

Wallace Stevens and the American Sublime

Mei-shu Chen

National Sun Yat-sen University

Abstract

Representing an American sublime free of European influence and classical, romantic, and transcendentalist formulations of the sublime, Wallace Stevens's poetry invites a re-investigation of Longinus's definition of the sublime. For Longinus, the effect of the sublime disposes the soul to high thoughts and leaves in the mind more food for contemplation. De-creating prior notions and construction of the sublime, his poetry (re)creates the spirit of a(n) (American) sublime, which passes beyond the confines of pre-established rules. Stevens develops his attempt to subvert authoritative literary practices, to compose the "poem of the mind," and to "construct a new stage" in his poetry, offering "a new knowledge of reality" rather than the Absolute. His deconstruction of literary conventions, habitual perceptions, and phenomenal interpretations sometimes inevitably deconstructs its original intent. This occurs especially when his attempt to efface the power of received views illustrates that commitment to a specific perspective acts as the foundation of thought, language, experience, and interpretation. His recognition of the negative effects of dominant perspectives could not preserve him from falling into their confinement; thus he experimented with various approaches to the knowledge of reality. The sublime discovered and created in Stevens's "supreme fiction" can be a fiction, an interpretation, or a new/different "knowledge of reality"; nonetheless, it provides "the never-resting mind" more food for free reflection. Intent not on "the final destination of the mind" but inclined to let

Mei-shu Chen is the Post-doctoral Fellow in the College of Liberal Arts at National Sun Yat-sen University. She is the author of a dissertation "The Subjective, Dynamical, and Liberatory Sublime in Emily Dickinson" and two journal articles "Emily Dickinson—A True Self-Reliant Non-Conformist" (*Yale-China Journal of American Studies* 1 (2000): 60-65) and "Shirley Geok-lin Lim, A Licensed Asian American Writer in a Moving Car" (*TELL Journal* 4 (2007): 127-54). She is also a co-editor of the book *Landscape and Travel Writing* 旅遊文學與地景書寫 (2013). E-mail: gmssc1976@hotmail.com.

(Received: 21 March 2013; Accepted: 9 October 2013)

“the imperfect” remain, Stevens presents a reality that “is the beginning not the end,” thereby creating his own version of an American sublime that encourages nonconformist thoughts and varied access to a knowledge of reality.

Keywords: sublime, primitive reality, nonconformist thoughts, deconstruct, interpretation, supreme fiction

Wallace Stevens and the American Sublime*

Discussing the postmodern sublime, Jean-François Lyotard argues against what he sees as a Western “presupposition, or even a prejudice, a ready-made attitude” toward the connection between the sublime and truth (138). In so doing, he invites a re-investigation of Longinus’s treatise on the sublime and questions absolutist “quasi-perceptible” attitudes toward “the sublime ‘situation’” (138). Similarly, in exploring the problematical allure of reality and what he terms a “new knowledge of reality,”¹ Wallace Stevens, with the spirit of “The American Scholar,” advocated by Ralph Waldo Emerson suffuses his poetry with multiple approaches to reality and the possibility of various truths, thereby activating readers’ sensibilities and imagination. In recognition of this element of his art, some Stevens scholars focus on the inner mechanism of reality, the record/concern with invocations of reality, Friedrich Nietzsche’s perspectivism, or the (im)possibility of writing about nature “without anthropomorphizing or humanizing it” (Hilfer 222).² Their writings have inspired me to further examine the negative dialectics, the power of forming/presenting conceptions, and the poetic sublime in Stevens’s works. Discouraging on the sublime, Rob Wilson emphasizes the decreation/negation of, George Santayana³ the breaking up of, and Lyotard the disruption of conventions. In his essay on Stevens, Wilson focuses on the poet’s negation (decreation) of “false or prior notions of the sublime” (177), of the sublime related to vastness and the spectacular, and of “the idealized notion that vastness of place demands a corresponding vastness of spirit on the poet’s part” (176). In this article, I enlarge on such ideas by discussing Stevens’s decreation and subsequent (re)creation of the spirit of the (American) sublime, which passes beyond the confines of “pre-established rules” (Lyotard’s terms). I argue that Stevens’s works dispose the “never-resting mind” (*TCP* 194) to many/divergent truths, encouraging nonconformist thoughts and varied access to a knowledge of reality.

Representative of an American sublime free of European influence and romantic/transcendental perception and realization of (eternal) truth in sublime sentiment, Stevens’s poetry invites a rethinking of Longinus’s definition of the

* I would like to thank the reviewers for their constructive comments. Above all, I am deeply grateful to Prof. J. B. Rollins of Chung Cheng University for his valuable advice and long-term support.

¹ The term appears in “Not Ideas about the Thing But the Thing Itself” (*The Collected Poems* 534). Except for “The Role of the Idea in Poetry” and “A Room on a Garden” in *Opus Posthumous*, all poems quoted appear in *The Collected Poems* (hereafter *TCP*).

² For such writings on Stevens, see Ellmann 147-70; White 240-65; Leggett; Hilfer 222-34.

³ It is Santayana’s idea in *The Sense of Beauty: Being the Outlines of Aesthetic Theory*.

sublime as “the echo of a great soul” passing “beyond the confines of the world” in thought, style, and method (“On the Sublime” 81) as well as his view that the effect of the sublime “dispose[s] the soul to high thoughts” and “leave[s] in the mind more food for reflection”(80). By deconstructing and negating classical, romantic, and transcendentalist formulations of the sublime, Stevens’s poetry reflects the essence of the Longinian as well as the American sublime. In its attempt to unburden itself of an inherited imperative, the imposed order, absolute truth, or high thoughts (divine truths), it embodies the spirit of both the sublime and the Emersonian American scholar, which emphasizes liberation from the confines of given norms, authority, and conventions. This poetry leads readers to insight into the power of forming/presenting conceptions by exposing the relationship between one’s perception and predominant perspectives. Stevens’s works also dispose the “never-resting mind” to various thoughts by introducing different knowledge of and approaches to reality.

Of the five principal sources of the sublime, Longinus considers “the power of forming great conceptions” to be the first and most important (80). On the sublime in literature, he proposes that by practicing the “mimetic of greatness” an author can create sublime expressions rather than settling for the passivity of “imitation” or “emulation,” thereby rediscovering the greatness of the ancients (85). To effect this “Longinian mimetic of greatness,” according to Wilson in *American Sublime: The Genealogy of a Poetic Genre*, “the past functions as a self-empowering agency and provides models of selfhood more than it comprises a legacy haunting all literature” (312). In “The American Scholar,” Emerson declares the American “day of dependence,” its “long apprenticeship to the learning of other lands,” at last complete and prophesies a new age of poetry (64).⁴ Each age “must write its own books; or rather, each generation for the next succeeding,” he insists, proposing “creative manners,” “actions,” and “words . . . indicative of no custom or authority, but springing spontaneous from the mind’s own sense of good and fair” (68). Poets, for Emerson, are “liberating gods,” who are “free” and “make free” (“The Poet” 236). In “American Literature; Its Position in the Present Time, and Prospects for the Future,” Margaret Fuller similarly challenges writers to be “absolutely true” to themselves, to fearlessly “express what is in the mind,” and to eschew “cant, compromise, servile imitation, and complaisance.” Only then, she maintains, can a writer become “original” and “soar beyond the common ken.”⁵

⁴ Emerson’s articles (“Nature,” “The American Scholar,” and “The Poet”) quoted in this essay appear in *Selections from Ralph Waldo Emerson*, ed. Stephen E. Whicher.

