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Combining close readings that highlight structural techniques Wallace Stevens uses to lead readers to see the world through his imagination with historical/biographical information and scholarship that provides context for their production, publication and content, I study how Wallace Stevens's, "The Poems of Our Climate," "Dutch Graves in Bucks County," and "Examination of the Hero in a Time of War" rely on rhetorical/aesthetic strategies characteristic of hybridity to complete his subsumption of reality into the ecosystem of the imagination. The results of my investigation reveal Stevens's rhetorical/aesthetic use of the characteristics of hybridity allow him to use the failures and successes of tradition and both skepticism and faith in the positivist present as tools whereby he can fulfill his aim of having readers experience the ways these poems take form in his mind. In other words, with the aid of these hybrid rhetorical/aesthetic strategies, Stevens strives to pull off a feat of telepathy through the medium of poetry and recreate the images and questions about knowing he experiences in his own mind in the mind of readers.

“COMMINGLED SOUVENIRS AND PROPHECIES”:
THE HYBRID REALITY OF STEVENS’S
AESTHETIC ECOLOGY OF MIND

by

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“COMMINGLED SOUVENIRS AND PROPHECIES”:
THE HYBRID REALITY OF STEVENS’S AESTHETIC ECOLOGY OF MIND

In a 1948 letter to José Rodríguez Feo, Stevens historicizes his clearly unsatisfied mood for the year and laments:

All the newness in this world ... as if modern art, modern letters, modern politics had at last demonstrated that they were merely diversions, merely things to be abandoned when the time came to pick up the ancient burden again and carry it on. (Letters 621)

Summing up his feelings, he states:

What music have I heard that has not been the music of an orchestra of parrots and what books have I read that were not written for money and how many men of ardent spirit and starscimitar mind have I met? Not a goddam one. (Letters 622)

It is impossible to state categorically what Stevens has in mind when he invokes a return to an “ancient burden,” and everything from royal rule, feudalism, state religion, aristocracy, laissez-faire capitalism, and any other number of “ancient” systems comes to mind as possibilities (Letters 621). However, the term “ancient burden” (Letters 621) finds its closest semantic resonance with the supremacist language of Rudyard Kipling’s infamous poem “The White Man’s Burden: The United States and The Philippine Islands, 1899,” which is necessarily entangled with the imperial (often euphemized as expansionist) rhetoric of Manifest Destiny and Roosevelt’s Corollary to the Monroe

Doctrine.¹ These political flashpoints of empire promotion coincided with Stevens's formative years of journal writing that started while he studied at Harvard in 1898. It is a matter of historical record that these ideas led to a hegemonic and conformist view of the world promoting empire in the name of "civilization" and/or "religion," wherein the displacement, murder, and colonization of peoples became romanticized into a political narrative that substituted the meanings of these acts from being acts of barbarity into being acts commensurate with rugged individualism and progress. Such shared beliefs in a "white man's burden" to civilize the world were imbued with the rhetorical gravitas of "adventure," "frontierism," and "discovery." All of these promotional motifs that accompanied the idea of the "white man's burden" were subsumed within solemn feelings of patriotic pride and "logical" arguments that encouraged expanding the nations' borders in the name of self-preservation and glory. Therefore, the process of carrying out the "white man's burden" was united with celebrating independence and individuality since such ideals made up the discourse materials of its promotion. The answer to the question of what Stevens means when he talks about returning to the "ancient burden" is one that leads to much conjecture and, of course, is one of context (Letters 21). But the possibility Stevens's comment about "carrying on" the "ancient burden" is an indulgence in one of the period's racist tropes is not beyond reason (Letters 621). In the same letter, Stevens's passions against all the newness in the world, circa 1948, include complaints that "all the weak affect the strong, and all the strong keep

¹ See "The White Man's Burden": Kipling's Hymn to U.S. Imperialism. <http://historymatters.gmu.edu/d/5478/>.

silence” that further reinforces the connection of his use of the term “ancient burden” with supremacist justifications rooted in fear of the other (Letters 621). There is now scholarship that delves into the uses by Stevens (as well as other important figures in modernism) of racist tropes and imagery. And, I believe, any student of his poetry and/or of modernism should be made aware of this scholarship. In this regard, teachers, I believe, have a responsibility to share this blight on Stevens’s poetry and legacy, as well as that of any other major figures of modernism² that similarly soiled their art.

