact that the terms in which we conceptualize the global 'We' might be prejudicial. The following passage can be read in Fredric Jameson's earlier book on Postmodernism: 'I must remind the reader of the obvious; namely, that this whole global, yet American, postmodern culture is the internal and superstructural expression of a whole new wave of American military and economic domination throughout the world: in this sense, as throughout class history, the underside of culture is blood, torture, death, and terror' (Jameson 1991: 2.) Through this compound adjective 'global-yet-American', Jameson makes the point that the achievement of cosmopolitan values across the globe demands a heightening of violence. Although the global-yet-American ethos appears to be a mode of fostering unity and progress without annihilating diversity, harmony can only be achieved by accepting the dominion of the leading nations over the developing world.

Since the end of the Second World War, political declarations have been made that are intended to be universal. The most obvious example would be the 'Universal Declaration of Human Rights.' The English version of the declaration is written in such a way that it never employs the first-person plural. Instead the text refers constantly to 'everyone' and to 'no one.' Take the first article of the declaration: "all human

beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights. They are endowed with reason and conscience and should act towards one another in a spirit of brotherhood.”²² We might wonder why the first-person plural is not employed in this context. Hypothetically speaking, the first article might be rewritten as: “We are born free and equal in dignity and rights. We are endowed with reason and conscience and should act towards each other in a spirit of brotherhood.” One reason might be that the human rights outlined in this declaration, noble as they are, are actually developed and imposed by an external authority. While no one should be external to a ‘universal declaration,’ both authority and overtures towards universality are essential to the success of this declaration. I would argue that the document does not utilize the plural form for it is not true that these rights are reflexively granted to everybody by everyone. The human rights described in this document were determined by an authority (in this case, the United Nations Organization and related institutions.) The people who constitute the authority remain theoretically separate from humanity since they must act as creators, guardians and guarantors of these rights. The ability to draft and redraft universal declarations lies at the disposal of global policy makers and not the people themselves. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights is meant to inform its subscribers of how human beings should to be perceived and respected. However, it is crucial to point out that this universal declaration is, in fact, made and upheld by a specific group of people on humanity’s behalf.

International law is not bestowed by an individual or god, by nature, nor even humanity itself but is invented and defended by those with political clout. Likewise, social theories have emerged over the last fifty years that aim to justify the egalitarian ethic of political liberalism by endowing it with the assumption of universal consent. In my opinion, the most successful of these attempts can be found in the philosophy of justice proposed by John Rawls. I will briefly consider Rawls’ model of social cohesion as a way of making a broader point about the importance of the universalizing sensibility (a sensibility that I believe is poeticized in Stevens’s work) to the ideology of contemporary liberalism. One of Rawls’ key

concepts is the 'veil of ignorance', a thought experiment that is intended to prove that the members of a society implicitly consent to the structuring of state institutions around egalitarian principles (Weinar 2008: 17.) I will restrict my remarks on Rawls to this concept. John Rawls' theory of justice aspires to prove that the welfare state is the most valid social model. More specifically, he believes that social resources (money, opportunities, property and other advantages) should be distributed in a compassionate way amongst the whole populace. He uses the term 'original position' to refer to the imaginary position from which the members of a culture determine how to structure a just society. This concept is succinctly explained by Leif Weinar writing for the *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*.

Were actual citizens to get together in real time to try to agree to principles of justice for their society the bargaining among them would be influenced by all sorts of factors irrelevant to justice, such as who could appear most threatening or who could hold out longest. The original position abstracts from all such irrelevant factors... The most striking feature of the original position is the VEIL OF IGNORANCE, which prevents other arbitrary facts about citizens from influencing the agreement among their representatives. As we have seen, Rawls holds that the fact that a citizen is for example of a certain race, class, and gender is no reason for social institutions to favor or disfavor him. Each party in the original position is therefore deprived of knowledge of the race, class, and gender of the real citizen they represent. In fact the veil of ignorance deprives the parties, Rawls says, of all facts about citizens that are irrelevant to the choice of principles of justice: not only their race, class, and gender but also their age, natural endowments, and more. Moreover the veil of ignorance also screens out specific information about the citizens' society so as to get a clearer view of the permanent features of a just social system.