⁵ She sees America as a land of mixed races/cultures that leaves “every impulse free, and abundant

After the heyday of Emerson and Fuller, many American poets who endeavored to attain the poetic sublime reconsidered the issue of the “mimetic of greatness” by focusing on the essence of sublimity defined by Longinus, thereby transcending the confines of received conventions/norms and creating their own idiosyncrasies. American poets adhering to the spirit of “The American Scholar” as well as the sublime have aimed at the creation of an American sublime released from European authority and prior formulation, a sublime rooted in nonconformist perspectives and poetics rather than dominating and fixed ones. Some of these poets have attempted a dialogue with the past in which they have reinvestigated and subsequently rejected literary conventions or received perceptions about connections among nature, the divine existence, and the first idea, thus accentuating their idiosyncratic presentation of the authentic, the beautiful, and the sublime. Consequently, they have created poetic sublimity through the breaking up of regularity in Santayana’s sense, by deconstructing conventions, by experimenting with approaches to the “knowledge of reality” or poetic composition not restricted within “pre-established rules,” and by developing fragmentary, ambiguous, inconsistent, and multifaceted thoughts that encourage more possibilities and perceptions.

In “Approaching the Romantic Sublime,” Thomas Weiskel points out that modern poets must face opposition between “authority and authenticity, between imitation, the traditional route to authentic identity, and originality, impossible but necessary” (8). Stevens, viewed as a poet “who brought a newly perceived but real world before the reader” in the *Norton Anthology of American Literature II* (Baym 1143), reiterates his attempts to subvert authoritative literary practices and perceptions (“its past was a souvenir” to him), to compose the “poem of the mind,” and to “construct a new stage.”⁶ Traditionally, as Emerson states, the active soul of a poet perceives, “utters,” or “creates” “absolute truth,” usually acquired through a sensation of beauty or sublimity in nature (“the symbol of spirit”) followed by a transcendence of sensual feelings.⁷ Nonetheless, in Stevens’s experience, composition associated with this process is problematic and does not “suffice” for a modern poet who is familiar with but intends to challenge

opportunity to develop a genius, wide and full” as American “rivers, flowery, luxuriant and impassioned” or as the “vast prairies, rooted in strength as the rocks on which the Puritan fathers landed” (4).

⁶ Such ideas are conveyed in “Of Modern Poetry” (*TCP* 239–40).

⁷ In “Nature,” Emerson sees nature as “the symbol of spirit” and insists that nothing exists in nature without its spirit or genius (31). In classical and romantic constructions of the sublime, in Lyotard’s view, something “like an Absolute, either of magnitude or of power, is made quasi-perceptible;” it is derived from “an aesthetic” sign of “a transcendence proper to ethics, the transcendence of the moral law and of freedom” in the sublime sentiment (136).

classical as well as romantic and transcendentalist constructions of the poetic sublime. As a poet at a time when people were trying to dismantle past logocentric models of belief and imagination,⁸ Stevens had, in Emerson's terms, "a whole new experience to unfold" in the changing world ("The Poet" 225). Convinced that the imagination loses vitality "as it ceases to adhere to what is real,"⁹ Stevens recognized that he had to be "the angel of reality," "the necessary angel of earth" (*TCP* 496) to attend to the power of forming/presenting knowledge of truths (what Longinus terms "great conceptions") and to express his modern living world even though a direct, complete, and eternal knowledge was impossible.¹⁰ The poetic sublime Stevens creates may not dispose the soul to "high thoughts" (Longinus 80), absolute truth, or divine truths (Emerson's emphasis) but rather different knowledge, thoughts, or truths.

On the role of ideas in poetry, Stevens points out an inherited imperative: the "chant and discourse" of truth ("The Role of the Idea in Poetry"), "the first idea" ("Notes toward a Supreme Fiction" *TCP* 381):

Ask of the philosopher why he philosophizes,
Determined thereto, perhaps by his fathers' ghost,
Permitting nothing to the evening's edges.

The father does not come to adorn the chant,
. . . , the patriarchs
Of truth. They stride across and are master of

⁸ As depicted in "Landscape with Boat," a man with a rebellious spirit tends to "suppose" and to "receive what others had supposed" without "accepting"; additionally, "as truth to be accepted," he supposes a "truth beyond all truths" (*TCP* 242).

⁹ In *The Necessary Angel: Essays on Reality and the Imagination*, Stevens writes, "The imagination loses vitality as it ceases to adhere to what is real. When it adheres to the unreal and intensifies what is unreal, while its first effect may be extraordinary, that effect is the maximum effect that it will ever have" (6).

¹⁰ In "Angel Surrounded by Paysans," Stevens remarks,
I am one of you and being one of you
Is being and knowing what I am and know.
Yet I am the necessary angel of earth,
Since, in my sight, you see the earth again,
.....
And, in my hearing, you hear its tragic drone
.....
Like watery words awash; like meanings said
By repetitions of half meanings. Am I not,
Myself, only half of a figure of a sort,
A figure half seen, or seen for a moment, a man
Of the mind, . . . (*TCP* 496-97)

In "The Man with the Blue Guitar," Stevens reflects, "I cannot bring a world quite round, / Although I patch it as I can" (*TCP* 165).

The chant and discourse there, more than wild weather

. . . . They become

A time existing after much time has passed.

Therein, day settles and thickens round a form—

Blue-bold on its pedestal—that seems to say,

“I am the greatness of the new-found night.”

(Stevens, *Opus Posthumous* 120-21)

An earlier work (“The Idea of Order at Key West”) asserts that poets are expected to know “the spirit” and “voice” in nature (among the “meaningless plungings of water and the wind,” “[t]heatrical distances,” “bronze shadows heaped” on “high horizons,” or “mountainous atmospheres” of “sky and sea”) because of a “blessed rage for order” (*TCP* 128-30). They are eager to “order words” of nature (the sea) and of vague and scarcely discernible human origins (“dimly starred”), thereby developing a rage to express and define them. In addition, Stevens delineates the moral/religious missions of verse in “A High-Toned Old Christian Woman”:

Poetry is the supreme fiction, madame.

Take the moral law and make a nave of it

And from the nave build haunted heaven. Thus,

The conscience is converted into palms. . . . (*TCP* 59)

Resisting the limitations of tradition, the poet demands permission for immoral expressions (“opposing law”) and defines poetry as “the supreme fiction.”¹¹ More inspiringly, in “This Solitude of Cataracts” and “Final Soliloquy of the Interior Paramour,” Stevens attends to the power of forming conceptions and suggests that the perceived and then interpreted finality (order) may not be the highest spiritual cause (truth) lurking in nature, but only the production of the imagination or conceptual preoccupation. He questions “permanent realization” (*TCP* 425) as well as “the obscurity of an order, a whole” (*TCP* 524) recognized through a sensation of beauty or sublimity in nature followed by a transcendence of sensibility.