In the same letter, Stevens states, “there are very few living individuals because we are all compelled to live in clusters: unions, classes, the West, etc.” (Letters 622). But while his criticism of the age highlights what he sees as the constraining effects of modernity, his solution is a return to an “ancient burden” that very well may be the epitome of conformity³ (Letters 621). In the sentence that follows Stevens’s call to “pick up the ancient burden,” he gives an explanation for dismissing all the “newness in this world” in favor of returning to ideals of the past, but does not explicitly identify what these ideals are (Letters 621):

What I mean is getting rid of all our horrid fictions and getting back to the realities of mankind. Perhaps instead of living in an era of man released at last from history, we are living in a period of a lot of damned nonsense. I cannot help

² See Rachel Blau DuPlessis’ *Genders, Races and Religious Cultures in Modern American Poetry, 1908-1934*.

³ In my mind, “ancient burdens” seems like the epitome of conformity because the phrase suggests resistance to change traditional social beliefs and practices. However, Stevens’ complaint resonates with 19th and 20th century “pro-aristocratic” arguments that greater social equanimity and democratic ideals would actually lead to a society plagued by mediocrity and conformity. In “Everyday Nobility: Stevens and the Paradoxes of Democratic Heroism,” Patrick Reading explores how in the poem “Examination of the Hero in the Time of War” Stevens reconciles his belief in democracy and arguments that equanimity necessarily hampers the development of excellence in society.

feeling that communism, in spite of its organization, in spite of its revolutionary program and detonations, is the bunk: something specious, the refuge of failure. (Letters 621-622)

This part of the letter, I believe is a glimpse into an important aspect of the “ghost in the machine” driving Stevens’s poetics. His poetic passion is greatly influenced by conflicting discourses of history and their accompanying triumphs and failures. It is important to understand that during Stevens’s lifetime (1879-1955) he experienced a great number of these conflicting discourses as the world drastically transformed. Stevens witnessed not only the Spanish American War, but WWI, WWII and a plethora of political, scientific and technological revolutions that fundamentally changed the world. To put into perspective the different technological epochs Stevens spanned during his lifetime, it is sufficient to state that if he had only lived a little over 2 more years he would have been a historical witness of both the Wright Brothers first powered flight and the successful launch by the Soviet Union of Sputnik, the first artificial satellite to attain orbit in space. In this portion of the letter, he shows a clear disillusionment with the results of the new efforts to transform the political landscape through modern ideas of “organization” and “revolutionary programs” in “communism” that have failed to achieve the desired “releas[e] at last from history” (Letters 621-622). However, his response to the reality of these failures, perhaps, is far from an ideal choice since it involves a return to, what quite possibly are, more well-trodden failures and tragedies; to those “ancient burdens” he sees as the “realities of mankind” (Letters 621-622).

Ultimately, the previous analysis of his letter serves as a nexus of context for the conflicting passions between the past and the present that informs the textual material

found in the poems to be discussed. However, the letter is not some point of departure from which the poems originate; the letter is not a causal link in a chain leading to the poems because the letter was written several years after the poems were produced by Stevens. The link between the poems and the letter is one of context based on content. Stevens's passionate use of swear words, like "damn" and "goddam," and the extremity of his excretal "bunk" language are not typical, as far as I have found, in Stevens's letters (Letters 621-622). I believe the passions he exhibits in the letter are a window into a conflict Stevens had in various contexts felt for some time. Stevens's historical view of the age he lived, and the passions these views kindled in him can be interpreted as evidence of a double bind-like situation between dashed hopes for the positivist promises of a modern present that continually fails to escape the atrocities of history, and in the face of those dashed hopes, a disillusion-impelled search for answers from traditions rooted in this historically atrocious past. These conflicting passions between ideals of the past and those of the new modern age Stevens straddled in his lifetime, I believe, translated into a determination to forever, if necessary, "untie" this bind by adopting a hybrid strategy which subsumed the contradistinctions of the age into his imagination. The result is a poetry "commingl[ing] souvenirs and prophecies" into hybridized creations that interrogate both the failures and successes of tradition and both skepticism and faith in the positivist present (Stevens "Comedian as the Letter C" qtd. in Holly Stevens *Souvenirs and Prophecies* vii).

In *Steps to an Ecology of Mind* Gregory Bateson, the inventor of the term double bind, illustrates the potential for creativity the push to reconcile a trap between two

irreconcilable messages can produce. In his book, he recounts an experiment wherein a hypnotist tells his subject that there is no way his hand can move but when he gives the subject the signal, he must move it (228). Once given the signal, the subject either “hallucinates the hand has moved, or hallucinates himself in a different place and therefore the hand has moved” (228). Stevens’s “Red Love Kit” exemplifies the basic dynamics of Bateson’s double bind concept:

Your yes her no, your no her yes. The words
Make little difference, for being wrong
And wronging her, if only as she thinks,
You never can be right... (emphasis added 1-4)