(Weinar 2008: 17)

Rawls contends that it is not merely unethical but actually illogical to establish a society based on an asymmetrical allotment of privileges and opportunities. The veil of ignorance is a heuristic device or 'fiction' that strips us of our individual differences before we decide the nature of our institutions. For Rawls, this screening-off of facts about personal identity is a necessary precondition for the achievement of any compassionate system. The veil of ignorance presumes that our particular traits as individuals will inhibit rather than enhance our sensitivity to others. He intends for us (behind the veil) to relinquish our usual, self-serving, subject-orientated perspective and taken on an attitude that has more concern for the welfare of others. A Rawlsian state is self-justifying in the sense that it takes for granted that the citizens of the state would agree with its principles (Richardson 2005: 5.) Thus, Rawls' social vision does not require the figure of a law-giver external to society nor does it require that we relinquish our opinions, personalities or preferences insofar as these are not reflections of personal identity. It does not matter whether one is a self-serving person or is naturally altruistic - once behind the veil of ignorance, one will find that a fair division of goods is the only reasonable policy (it is assumed that a selfish person would rather play it safe than recommend an unequal distribution of goods.) Egalitarianism therefore is grounded in moderate self-interest but this interest is abstract rather than particular. The imperative implied by the veil of ignorance is hard to miss: we must approach the problem of organizing our society from an anonymous perspective.

When we are formulating principles of justice that will apply to everyone, our typical first-person singular perspective should become a first-person plural. In a sense, the veil of ignorance is premised on the belief that all human beings share an essential nature and would recognize this solidarity if we could overlook the superficial differences between us. Rawls asks us to imagine ourselves emptied of all personal features (such as race, gender, class) before we engage in social debate. The Emersonian ideal of obtaining an uncorrupted, egoless worldview is, therefore, brought into the sphere of political theory

through Rawls' theories of justice. The term 'veil of ignorance' can be seen as a philosophical equivalent to Stevens's 'ignorant eye' or Emerson's 'naïve eye' (even the analogy of sight is retained in Rawls' phrasing) and invites the same criticisms. As Tony Tanner argues in his analysis of Emerson, a vision that is totally untarnished by any preconceptions or egoism would not be able to discern anything save an 'undifferentiated confusion' (Tanner 1977: 31.) The adoption of a totally neutral and unprejudiced way of looking would not even allow one to make the initial distinction between figure and ground. In terms of Rawls' theory, it is hard to see exactly how one can exclude important pieces of knowledge about oneself (such as one's beliefs and values) while retaining moderate self-interest. John Rawls' theory of social justice is in keeping with the ideology of globalization as it does not demand the full eradication of personal differences but does require that these differences are bracketed off when citizens make decisions that will affect everyone in society. When it is carried to an extreme, the inherently commendable proposal that individuals should do what is best for society rather than merely serving themselves can have dangerous consequences. It is a logic that has been used as a pretext for imperialism: our troops invaded your country for the good of your people; our productions dominate your economy in order to improve your lives and so on. Viewed with a little charity, though, one finds that the veil of ignorance is intended only to apply to certain questions, including the matter of how society is structured. The citizens of a country must therefore be able to switch between the two sides of the human character. They must be able to think as individuals at certain times and must be willing to take on an impersonal viewpoint when it is appropriate to do so.