Realizing that people inevitably search for proof of divine presence and power, seeking secure feelings of warmth and wholeness in the indifferent, changing world, Stevens voices in “Final Soliloquy of the Interior Paramour” that the “world imagined is the ultimate good”:

¹¹ In the poem, Stevens writes,

. . . . But take

The opposing law and make a peristyle,

And from the peristyle project a masque

Beyond the planets. Thus, our bawdiness,

Unpurged by epitaph, indulged at last,

Is equally converted into palms. . . . (*TCP* 59)

This is, therefore, the intensest rendezvous.
It is in that thought that we collect ourselves,
Out of all the indifferences, into one thing:

Within a single thing, a single shawl
Wrapped tightly round us, since we are poor, a warmth,
A light, a power, the miraculous influence.

.....
We say God and the imagination are one
How high that highest candle lights the dark.
Out of this same light, out of the central mind,
We make a dwelling in the evening air,
In which being there together is enough. (*TCP* 524)

This depiction corresponds to the transcendental experience Emerson elucidates in “Nature”: in the perception of an overarching (single) truth (“the obscurity of an order, a whole, / A knowledge, that which arranged the rendezvous”),¹² men “forget each other” and themselves (*TCP* 524). These lines seem to suggest that when “all mean egotism vanishes,” a man becomes “a transparent eyeball”; he is “nothing” but thus “see[s] all” and is “part or particle of God” (Emerson, “Nature” 24). However, as to such an imagined, rendezvoused (collected), or desired order, Stevens reveals that perhaps there “was so much that was real that was not real at all” in “This Solitude of Cataracts” (*TCP* 425). Perhaps the world envisioned is “the ultimate good” and so appears the conceived order; nonetheless, an imagined world as well as truth “loses vitality as it ceases to adhere” to reality (Stevens, *Necessary Angel* 6). And thus a verse composed in such a framework may lose its sublimity and become a static “fiction.”

Living at a time when people were losing faith in the Christian God and overarching truth, Stevens unfolded how such new experience affected him, exemplifying Emerson’s point in “The Poet”: “the experience of each new age requires a new confession” (*Selections* 225). In this poet’s “act of the mind” (*TCP* 239), one of the particularly noteworthy aspects is that a new world view and immaculate exploration of relations between nature and truth/man must be achieved through a focus on objective reality in nature or questioning, skepticism, and deconstruction of habitual perceptions and phenomenal interpretations, especially those of romantic poets. As Mary Arensberg points out in *The American Sublime*, Stevensian moments of the sublime happen “as an erasure, a whitening out of the family romance” (17), a negation of romantic as well as transcendentalist practices.

¹² In Emerson’s words in “Nature,” people “return to reason and faith” (24).

Depicting it as “vain” to search “earth and sky” to “espy” “truth in nature” (“A Room on a Garden,” *Opus Posthumous* 73-74) while hoping to attain an immaculate revisioning of the world by dismantling logocentric models of belief, Stevens seeks “the poem of pure reality” and attempts to represent objects themselves instead of any overarching truth/divine ideas behind them (*TCP* 471). Thus he inclines to present things directly rather than through metaphors made up of “degeneration” and “obscure” (not “primary”) descriptions.¹³ Such a strategy appears especially in “An Ordinary Evening in New Haven,” where the poet-persona “keep[s] coming back and coming back” to “the real instead of the hymns” which “fall upon it out of the wind.” He insists on pursuing the verse of “pure reality” untouched by “trope or deviation” but rather “straight to the word,” “to the transfixing object” at “the exactest point at which it is itself” transfixed “by being purely what it is.” He claims to seek a view “through the certain eye” making “clear of uncertainty” and “with the sight” of “simple seeing, without reflection.” “We seek Nothing beyond reality,” he further insists, questioning the conventional romantic/transcendentalist idea that a philosophical idea/overarching truth lies behind the world (*TCP* 471). As in “Not Ideas about the Thing but the Thing Itself,” Stevens’s poems exhibit “a new knowledge of reality” (*TCP* 534), rather than absolute truth. This is because he finds it “not in the premise that reality” is “a solid”; instead, the perceived/presented reality (truth) “may be a shade that traverses,” a “dust, a force that traverses a shade” (“An Ordinary Evening in New Haven,” *TCP* 489). Thus the “scrawny cry” of a bird that seemed like a sound in one’s mind could be just an elicited “knowledge of reality” (*TCP* 534).

As Crispin “at sea” in “The Comedian as the Letter C” creates “a touch of doubt” (*TCP* 27) and “the anti-master, floribunda ascetic” in “Landscape with Boat,” “brushe[s] away . . . / the colossal illusion of heaven” (*TCP* 241), Stevens held skeptical and rebellious attitudes toward received perceptions and phenomenal interpretations, attempting to transcend their confinement in order to “arrive” at “the neutral centre, the ominous element, / The single-colored, colorless, primitive” (*TCP* 242). “Bouquet of Roses in Sunlight” demonstrates Stevens’s comprehension of the subtle relation not only between reality and imagination but between man and natural objects by expressing that things change when one’s sense of them changes, which suggests that the effect/meaning of a thing varies according to one’s perspective. He argues that the main focus in many poems concerning natural objects is not on the physical reality of the depicted

¹³ “The Motive for Metaphor” and “Metaphor as Degeneration” comment on these traits: “The motive for metaphor, shrinking from / The weight of primary noon, / The ABC of being” (*TCP* 288).

object but rather on its symbolic/metaphorical meanings and functions derived from human imagination for “a completing of . . . truth” (*TCP* 431). In “Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird” (*TCP* 92-95), he critically displays various versions of a blackbird, some of which mirror past great poets.¹⁴ The fourth stanza (“A man and a woman / Are one / A man and a woman and a blackbird / Are one”) reflects an affinity with Emersonian transcendental ideas. William Wordsworth and his followers who take the origin of poetry “from emotion recollected in tranquility” (“Preface to Lyrical Ballads” 168) are recalled in the “beauty of inflections,” “innuendoes,” the “blackbird whistling,” or “just after” (*TCP* 93). Additionally, an “indecipherable cause” in the “shadow of the blackbird” is traced and meditated on by either romanticists or transcendentalists who tend to observe/experience nature according to philosophical and psychological preconceptions in which their own images and desires are reflected. Stevens then remarks on the musical effects that traditional poets pay much attention to,

I know noble accents
 And lucid, inescapable rhythms;
 But I know, too,
 That the blackbird is involved
 In what I know. (*TCP* 94)

Furthermore, Stevens questions the imaginative efforts of some romantic poets to delineate something idealistic and beautiful while ignoring the truly living thing around them:

Why do you imagine golden birds?
 Do you not see how the blackbird
 Walks around the feet
 Of the women about you? (*TCP* 93)

Stevens refused to conform to poetic conventions and phenomenological construal analysis. As insinuated in “The Comedian as the Letter C,” he was discontent with “counterfeit,” “masquerade of thought,” “hapless words” that “must belie the racking masquerade,” or “fictive flourishes that preordained” “passion’s permit” (*TCP* 39). He emphasized this refusal by composing “Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird” in irregular stanzaic and metric forms