Based on the content of the poems that are the focus of this thesis, “The Poems of Our Climate,” “Dutch Graves in Bucks County,” and “Examination of the Hero in a Time of War,” I believe for Wallace Stevens the answer to the double-bind-like contradistinctions of modernism that led to the famous fragmentation and isolation typical of much modernist poetry was to produce a hybrid poetics that utilizes both the failures and successes of tradition and both skepticism and faith in the positivist present. In other words, Stevens created a poetry interested in highlighting both the incongruities and linkages between concepts rooted in the past: philosophy, mysticism, subjectivity, tradition and those associated with the modern period: science, technology, objectivity, and atheism. In these poems, one of Stevens’s chief aims is to recreate in the minds of readers the way in which these poems formed in his own imagination. I propose that his attempts at what amounts to a telepathic feat of poetry depended on a careful calibration of textual and contextual sequences of these traditional and positivist materials that take

on hybrid characteristics. His engagement with the conflicts between the beliefs of the past and beliefs of the present with regard to art, philosophy, heroism and warfare reflect a rhetorical/aesthetic strategy that plays upon both the strengths and weaknesses of philosophy, tradition, subjectivity, and mysticism, representative of the past, and science, technology, objectivity, and atheism that represent the positivist present. It is in this context of the interrogation of past and present that Stevens makes use of the fluidity of hybrid characteristics as part of his poetic subsumption of reality into the ecosystem of the imagination. And it is within this imaginative ecosystem that Stevens's "The Poems of Our Climate," "Dutch Graves in Bucks County," and "Examination of the Hero in a Time of War" come alive in the minds of readers.

In "Poems," the subsuming of reality into the ecosystem of the imagination involves historically opposing views on poetic art and our ontological position to judge words into an imaginative mixture leading to uncertainty, in "Dutch" the subsumption of reality into imagination melds and transforms the relationship, or lack of it, between soldiers of the past, soldiers of the present, and the whole history of human genealogy into an illusion of noble sentiment, and in "Examination" the subsumption of the reality of the embodied representation of the heroic and its reality as disembodied sentiment coalesces into imaginary visions of the heroic contingent on the environment for their multifaceted manifestations. In the poems, hybridity works in diverse forms: as the union of lived experienced and imagination, as synthesis leading to new conceptions, as tensions between opposing ideas that are nevertheless inexorably connected, as a tool for multiplying meanings, and in cultural integrations of language and aesthetics. But the

underlying purpose of these hybrid combinations is so that Stevens can reproduce in readers, experiences that took form in his mind. He strives to pull off a feat of telepathy through the medium of poetry and recreate the images and questions about knowing he experiences in his own mind in the mind of readers. Furthermore, in keeping with the contradictory tensions of the material forming the poems as well as the imaginative ecosystem into which they are subsumed, the poems have indeterminate endings mirroring the uncharted reality of the closest and, as of yet, least understood ecological system of all: the mind. My methodology for the study of the hybrid characteristics of these poems combines close readings that highlight structural techniques Stevens uses to lead readers to see the world through his imagination with historical/biographical information and scholarship that provides context for their production, publication and content.

In Search of Stevens's Imperfect Paradise

In her biography *Wallace Stevens: the Later Years, 1923-1955*, Joan Richardson characterizes Stevens as an avid reader of works concerned with “how the common man and woman understood reality,” and that, “he made numerous transcriptions of passages having to do with what constituted “honesty” or “truth” in art and in life” (145, 148). “The Poems of Our Climate” appeared along with twelve poems under the heading “Canonica” in the spring 1938 issue of *The Southern Review*. Therefore, it is not surprising that during this time in his life, the late 1930s, Stevens would as part of his defining characteristics of poetry see it as “the statement of the relation between a man and the world” (Stevens qtd. in Richardson 150). An ontological focus serves as a main

theme throughout “The Poems of Our Climate,” but it also becomes a gyre that will capture and compact within it sundry philosophies on art, their relation to human experience, and ideas expressed in Stevens’s poetry and prose. Stevens’s conceptions of both the ideal poet and the ideal reader converge when the poet being “sensitive to the mechanisms ... and range of possible associations ... represent[s] as many ... [of] them as possible,” and the reader, in a type of quest reminiscent of that of “Oedipus ... solve[s] the puzzle the poem present[s]” (Richardson 145).