Viewing the world from the original position, we would have no choice but to treat all human beings as equals. Yet, if pushed, we would have to admit that we do not have any evidence to suggest that all members of society are, in actuality, equally valuable and do not desire any proof of this. We subscribe to this ethos simply because we want to be the type of altruistic people who are concerned with the welfare

of others. While one may not actually believe that all human beings are equally deserving of privileges but we are compelled by the veil of ignorance to act as though this were true. In this way, in a variety of political and philosophical texts, the ideal of social harmony has been elevated into a 'supreme fiction' that multitudes subscribe to while suspecting that it is unattainable in practice.

Along these lines, Fredric Jameson rightly identifies an inconsistency inherent in Wallace Stevens's concept of supreme fiction. According to Stevens, we need not convince ourselves that our ideals are true but we should continue to support them nonetheless as an act of pure will. The injunction to treat something meaningless as if it were profound is, for Jameson, the 'strong form of ideology' in Stevens as it is in certain strains of Existentialism (Jameson 2007a: 220-1.) It is through this admission that his tendency to express theoretical statements in his poetry might become self-defeating. His stated desire to adhere to reality itself is undermined by his championing of a relativistic theory of belief. As Jameson points out, the claim that we ought to have beliefs without necessarily ascribing truth value to them not only makes ideology (in its normal sense) largely untenable but, furthermore, transforms fiction into something empty and unappealing (Jameson 2007a: 221.) However, on another level, Stevens's theory of belief does well to recognize that the uncoupling of ideals and truth is an important characteristic of our age. John McGowan attests to this notion: 'Consent to capitalist society (and, perhaps, to any society), it now appears, is not a matter of belief at all – or not, at least, belief in foundational, traditional truths...Capitalism has shown itself remarkably indifferent to both the destruction or retention of fundamental (religious, metaphysical or even ideological) truths and the beliefs dependent on them' (McGowan 1991: 14.)

I suspect that it has indeed become possible to subscribe to a belief system without believing that it is more correct, valid or 'better' than any other ideology. Insofar as contemporary theory treats meaning as

a constructed narrative rather than as the recognition of facts, it too must struggle with issues related to relativism. The three sections of 'Notes towards a Supreme Fiction' stipulate that the highest poetry must be abstract, changing and must give pleasure. We have already seen how an innovative use of symbolism and decreation enabled Wallace Stevens to develop an abstract style and to depict change. The need to give pleasure, however, may be a more problematic aspect of his work. The evocation of suffering, love, desire, loneliness and other painful emotions cannot be easily achieved through his aesthetically pleasing language. There are times when it might be necessary for the poet to be more confrontational and forceful. In contrast to the oppressive gravity of much of modern poetry, Stevens's poems sometimes veer into outright silliness. The devaluation of his own assertions that occurs when he equates belief with fiction weakens the force of his 'wisdom poems' or anecdotes that may otherwise convey an intellectual or spiritual principle. By the same token, his tendency to avoid any kind of adversarial tone makes the representation of interpersonal conflict impossible. Stevens's preference is to employ pleasing imagery and develop the overall appeal of his verse so that it mostly elicits pleasure from the reader. The major consequence of avoiding unpleasantness is that his work, even when it deals with darker themes, tends to produce a feeling of enjoyment.

Certainly, as we saw in the opening chapter, some critics praise Stevens for his hopeful attitude towards the future while others despair of his refusal to acknowledge the brutality of man against man. Ultimately, his unwillingness to acknowledge that the 'Other' can be demanding, threatening or unknowable undermines his otherwise comprehensive worldview. Ironically, Wallace Stevens's greatest failing as writer might lie not in any failure to depict harmony but in his inability to properly depict human drama. The constant employment of impersonal pronouns, basic archetypes or caricatures entails that his style is ill-suited to the rendition of human drama. Howard Nemerov comments on this complaint:

In a way, it is quite true to say that a poetry of this sort cannot be dramatic, because it begins just where thought has arrived at "the ratio of all things," and has only two developments open to it: the closing of the circle, or the transcending leap into something other, which will be something arbitrary...So metaphor also becomes arbitrary, mystical or absurd, since particulars may be said to resemble generalities as it were helplessly, whether or not the mind can trace the details of the resemblance.