¹⁴ On birds, many great poets before Stevens wrote well-known verse, such as Percy Bysshe Shelley’s “To a Sky-Lark,” John Keats’s “Ode to a Nightingale,” Samuel Taylor Coleridge’s “The Rime of the Ancient” (Albatross), William Cullen Bryant’s “To a Waterfowl,” and Edgar Allan Poe’s “The Raven.” In these poems, human attributes, reflections of the narrator’s mind, symbolic meanings, and instructive functions of the birds are highlighted. In contrast, Stevens focuses on a blackbird, which is usually taken as an ill omen. His choice of an unidentified black bird instead of a bird signifying something significant embodies his intention to break the taboo and leave conventional literary circles.

with few rhymes. Stevens also rejected logocentric models.¹⁵ He composed this aphoristic text with a collection of sensations that are particularly momentary in the mind. This poem on nature scenes presents incoherent perceptions expressed in a plurality of styles, not “something like an Absolute” “made quasi-perceptible” (Lyotard 138). There is distinct and suggestive beauty concerning the views of the blackbird with its surroundings; however, the poet refuses “to prefer” (*TCP* 93) any view by continually shifting his focus. The poet, not a romanticist, transcendentalist, realist, or rationalist, prefers to represent the “primitive” picture as momentarily witnessed—an objective reality, not an imagined or transcendent one:

It was evening all afternoon.
It was snowing
And it was going to snow.
The blackbird sat
In the cedar-limbs. (*TCP* 95)

Nature, Stevens insists, is not intended to be, in Lyotard’s word, “exploited” by the mind for “a purposiveness” which is not nature’s.¹⁶ There are many kinds of truths and momentary meanings; the truth about the bird is confined to the moment when it is sensed. Such a poem “refreshes life” (*TCP* 382) by rediscovering the power of momentary meanings, thereby disposing the mind to varied responses to the shifting scene. Significantly, in pressing this point, Stevens reveals the impossibility of an overarching truth/finality, an impossibility made explicit in “On the Road Home”: “‘There is no such thing as the truth’ / . . . / ‘There are many truths, / But they are not part of a truth’” (*TCP* 203).

Despite his consciousness of the poet’s obsession with first causes and eternal truth as well as his hope to create a verse which “satisfies / Belief in an immaculate beginning / And sends us, winged by an unconscious will, / To an immaculate end” (“Notes toward a Supreme Fiction,” *TCP* 382), Stevens’s poems demonstrate an insight into the power of a predominant perspective and thus emphasize presenting things as they are rather than as either metaphors or reflections of the poet’s self and divine ideas. In “Description Without Place,” he suggests that under the influence of a limited, presupposed, or fictitious vision developed by the internalization of literary/cultural conventions, what poets

¹⁵ He conveys negative impressions of romanticists and realists in “The Comedian as the Letter C” (*TCP* 40) and of rationalists in “Six Significant Landscapes”: “Rationalists, wearing square hats, / Think, in square rooms, / . . . / They confine themselves / To right-angled triangles” (*TCP* 75).

¹⁶ In *The Inhuman: Reflections on Time*, Lyotard argues that in the conventional construction of the sublime, nature is “‘used,’ ‘exploited’ by the mind according to a purposiveness that is not nature’s, not even the purposiveness without purpose implied in the pleasure of the beautiful” (136).

perceive and depict is possibly not “real” but “seeming”: it “is possible that to seem—it is to be, / As the sun is something seeming and it is” (*TCP* 339). Stevens further indicates the consequences of “potential seemings,” stating,

There might be in the curling-out spring
 A purple-leaping element that forth
 Would froth the whole heaven with its seeming-so,
 The intentions of a mind as yet unknown,
 The spirit of one dwelling in a seed,
 Itself that seed’s ripe, unpredictable fruit. (*TCP* 341)

As to the effect of privileged/predominant ideologies, he offers an instructive illustration:

. . . . It was a queen that made it seem
 By the illustrious nothing of her name.

 Things look each day, each morning, or the style
 Peculiar to the queen, this queen or that,
 The lesser seeming original in the blind (*TCP* 339-40)

The poet expresses that with a green mind, the queen makes “the world around her green” and “such seemings” actual. In such an “age” governed by the queen (“a manner collected from a queen”), a “singular man” is forced to assimilate the dominant thinking and reading:

An age is green or red. An age believes
 Or it denies. An age is solitude
 Or a barricade against the singular man
 By the incalculably plural. (*TCP* 340)

Stevens’s depiction of human will and the power of an age reflects Nietzsche’s arguments in *The Will to Power*.¹⁷ As one’s “sense perceptions” result from “assimilation and equalization in regard to all the past” in one instead of direct im-

¹⁷ For Nietzsche’s views on the relation between human will and knowledge/truth, see “Book III: Principles of a New Evaluation” in *The Will to Power*. Nietzsche states in *The Will to Power*:

. . . logic would be an imperative, not to know the true, but to posit and arrange a world that shall be called true by us. . . . the question remains open: are the axioms of logic adequate to reality or are they a means and measures for us to create reality, the concept of “reality,” for ourselves.? . . . The proposition therefore contains no criterion of truth, but an imperative concerning that which should count as true. . . . “Truth” is the will to be master over the multiplicity of sensations: to classify phenomena into definite categories. In this we start from a belief in the “in-itself” of things (as take phenomena as real).

pression and as the received “axioms of logic” are a means to “create reality,” to “order, simplify, falsify, artificially distinguish” and “master . . . the multiplicity of sensations,” or to “classify phenomena into definite categories,” what is acquired and then presented is simply a “fictitious world of subject, substance, ‘reason,’” phenomena and truth. In other words, the perceived knowledge/truth is true or quasi-perceivable within that constitution, but not absolutely “adequate to reality” (truth). It is the queen’s own “perspective” that compels all other drives to accept it as a norm. As to this “fictitious” (in Emerson’s term, “superficial”) perspective, Emerson proposes that the heart of a child and the release of sensual sensations can reverse it.¹⁸ However, Stevens shows not only his distrust of transcendental intuition but also his objection to either perceiving the natural world as a transcendental object or putting all its parts together to make the world coherent and sensible. Therefore, although he accepts that moments of truth may be perceived in the sublime sentiments produced by our responses to nature,¹⁹ Stevens makes inspiring observations on romantic/transcendental perception and realization of (eternal) truth. He further exposes its problematic effects and suggests liberation from the preoccupation with an “absolute truth” as well as such poetic expressions in a language that is not solid.

According to Stevens, man is eager to obtain the truth “in a calm world” where “there is no other meaning” (“The House Was Quiet and the World Was Calm,” *TCP* 359) and to have his mind “rest” in “a permanent realization,” breathing “his bronzen breath at the azury center of time” (“This Solitude of Cataracts,” *TCP* 425). However, a world in which rivers keep on “flowing the same way” without “the oscillations of planetary pass-pass” (*TCP* 425) as well as reasoned truth is not the one in which man actually lives. It is, instead, one he imagines, “The first idea is an imagined thing” (“Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction,” *TCP* 387). Accordingly, demands for a unity of truth, Stevens comments in “Connoisseur of Chaos,” prove nothing (“Well, an old order is a violent one. / This proves nothings”). Each demand is “Just one more truth, one more /

¹⁸ Emerson remarks, “the sun illuminates only the eye of the man, but shines into the eye and heart of the child” (“Nature” 23). In “Each and All,” he shows that when the speaker discloses his mind and releases his senses again, he goes through a sublime experience. Inhaling “the violet’s breath,” seeing the oaks, firs, pine-cones, acorns, and the sky, and hearing the rolling river and the morning bird, the speaker has the feeling of not only the beautiful again but also the sublime as beauty “[steals]” through his senses and a wild delight runs through him. It is at that point that he perceives “deity” and “the perfect whole” (*Selections* 414).

¹⁹ In “Notes toward a Supreme Fiction,” Stevens declares that “truth depends on a walk around a lake” and “there are times of inherent excellence” or “moments” of extreme, “fortuitous,” and “personal” “awakening” in which one sits “on the edge of sleep” as “on an elevation” and beholds the “academies like structures in a mist” (*TCP* 386).

Element in the immense disorder of truths" (*TCP* 216). In "On the Road Home," "Landscape with Boat," and "Notes toward a Supreme Fiction," Stevens urges man to liberate himself from the "colossal illusion of heaven" (*TCP* 241), truth as "a single word" (*TCP* 204), and other received concepts to allow his perceptions of the world to become not only more varied and active but also to continuously adjust to its constant changes ("inconstant objects of inconstant cause" in "a universe of inconsistency") (*TCP* 389). The "supreme fiction" (composition of poetry) must "change" (*TCP* 389) as must one's approach to the "knowledge of reality." This change is especially critical to a poet who hopes to compose poems "of the act of the mind" (*TCP* 240), poems of a reality which "is the beginning not the end" ("An Ordinary Evening in New Haven," *TCP* 469).

To Stevens, this change is particularly imperative to a writer in "a world of words" in "which nothing solid is its solid self" ("Description Without Place," *TCP* 345). Along with the problems of classical and romantic obsession with the "Absolute" and the acquisition of knowledge, reality, or truth through sense perceptions dominated by logocentric models of belief or by received axioms of logic, Stevens attends to those concerning poetic expressions in a language which is not "firm" and "determined" in Nietzsche's terms. Unlike Emerson, who defines words as "signs of natural facts" in "Nature" (31), Stevens, in "Description without Place," conveys an idea similar to Ferdinand de Saussure's in *Course in General Linguistics*: "the bond between the signifier and the signified is arbitrary," not inherent and solid:

For whom the word is the making of the world,
The buzzing world and lispings firmament.

It is a world of words to the end of it,
In which nothing solid is its solid self.

.....

It matters, because everything we say
Of the past is description without place, a cast
Of the imagination, made in sound;
And because what we say of the future must portend,

Be alive with its own seemings, seeming to be (*TCP* 345-46)

Stevens's understanding of language and signs leads to enlightening suggestions in "Description without Place," "Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Black-bird," "The Idea of Order at Key West," and "Notes toward a Supreme Fiction," all of which introduce approaches to a poetic "knowledge of reality." First, a poet's description is merely a "revelation," not the "thing described, nor false

facsimile" (*TCP* 344). Second, it may be "an artificial thing that exists" in "its own seeming." In other words, the representation of a thing can be just an image which seems to but does not actually identify. Third, a presentation of something in nature can provide a picture of it ("a small part of the pantomime," *TCP* 93) but not its whole or the "spiritual facts" behind it (*TCP* 343).²⁰ Fourth, as conveyed in "The Idea of Order at Key West," though a poet tries to delineate what is heard or seen, it is the poet and the poem, not the depicted object (such as the sea in the verse), that is heard even though in all his/her phrases stir the "grinding water and the gasping wind" (the sublime).²¹ The sea, whatever "self it had," "became the self" that was the poet's song. Being the maker or presenter of a passing scene in nature, a poet is only "the single artificer of the world" in which he/she sings (*TCP* 129), not a divine revealer "whose eye can integrate all the parts" as Emerson suggests in "Nature" (23).

Moreover, Stevens presents approaches to the knowledge of reality. His art captures the meaning of a thing in its difference from others in "Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird" and "Anecdote of the Jar." According to Saussure, a meaning is not inherent in a sign but "functional," a result of its relationship and contrast with other signs. The blackbird's being noticed can be attributed to its contrast with the white background of "twenty snowy mountains" and its movement in the cold bare landscape. The same is true of its eye made manifest by its white rim. Similarly, the jar in "Anecdote of the Jar" is gray and bare. However, as the jar, an artificial object, was put on a hill, it "made that slovenly wilderness" surround that hill and thereby become "no longer wild." The jar was "of a port in air" and seemingly "took dominion everywhere," but Stevens suggests it merely provides a means and focus for a view of the wilderness; it "did not give of bird or bush" (*TCP* 76).²² In "Notes toward a Supreme Fiction," the poet further highlights the interrelation of opposites, seeing it as "the origin of change":

Two things of opposite natures seem to depend
On one another, as a man depends

²⁰ In contrast, Emerson states that "particular natural facts are symbols of particular spiritual facts" ("Nature" 31).

²¹ According to Longinus, the true sublime uplifts the soul, which is "filled with joy and vaunting, as though it had itself produced what it has heard" (80).

²² The jar is a simple man-made object that dominates the wild place when placed there and becomes the focus of one's attention. The verse again illustrates the influence of the centered perception. Described to be "of a port in air," where goods can be loaded or unloaded, the jar can be interpreted as a foundation of one's thoughts. In other words, one's ideas may be derived from or around it. Here Stevens implies that the jar, alien to the world of bird or bush, might provoke some poets' imagination of a bird or bush.

On a woman, day on night, the imagined

On the real. This is the origin of change. (392)

In addition to relativism and “the origin of change,” Stevens, intent on pure perception and composition of “the poem of pure reality” that discards the restrictions and fiction of either derived or presupposed vision/concepts, introduces other approaches to the “knowledge of reality.” In “Notes toward a Supreme Fiction,” the poet-persona states,

Begin, ephebe, by perceiving the idea
Of this invention, this invented world,
The 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. (*TCP* 380-81)

He emphasizes that one must never “suppose” “an inventing mind” to be the source of the idea of the sun nor “compose” a “voluminous master folded in his fire” for that mind (*TCP* 381). Finally, he claims, “How clean the sun when seen in its idea, / Washed in the remotest cleanliness of a heaven / That has expelled us and our images” (free from the imposition of human sense and interpretation). In addition to a “clean” and “ignorant” mind, Stevens insinuates in “The Snow Man” that one who intends to attain the unadulterated (“first”) idea “must have a mind of winter” (*TCP* 9). Such an expression seemingly contradicts his original intent. Here, the poet suggests that when a man has become enmeshed in a tangle of imagination and reality or immaculate and received interpretations, his subversion begins to query and deconstruct its own action. Such an effect implies that one’s judgment and representation of the sensed proceed unavoidably from specific perspectives rather than rising from pure perception. Thus the obliteration of learned responses to leaves and wind in winter is proposed: one must not think “of any misery in the sound of the wind” or in that “of a few leaves,” for those readings are founded, in Martin Heidegger’s terms in *Being and Time*, upon one’s “fore-having, fore-sight, and fore-conception” (141). In other words, those interpretations are deemed to be inherited/assimilated impressions in the mind.²³ Accordingly, in this poem as well as “The Comedian as the Letter C,” Stevens implies that only by releasing oneself from “the unavoidable shadow” of the past and being “stripped of every fiction” can