(Nemerov 1957: 3-4)

Nemerov's explanation implies that the reason why Stevens's poetry cannot be dramatic is not because poet refuses to acknowledge the demands of the 'Other' but because he has a greater ambition in mind: to create a theory of poetry that could double as a theory of life. However, several more recent critics have interpreted the lack of human relationships in his writing as evidence of the poet's failure to pay as much attention to human affairs as he pays to theoretical matters. In his book 'Wallace Stevens and the Interpersonal', Mark Halliday takes Stevens to task for his disinterest in the lives of other people. Halliday claims that 'Stevens's poetry largely tries to ignore or deny all aspects of life that center on or are inseparable from interpersonal relationships' (Halliday 1991: 3.) Gerald L. Bruns, like Halliday, identifies 'distancing' as a contradiction inherent in the poetry: 'there came a time when questions about language (and also therefore about mind and reality) began to be reformulated as questions about social practice, or about historically contingent, socially determined and ideologically bound conventions of human life. From a hermeneutical standpoint the main problem for Stevens is not how mind links up with reality but what to do about other people.' (Bruns 1987: 24-5.) Under this reading, Stevens does not develop his poetic dialectic far enough - while he shows how metaphysical problems can be deferred into issues of language, he does not indicate that language itself is a type of social interaction. Bruns goes on to identify points in the poetry where the possibility for interpersonal dialogue briefly arises before being stifled.

Bruns makes the case that Stevens consistently fails to acknowledge the singular voice of the other. He lists several examples:

Think of how often metaphors of the choir and the chorus turn up in Stevens's poetry – rings of men, for example, chanting. Stevens has many ingenious ways of silencing the “cracking of voices in the mind” by converting such sound into an ideal form that cannot be comprehended except by visual analogies, or analogies with a soundless music reverberating in an ideal chamber, or by recourse to some figure of transcendence like the “central man.”

(Bruns 1987: 28-9)

Gerald Bruns' commentary frames Stevens as an aesthete who is altogether more interested in concepts than in the lives of his fellow man. He qualifies this argument with examples from the poetry where depersonalized human figures are apparent or where there is a tendency to divert attention to non-human objects. These examples substantiate the claim that Wallace Stevens was apparently disinterested in interpersonal dynamics. In my opinion, this failing is a natural consequence of any theory that values social cohesion over individualism. Examples of such ideologies would include John Rawls' 'original position', the Hegelian concept of 'universal will' and the contemporary notion of the global village. Despite the fact that these philosophies are meant to instil compassionate and empathetic values, they tend to depict human differences as obstacles that must be overcome.

I have made reference to several different philosophical and political theories in this section in order to indicate how the general tenor of Western thought has shifted from a state of valorising the interior life of the individual to putting predominant focus on the ideal of harmony. Continental philosophy, for example, renounced its Cartesian origins in favour of materialist conceptions of human consciousness that see

mental life as part of a continuum that includes other minds and environmental context. Similarly, the Freudian understanding of religion establishes spirituality as a means for the ego to sublimate itself into a spurious unity. Although it resists this trend as far as possible, the same progression can be found in the development of 20th Century poetry. More so than any other major writer of his time, Wallace Stevens has challenged the traditional conception of literature as a self-expressive and self-excluding medium. It is, therefore, unsurprising then that Fredric Jameson concludes his essay with the idea that Stevens's poetry can be best thought of as theory:

What before was merely 'poetic' discourse with its traditional and banal problems of the nature of specially poetic discourse and of the aesthetic as non-practical and non-cognitive, suddenly opens up into a new form of discourse which is theoretical and poetic all at once, in which "the theory of poetry" becomes one with "the life of poetry." Yet this emergence marks the originality of Stevens, now considered as a moment of the 1960s, a moment in which "poetry" also, in its traditional sense, dies and is transformed into something historically new, something that will gradually (in opposition to philosophy or literature alike) come simply to be designated as theory. It is the end of art, perhaps, in the Hegelian sense, but also its realization and its transformation into the sphere of culture generally or of the Symbolic Order.