²³ In “An Ordinary Evening in New Haven,” Stevens insinuates that “reality” may exist only in “the mind” and that the “heavens, the hells, the worlds, the longed for lands” are “created from nothingness” (*TCP* 486).

one possibly behold the pure idea of the world and discover, rather than impose, “orders” (*TCP* 27-46).²⁴

On the surface, as Paul A. Bové comments, Stevens insinuates that like a snow man, one may see nature “without the intruding veil of a symbol or a correspondence which metaphorically transforms the other into an appendage of the Self” (“Fiction, Risk, and Deconstruction: The Poetry of Wallace Stevens” 190). In other words, with a mind of winter, one “can no longer impose human emotion, ‘any misery,’ on ‘the sound of the wind’” (190); one will avert what John Ruskin calls “the pathetic fallacy,” simply viewing the frozen land covered by white snow. And yet, does a person’s perception of things in nature spring from pure judgment rather than presumed concepts in this construal? Stevens’s choice of diction appears oxymoronic and paradoxical. First, he posits the necessity of possessing a mind of winter to “regard” “the frost and the boughs” of “the pine-trees crusted with snow” (*TCP* 9). To “regard” something with a certain mind is to perceive it from that specific perspective or under a special condition. When one views nature with “a mind of winter,” as the title of his poem “What You See is What You Think” signifies, the beheld corresponds to “a mind of winter”; it is cold, bare, colorless, and invariable. Further, as the viewer or listener becomes “nothing himself,” he, contrary to what is described in “Final Soliloquy of the Interior Paramour,”²⁵ sees only “nothing that is not there and the nothing that is” (*TCP* 10). Namely, he surely perceives “the nothing,” which is “imagined” and taken as the “first idea” or feature perception of a mind of winter (a snow man). Stevens seems to assume that on this premise man may gain access to “pure reality,” “bright origin,” fact, or thought. A

²⁴ In “The Comedian as the Letter C,” Stevens describes Crispin as “free” from “the unavoidable shadow of himself” that “lay elsewhere around him” and declares,

. . . . Severance
 Was clear. The last distortion of romance
 Forsook the insatiable egotist. The sea
 Severs not only lands but also selves.
 Here was no help before reality.
 Crispin beheld and Crispin was made new.
 The imagination, here, could not evade,
 In poems of plums, the strict austerity
 of one vast, subjugating, final tone.
 The drenching of stale lives no more fell down. (*TCP* 30)

In “Notes toward a Supreme Fiction,” he suggests that one “discover an order. . . / Not to impose,” “find the real,” and “be stripped of every fiction except one, / The fiction of an absolute –Angel,” but questions “the angel in his cloud,” exclaiming, “What am I to believe?” (*TCP* 404).

²⁵ As I pointed out above, Stevens suggests a transcendental experience in the verse: “We feel the obscurity of an order, a whole, / A knowledge, that which arrange the rendezvous / . . . / We say God and the imagination are one. . .” (*TCP* 524).

further illustration is in “Notes toward a Supreme Fiction” where the poet states that “the nothingness was a nakedness, a point” beyond “which fact could not progress as fact” and beyond “which thought could not progress as thought” (*TCP* 403). In a sense, the supersensible faculty functions in the person’s discernment of “the nothing” in the winter world. From a Kantian perspective, it is a faculty through which the overwhelmed imagination can turn fear into pleasure, and a feeling of safety or balance can be achieved. This faculty of the human mind allows a man to transcend his sensual feelings in order to attain reason. To Stevens in “The Snow Man,” a mind of winter erasing sensation may enable man to perceive “pure reality” or “the first idea” (the supersensible finality), for he suggests in “Notes toward a Supreme Fiction” that the fiction resulting from feeling is “the more than rational distortion” (*TCP* 406). While Emerson asserts the importance of heart (emotion/intuition) and mind in one’s sense of not only the beautiful and the sublime but also the truth and reason behind it, Stevens avers in these two poems that things may be verily discerned without the interference of feelings and emotions, which are depicted as not “immaculate” (*TCP* 382) or trustworthy in one’s recognition as well as in one’s presentation of reality.

However, as conveyed in “The Plain Sense of Things,” it is difficult to “choose the adjective” for “a blank cold” as well as for a human being with feelings to perceive as a snow man does (*TCP* 502). Accordingly, such critics as Harold Bloom question why the person beholds “something shagged and rough” if he really sees “the same bare place” without human emotions (“Reduction to the First Idea” 95). As Stevens himself asserts in “The Plain Sense of Things”: “Yet the absence of the imagination had / Itself to be imagined”; the person’s perception and judgment of the winter world as well as his subjective finality about the viewed scenes can be merely an effect of imagination and presumption (*TCP* 503).²⁶ In Bloom’s words, “the nothing” can be “the most minimal or abstracted of fictions,” but still a fiction (95). In that case, in “The Snow Man,” the poet’s attempt to demolish an inherited structure of thinking and presentation with a presumed percept leads merely to a different knowledge of reality or a kind of fictive understanding and representation of the world, not truly an absolute reality. Again, the verse can be read as Stevens’s demonstration of the interrelation between one’s perspective and the effect of the perceived. As argued in “Description Without Place,” the description is only “revelation,” not the “thing described” “nor false facsimile”; it can be “an artificial thing that

²⁶ With human appearance but fictive eyes and ears, a snow man’s vision and hearing are imaginary.

exists” in “its own seeming, plainly visible” (*TCP* 344). Such poems reflect a Nietzschean principle: there are no absolute moral facts/truth but only interpretations, which are driven by the interpreter’s “will to power” and reveal his/her values/perspectives.²⁷ The knowledge of reality discerned with a winter mind can encourage contemplation by being one of “many truths” and being “the beginning not the end.”

In addition to various perceptions resulting from different perspectives (“Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird”), a knowledge of reality effected by a quasi-purified perspective (“The Snow Man” and “Notes toward a Supreme Fiction”), and approaches to reality (“Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird,” “Description without Place,” “The Idea of Order at Key West,” and “Anecdote of the Jar”), Stevens introduces diverse scenes into a text without suggesting connections or meanings. Such a work disposes the mind to different/new experience and perspectives as illustrated in “Six Significant Landscapes.” Here the poet takes himself as well as his readers to a foreign place and imagined space to experience dissimilar landscapes. There is a picture of an old man sitting in the shadow of a pine tree in China watching larkspur (blue and white) wave in the wind at the edge of the shadow as his beard and the pine tree are stirred by the wind (*TCP* 73). There is also a scene of an obscure night (“The night is of the color / Of a woman’s arm”) and a pool shining like “a bracelet” shaken “in a dance.” Another depicts the speaker’s dream of the moon, the “white folds” of whose gown are filled with “yellow light,” the “soles of whose feet” have grown red, and whose hair is filled with “certain blue crystallizations” from stars not far off (*TCP* 74). The following scene depicts a star shining through grapeleaves. All are passing images of nature in motion. After presenting the scenes, the poet challenges the dimensions of one’s imagination/perspective, suggesting,

Rationalists, wearing square hats,
 Think, in square rooms,

 They confine themselves
 To right-angled triangles.
 If they tried rhomboids,
 Cones, waving lines, ellipses—
 As, for example, the ellipse of the half-moon—
 Rationalists would wear somebreros. (*TCP* 75)

²⁷ In Stevens’s words in “Notes Toward A Supreme Fiction,” that is, “We reason of these things with later reason / And we make of what we see, what we see clearly / And have seen, a place dependent on ourselves” (*TCP* 401). One tends to “include the things” that “in each other are included, the whole,” the “complicate, the amassing harmony” and then “imposes orders as he thinks of them” (403).

Presenting such fragmentary, multifarious scenes, Stevens encourages a multifaceted and expansive perspective: "I measure myself / Against a tall tree. / I find that I am much taller" (*TCP* 74) and invites one's free contemplation / interpretation.

As a modern poet at a time when people were interrogating past logocentric models of belief/imagination and prior formulations of the poetic sublime, Stevens indeed had "a whole new experience" to unfold in the constantly changing world. His poems, such as "A High-Toned Old Christian Woman," "Of Modern Poetry," "Angel Surrounded by Paysans," and "The Man with the Blue Guitar" demonstrate that he did not view poetry as "God's wine"²⁸ but as "the supreme Fiction" where there may be "haunted heaven" or "novelities of the sublime" (*TCP* 59), where the world is "washed" in the poet's "imagination," and to "which his imagination return[s]" (*TCP* 179).²⁹ With the idea that the imagination loses vitality when it does not "adhere to what is real," Stevens recognized the necessity of not only being "the angel of reality" to present his living world but also exploring and prudently manipulating the power of forming and presenting truths (conceptions) despite the impossibility of a direct, complete, and eternal knowledge of reality.

Regarding modern poetry as "the poem of the mind in the act of finding" what would "suffice," Stevens wanted his poems to "construct a new stage," "to be living, to learn the speech of the place," and to reflect the issues of the time (*TCP* 240). Consequently, his readers are presented with a subjective perception and "knowledge of reality" "contingent on its time and place" in a transitory "supreme fiction" which "refreshes life" (*TCP* 382). Reading his works, they will be inspired by his poetic power and sublime expressions, sharing for a moment the poet's own liberation from the confines of classical, romantic and transcendentalist constructions of the sublime associated with logocentric models, the pathetic fallacy, and phenomenal interpretations (*TCP* 382). Such poems, "through candor," bring back "a power" that "gives a candid kind to everything" (*TCP* 382). Nevertheless, as Marianne Moore points out in her comments on "Notes toward a Supreme Fiction," Stevens's poetics sometimes reveals his imagination to be emotionally complicated, committed to "principles," "impatient with received aesthetic values," and "agnostic but uneasy with the unknown."³⁰ As a result, although aware of problems in language and imagery (components of the sublime defined by Longinus), Stevens did not concentrate on artistic ex-

²⁸ Emerson states that "poetry is not 'Devil's wine,' but God's wine" in "The Poet" (*Selections* 234).

²⁹ This seems to imply Nietzsche's idea that one unable to see round his/her own corner cannot get outside his/her own perspectives, but tends to interpret what he/she perceives.

³⁰ Moore's review is discussed by William Doreski in *The Modern Voice in American Poetry* (43).

perimentation with their innovative usage. Instead, paying special attention to the power of forming or presenting a nonconformist knowledge of truths, Stevens experimented with approaches to reality. He attended to the presentation of a “new knowledge of reality” as well as a “beauty of reality” through a focus on objective reality, a liberation from received perceptions and conventional constructions of the sublime, and a return to the “primitive,” to the nothingness, out of which it is possible to find a pure / different knowledge of truth(s).³¹ His intent to efface the power of received views is faced with a bleached / refined perception that may lead to a fiction of an “immaculate” beginning / end (*TCP* 382) or a “fiction of the abyss” (Arensberg’s term in *The American Sublime* 17). In his words in “The American Sublime,” the Stevensian sublime “comes down/ To the spirit itself, / The spirit and space / The empty spirit / In vacant space” (*TCP* 131). Such a sublime sentiment stripping away the imposed old order/ truth as well as logocentric models of thinking is intended for the recognition of the interrelation between one’s perception and perspective and the possibility of a different knowledge of reality.

Such a poetic performance raises the question of whether an American poet must “go barefoot / Blinking and blank,” eliminating all received images, conventions, or perceptions in order to display “pure reality” or “bright origin” and create sublime expressions (*TCP* 131).³² With skeptical and rebellious attitudes toward received reality and practices, Stevens unavoidably reflects a subjective and conceptual sublime judgment and presents expressions that appear not truly disinterested but presuppose a kind of purposiveness. Such poetry illustrates that commitment to a specific perspective acts as the foundation of their thought, language, experience, and interpretation. Under such circumstances, particular words, meanings, and practices are elevated to a privileged position. The reality, idea, “complete simplicity,” or the sublime discovered or created in the world of a “supreme fiction” can be nothing “absolute” or “solid” but an interpretation, understanding, fiction, or different “knowledge of reality.”³³

³¹ In “Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction,” Stevens avers, “Out of nothing to have come on major weather, / It is possible, possible, possible. It must / Be possible. It must be in that in time / The real will from its crude compounding come” (*TCP* 404).

³² It is a question the poet-persona asks in the poem.

³³ In “The Poems of Our Climate,” Stevens especially highlights the verse of complete simplicity and the unsatisfied human mind,

II.

Say even that this complete simplicity
Stripped one of all one’s torments, concealed
The evilly compound, vital I
And made it fresh in a world of white,
A world of clear water, brilliant-edged,

However, Stevens's subversion and presentation of a "new knowledge of reality" questioning and passing beyond received images, conventions, or perceptions, in Lyotard's words, disrupts their attempt to effect a "regulation" of "a purposiveness of art, which was to illustrate the glory of a name, divine or human, to which was linked the perfection of some cardinal virtue or other" (96). By way of questioning, presenting diverse possible approaches, and then questioning such approaches, Stevens's work introduces some approximating truths.

Although no "Absolute" is derived from the Stevensian "aesthetic" sign or sublime sentiment, Stevens's version of the American sublime released from the confines of prior constructions of the sublime can afford "the never-resting mind" (*TCP* 194) "more food for reflection" (Longinus 80). Such food may be found in contemplation of the interrelations between cognitive judgment and the construction of the sublime or "pure reality," of relativism in "Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird" and "Anecdote of the Jar," of multiplicity of perceptions/truths, and of the impossibility of an overarching truth.³⁴ Conscious of the problematic connection between one's sense (in Nietzsche's term "perspective") and the sensed (the essence of things) while familiar with the influence of the Western preoccupation with a search for "truth," Stevens highlights the crucial effect of untruth, illusion, and fiction. Intent not on "the final destination of the mind" (freedom from feelings of impotence) but inclined to let "the imperfect" remain ("The Poems of Our Climate," *TCP* 194) and "the war" between the mind and the perceived continue,³⁵ Stevens composed the

Still one would want more, one would need more,
More than a world of white and snowy scents.

III.