(Jameson 2007a: 222)

Jameson's paper culminates on this ambivalent note, suggesting that poetry is no longer separable from culture in general. He suggests that Stevens's ideal of a 'supreme fiction' amounts to the rejection of traditional poetic values. Of course, there is ample evidence to argue, on the contrary, that Wallace Stevens operated within the traditions provided by his main literary precursors such as Stéphane Mallarmé and Walt Whitman. Yet, despite these correspondences, I have argued that his work cannot be

considered the reproduction of any particular poetic doctrine. Jameson makes the case that the poetry might be associated with the rather amorphous category of 'theory', which currently acts as a crossroads between various intellectual disciplines. Whether or not earlier readings of Stevens in terms of Romanticism, High Modernism or various mid-century philosophies (such as Existentialism) have run their course, the fresh interpretations provided by the new context of theory cannot be accepted as the final resolution of our uncertainties.

While many useful parallels can be drawn between the poet's depiction of reality and the ideology of globalization, for instance, it should be recognized that these comparisons can become instructive only once one has performed a full, formal appreciation of the poems themselves. The radicalism inherent in Jameson's closing statement immediately undermines more cautious 'ideas of Stevens', though to say that his poetry constitutes a 'yet unclassifiable discourse' should not preclude necessary questions of how it might be read or enjoyed. Both Jameson and Frank Lentricchia cite Stevens as an example of a writer that successfully combines theoretical and literary modes. His theory of the 'first idea', for example, is a notion that has its clearest parallels in the genre of philosophical writing rather than poetic discourse.

Yet, one can perceive a sense of foreboding in the suggestion that Stevens's achievement marks 'the end of art.' Through a quick consideration of various philosophical works, I have argued that the ideal of overcoming one's limited perspective is central to various ideologies that have come to the fore over the last fifty years. It may well be the 'post-individualist' dimension to Wallace Stevens's aesthetic that has allowed it to remain relevant to an audience that has become disillusioned with displays of authenticity. The mystique that was once attached to the image of the *poète maudit* or the hermetic artist has faded considerably in the second half of the century. Likewise, the impulses that drove much Modernist poetry are barely present in Stevens – he displays no fundamental distrust of language, economics or religious

institutions. I have argued that impersonality could be considered to be the definitive characteristic of his poetic style and the quality that distinguishes him from his precursors and contemporaries. As we have seen, the impersonal character of his writing is cultivated not only in his compositional choices (such as his preference for abstractions) but is also present on a thematic level, as was demonstrated in the previous chapter. The concept of the 'sublime' was disconnected from ideals of God, Beauty or the Imagination. One's essential anonymity was portrayed as a type of immortality.

While one cannot study a poem as though it were written in a vacuum, free of influence, ideological or psychological motivations, I think it is equally important to put our interpretations into their proper context. Our brief survey of criticism in the first chapter outlined the various perceptions that have been dominant at different points throughout the last century. As we saw, controversies inevitably arise whenever a critic tries to narrowly periodize his accomplishments or has the audacity to state a preference for certain poems over others. Of the many approaches that have been examined in this paper, however, I think that Fredric Jameson's 'idea of Stevens' best captures his relevance to the present moment. There may come a time when the word "theory" itself seems to belong to a bygone era. As critical sensibilities come into and go out of fashion, Wallace Stevens's poetry continues to offer something quite different to each successive generation. While the very existence of a text betrays the presence of an author, this assertion of personality is checked in Stevens's case by the desire to accommodate the anonymous, future reader. The radical impersonality of his language results in a form of literature that is exceptionally open to the evolving responses of its audience. I think it fitting to end our examination of the poetry and its critics with an excerpt from an unjustly neglected later lyric entitled 'The House was Quiet and the World was Calm':

The house was quiet and the world was calm.

The reader became the book; and summer night

Was like the conscious being of the book.

The house was quiet and the world was calm.

The words were spoken as if there were no book,

Except the reader leaned above the page,

Wanted to lean, wanted most to be

The scholar to whom the book is true, to whom

The summer night is like a perfection of thought.

The house was quiet because it had to be.

(1-10. Stevens 2006: 312)

NOTES

¹ The collected letters have provided an invaluable resource for serious students of the poet. See Stevens, Wallace. 1966. *Letters of Wallace Stevens*. Ed. Holly Stevens. London: Faber and Faber.

² See Lentricchia, Frank. 1989. *Ariel and the Police*. London: The Harvester Press. Page.171. Lentricchia's book, one of several studies of Wallace Stevens by the author, is notable for its focus on the poet's personal life, sexuality and letters. Important dimensions to Stevens's life and work that are seldom considered by his critics are dealt with in impressive detail here.

³ Several of the poems published in this collection had appeared in literary magazines as early as 1915.

⁴ See Stern, Hebert. 1966. *Wallace Stevens: Art of Uncertainty*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press. Page 6. Please note that the term 'formalist' in this essay is used in the commonsensical way to refer to approaches that prioritize observations into the writer's compositional methods and use of language over contextual, historical or ideological critique. I do not intend for the words 'form' or 'formalist' to be imply any specific doctrine or school of criticism.

⁵ Although the 1960s saw the release of the first major philosophical studies of Stevens, notably in *The Act of the Mind* edited by J. Hillis Miller and R.H. Pearce which was released in 1965, critical opposition to this trend should not be overlooked. See Willard, Abbie 1973 *Wallace Stevens: The Poet and His Critics*. Chicago: American Library Press. Willard's broad survey contains an enlightening account of resistance to this decade's shift towards more overtly philosophical treatments of the poetry (this shift is described through pages145-150.)

⁶ See Stern, 1966:13. I would further recommend Andrew Filreis's 1994 study *Modernism From Right to Left: Wallace Stevens, The 30s and Literary Radicalism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press) for a comprehensive account of the deprecation of Stevens's work for its alleged insensitivity to the political climate of the 1930s.

⁷ Stanley Burnshaw's Marxist condemnation of Stevens was later partly retracted by the author in the early 1960s. For further information on Burnshaw's original review and his later change of heart see Willard 1973:32-35)

⁸ See Stern 1966: 14-15 and Doyle 1985: 9-10.

⁹ In the main, of course, Stevens still tends to be historically situated within the modern period and therefore he is often bracketed alongside other early twentieth century American poets. This is a perfectly standard way of putting Stevens into the appropriate chronological position. However, it is also common for critics to take the next step and to define Stevens as a Modernist poet, which implies that his work has a strong stylistic and thematic affinity with certain other writers. It is this assumption that deserves to be challenged and not the obvious points that Stevens wrote in the first half of the twentieth century, that he was acquainted with William Carlos Williams and Marianne Moore etc. An excellent example of how this assumption concerning Stevens might free up certain interesting readings, however, is the 1987 book of criticism *Wallace Stevens Poetics of Modernism* edited by A Gelpi (New York: Cambridge University Press.) This collection carefully establishes a basis, beyond chronology, for comparing Wallace Stevens with other poets and artists of his day.

¹⁰ See, for instance, Perloff, Majorie. 1987. 'Revolving in Crystal: The Supreme Fiction and the Impasse of Modern Poetry' in *Wallace Stevens: Poetics of Modernism*. Ed. Albert Gelpi. 2nd Edition Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. Pages.46-47. Perloff begins her paper with a critique of Stevens's detached response to world events.