There would still remain the never-resting mind,
So that one would want to escape, come back
To what had been so long composed.
The imperfect is our paradise.
Note that, in this bitterness, delight,
Since the imperfect is so hot in us,
Lies in flawed words and stubborn sounds.
(*TCP* 193-94)

³⁴ The absence of a discernible connection between the presented and the absolute truth or foundational philosophical thought renders Stevens's verse of simple objects or scenes abstract to critics who wish to believe the poet presents a mode of "apprehending reality" which is "a reflection of the inner mechanism of that reality" (Ellmann 170) or which maintains philosophical insights despite his simply concrete and pure presentation.

³⁵ Analyzing the conventional construction of the sublime, Lyotard states that "imaginative nature" is "sacrificed in the interests of practical reason," which "heralds the end of an aesthetics, that of the beautiful, in the name of the final destination of the mind," "freedom" from suffering and feelings of impotence (137). In "Notes toward A Supreme Fiction," Stevens argues, "there is a war between the mind / And sky, between thought and day and night. It is / For that the poet is always in the sun, / Patches the moon together in his room / . . . / It is a war that never ends" (*TCP* 407).

“poem of the mind” to achieve different knowledge of/approaches to reality in his supreme fiction, which refreshes life and perspective. His decreation/negation of the past American sublime contributes to the creation of his own version of the American sublime reflecting the spirit of the Longinian sublime and the Emersonian American scholar that insists on passing beyond the confines of given norms and conventions. He creates a poetic sublime that encourages nonconformist/unconventional access to the knowledge of reality as well as critics’ diverse analyses in the critical constructs in which Stevens’s poetry is “washed” in their imagination/interpretation and to which their imagination/interpretation returns.

Works Cited

- Arensberg, Mary. *The American Sublime*. Albany: State U of New York P, 1986. Print.
- Baym, Nina, ed. *The Norton Anthology of American Literature*. 2nd ed. Vol. 2. New York: Norton, 1986. Print.
- Bloom, Harold. “Reduction to the First Idea.” *Critical Essays on Wallace Stevens*. Ed. Steven Gould Axelrod and Helen Deese. Boston: G. K. Hall, 1994. 84-98. Print.
- Bové, Paul A. “Fiction, Risk, and Deconstruction: The Poetry of Wallace Stevens.” *Destructive Poetics: Heidegger and Modern American Poetry*. New York: Columbia UP, 1980. 181-215. Print.
- Doreski, William. *The Modern Voice in American Poetry*. Gainesville: UP of Florida, 1995. Print.
- Ellmann, Richard. “How Wallace Stevens Saw Himself.” *Wallace Stevens: A Celebration*. Ed. Frank Doggett and Robert Buttel. Princeton: Princeton UP, 1980. 146-70. Print.
- Emerson, Ralph Waldo. “The American Scholar.” Whicher 63-96.
- _____. “Each and All.” Whicher 413-14.
- _____. “The Poet.” Whicher 222-41.
- _____. “Nature.” Whicher 23-56.
- Fuller, Margaret. “American Literature; Its Position in the Present Time, and Prospects for the Future.” *The Web of American Transcendentalism*. The Web of American Transcendentalism, n.d. Web. 21 Nov. 2012.
- Heidegger, Martin. *Being and Time: A Translation of Sein und Zeit*. Trans. Joan Stambaugh. Albany: State U of New York P, 1996. Print.
- Hilfer, Anthony Channell. “The Nothing That Is.” *Texas Studies in Literature and Language* 54.2 (Summer 2012): 222-34.
- Leggett, B. J. *Early Stevens: The Nietzschean Intertext*. Durham: Duke UP, 1992. Print.
- Longinus. “On the Sublime.” *Theory Since Plato*. Ed. Hazard Adams. New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1971. 76-101. Print.
- Liotard, Jean-François. *The Inhuman: Reflections on Time*. Trans. Geoffrey Bennington and Rachel Bowlby. Cambridge: Polity, 1991. Print.
- Nietzsche, Friedrich. *The Will to Power*. Nietzsche’s Features Archive, 13 Nov. 1998. Web.

11 Oct. 2012.

- Santayana, George. *The Sense of Beauty: Being the Outlines of Aesthetic Theory*. Cambridge: MIT P, 1988. Print.
- Saussure, Ferdinand de. *Course in General Linguistics*. Trans. Wade Baskin. New York: Philosophical Library, 1959. Internet Archive, n. d. Web. 11 Oct. 2012.
- Stevens, Wallace. *The Collected Poems*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1991. Print.
- _____. *Necessary Angel: Essays on Reality and the Imagination*. New York: Vintage, 1951. Print.
- _____. *Opus Posthumous*. New York: Vintage, 1990. Print.
- Weiskel, Thomas. "Approaching the Romantic Sublime." *The Romantic Sublime: Studies in the Structure and Psychology of Transcendence*. Baltimore: The John Hopkins UP, 1976. 3-33. Print.
- Whicher, Stephen E., ed. *Selections from Ralph Waldo Emerson*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1957. Print.
- White, Gillian. "Reality in America: Realism and Rhetoric in Stevens's 'The Noble Rider and the Sound of Words'." *Wallace Stevens Journals* 35.2 (2011): 240-65. Print.
- Wilson, Rob. *American Sublime: The Genealogy of a Poetic Genre*. Madison: U of Wisconsin P, 1991. Print.
- Wordsworth, William. "Preface to Lyrical Ballads." *The Norton Anthology of English Literature*. Ed. M. H. Abrams. 2nd ed. Vol. 2. New York: Norton, 1986. 157-70. Print.

華萊士·史蒂文斯之「美式超凡」詩作

摘要

華萊士·史蒂文斯(Wallace Stevens)的詩代表一種美國式的「超凡」(an American sublime)，擺脫了歐洲影響以及古典、浪漫和先驗論者之構想，重新檢視朗基努斯對「超凡」(the sublime)的定義，以及朗基努斯認為其關鍵在於心中留下許多可思索之處的觀點。他的詩拆解以往對「超凡」的概念和建構，重新創造一種美國式的「超凡」，超越既定規則之侷限。企圖顛覆權威文學慣例的史蒂文斯，在詩歌中意圖撰寫「心靈之詩」，「建構新的舞台」，他不執著於支配一切的真理，而是提供一種非絕對之「新的現實認知」。他對文學傳統、習慣看法、和現象詮釋的解構，有時也難免解構其初衷；這樣的現象證明了對特定觀點的執著，往往成為其思想、語言、經驗、和詮釋的根基。史蒂文斯對支配觀點的負面效果之認知，並無法使他逃脫其侷限，因此他嘗試以各種途徑追求現實的認知。在史蒂文斯的「至高虛構」中所發現和創造的超凡，可能是一種虛構、一種詮釋、或是一種新的/不同的「現實的認知」，但是也提供更多的素材給「永不停歇的心靈」深(反)思。史蒂文斯的本意不在「心靈之終點」，而是傾向讓「不完美」存在，他所呈現的現實「是起點非終點」，因而創造出他自成一格之美國式「超凡」，鼓勵不墨守成規的思想和追求現實認知的各種方法。

關鍵字：超凡，單純的現實，不墨守成規的思維，解構，詮釋，至高虛構