¹¹ In fact, Frank Kermode's analysis of similarities between Martin Heidegger and Wallace Stevens entitled 'Poetically Dwelling in Connecticut' is a fine example of how one can find philosophical themes in poetry without treating it as a philosophical document. This article can be found in Kermode's 2003 book *Pieces of My Mind*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Gilroux.

¹² See Sephanson, Anders 1989 'Regarding Post-Modernism: A Conversation with Fredric Jameson' in *Postmodern Jameson: Critique*. Ed. David Kellner. Washington: Mouton de Gruyter Press. In this interview, it is established that Fredric Jameson primarily has cultural 'discontinuity' in mind with this description but he also makes reference to discontinuity as a deliberate aesthetic strategy in postmodern art.

¹³ See Vajda, Gyorgy 1982 'The Structure of the Symbolist Movement.' in *The Symbolist Movement in the Literature of European Languages*. Ed. Anna Balakian. Budapest: Akademiai Kiado,

¹⁴ A tradition that goes back at least as far as William Wordsworth's concern with the presentation and framing of his works, visible in the Preface added to the second edition of the *Lyrical Ballads* in 1800, and revised and extended for 1802 edition.

¹⁵ Edmund Wilson's study *Axel's Castle: A Study of the Imaginative Literature of 1870-1930* makes strong case for the influence of Symbolism on Modernism. Wilson depicts this influence as being part of a modern conflict between naturalistic and imaginative mentalities. The final chapter of Frank Kermode's 1957 book *The Romantic Image* (Amsterdam: Routledge and Kegan Paul) presents a more recent examination of the influence on Symbolism on Modernist Poetry. Alternatively, the collection of essays *The Symbolist Movement in the Literature of European Languages* edited by A. Balakian (1982. Budapest: Akademiai Kiado,) traces the import of Symbolism on the writers of several different languages.

¹⁶ Charles Altieri's article 'Why Stevens Must be Abstract' and Bonnie Costello's 'Stevens and Painting' are two particularly thorough examinations of this theme. Both articles can be found in the 1987 collection *Wallace Stevens Poetics of Modernism*. Ed Albert Gelpi. 2nd Edition. New York: Cambridge University Press.

¹⁷ The best account of Wallace Stevens's links with French Symbolism remains Michel Benamou's 1972 book *Wallace Stevens and the Symbolist Imagination*. Princeton: Princeton University Press. The most influential purveyor of the view that Wallace Stevens belongs to the Emersonian tradition is Harold Bloom. His 1977 book *Wallace Stevens: The Poems of Our Climate* offers a thorough overview of the poet's entire oeuvre. See Bloom, Harold 1977 *Wallace Stevens: The Poems of Our Climate*. New York: Cornell University Press.

¹⁸ This poem, composed by the monk Ryozen Hoshi, is part of a longer collection called the *Ogura Hyakunin Isshu* (*Single Songs of a Hundred Poets*.) Hoshi's poem is classified as number 70. Clay MacCauley's 1917 translation of the *Ogura Hyakunin Isshu* is available online at <http://extext.virginia.edu/japanese/hyakunin/maccauley.html>

¹⁹ 'Theory' as a poem collected in *Harmonium* was written before 1924, Martin Heidegger's most famous and representative work *Sein Und Zeit* was first published in German three years later. Jean-Paul Sartre's earliest publications became available to the public in the 1930s.

²⁰ See Jameson, Fredric 1988 'Imaginary and Symbolic in Lacan' in *The Ideologies of Theory Volume One: Situations of Theory*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press. This article on Lacan was first published in the 1970s and remains one of the earliest and clearest expositions of Lacanian theory for an English-speaking audience.

²¹ See Lentricchia's aforementioned *Ariel and the Police* and Vendler, Helen 1980 *Wallace Stevens: Words Chosen Out of Desire*. Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press.

²² *The Universal Declaration of Human Rights* (drafted in 1948) is available online at the United Nations website: <http://www.un.org/en/documents/udhr/index.shtml>

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