It is in this spirit of searching for associations which can further an understanding of “The Poems of Our Climate” that I undertake the quest Richardson described as vital to the ideal reader of Stevens. In so doing, I uncover Stevens’s subsumption of a confluence of ideas on aesthetic theory and its links to human experience that become translated into the ecology of imagination. These ideas include: the imagistic poetry of the Modernist period, Kant’s hierarchy of aesthetics, and Nietzsche’s division of Apollonian and Dionysian characteristics within Greek tragedy, found in *The Birth of Tragedy from the Spirit of Music*. “The Poems of Our Climate” is rich in subject matter concerning aesthetics and its relation to human ontology. It has been claimed of Nietzsche, that he used “tropes of “truth” and “error” [as] ... rhetorical devices to help reader[s] understand and confront the intuition for a final truth” as nothing more than an illusion (Magnus 5). In “The Poems of Our Climate” Stevens uses tropes of “beauty” and “art” as a poet, playing with language and our beliefs, he dramatizes a struggle we all must confront, the struggle to understand *how* and *what* we perceive. Moreover, through this drama he playfully and ironically enacts how these questions relate to human *being*.

Double Entendre Title

The title “The Poems of Our Climate” uses figurative language to represent timeliness. A more commonplace title, with the same connotation, would be “The Poems of Our Times.” However, as I shall explain shortly, with this choice of title, Stevens has more in mind than communicating timeliness with an artistic twist. In a June 6, 1938 letter to Leonard C. Van Geyzel, Stevens says that “the best poetry magazine” around that time was *New Verse*, which in the January 1938 edition included the following advertising blurb by Sylvia Lynd: “Whoever is curious as to the state of poetry at the present day cannot do better than to get “The Year’s Poetry”” (Letters 332; Lynd 1). The following edition of *New Verse*, published in March, contains a similar blurb in the promotion of *The Faber Book of Modern Verse*: “No one book better exemplifies the poems of our own age and day” (1). The advertising of poetry during this period was obviously tied to this concept of timeliness, and its message was certainly not lost on Stevens. In “Of Modern Poetry,” a poem that will also form part of *Parts of the World* (1942), the speaker states: “It has to be living, to learn the speech of the place. / It has to face the men of the time and to meet / the women of the time...” (7-9).

The title serves as a tempting bellwether to reflect on poetry and easily invites comparisons of other poets’ work. For example, Howard Bloom believes “The Poems of Our Climate” “is Stevens’ *Ode on a Grecian Urn*” and therefore invokes Keats as a possible precursor to the meditation explored in the poem (141). Ezra Pound’s imagism and William Carlos Williams’s objective poetry have been closely associated with the stylistic elements of the poetry the speaker of the “Poems of Our Climate” re-creates in

its first six lines. Of note in this regard is the strong imagistic and objective nature of the first two lines, “Clear water in a brilliant bowl, / Pink and white carnations,” reminiscent of Pound’s, “Petals on a wet, black bough,” in his popular poem “In a Station of the Metro” (“Poems” 1-2; “Station” 2). The meditation by the speaker of the “Poems of Our Climate” describing stripping “all of one’s torments,” the “the evilly compounded I” and to “ma[ke] it fresh” as futile, parody Pound’s call to strip away the “emotional slither” from poetry, and his now famous dictum to “make it new” (12-14 ; Pound 262).

While acknowledging connections to Keats and Pound in “Wallace Stevens: Poems Against his Climate” Jacqueline Vaught Brogan feels confident that irony is the primary motive of the title:

Although Imagism and Keats, and even the more generalized “chaos and change” that began to accompany the late 1930s are undoubtedly part of the larger climate that informs this poem, the self-reflective irony of the title suggests that “The Poems of Our Climate” is primarily an ironic critique of the particular poetic climate at the time, one dominated to a large degree in 1938 by the “objective” poetry of his well-known contemporary, William Carlos Williams. (76)

Her piece goes on to tie what she sees as Stevens’s flawed imitation of Williams’s objective poetry in the first section of “The Poems of Our Climate” to what she feels is a misunderstanding by Stevens of Williams’s poetic project. Therefore, according to Brogan:

“The Poems of Our Climate” may be said to demonstrate Stevens’ “ignorance” of Williams’ poetry or, more specifically, of Williams’ poetic strategy. However much we may find that Williams ultimately succeeds in evoking [the actions of the mind] Stevens desires of modern poetry, such “objective” poetry remains for Stevens far too “anti-poetic.” (78)

She believes Stevens misunderstands Williams because he ignores how his poetry enacts the mind, which was, after all, a central concern Stevens had for poetry at the time, emphasized in “Of Modern Poetry” with its “...metaphysician in the dark, twanging... / The poem of the act of the mind” (20, 28). Whether this is the case, perhaps, is open to debate; however, her analysis of Williams’s poetry in connection with “The Poems of Our Climate” is highly convincing. And it underscores how the poem’s title can simultaneously point toward different avenues for approaching its significance, the direction of comparing the introductory lines of the poem with the work of other poets with which it finds fault and/or affinities, and the direction, leaving that consideration aside that delves into what type of poetry is most amenable to the ontological ecology human beings inhabit. Because instructive as it is to study “The Poems of Our Climate” as a poem calling attention to the state of poetry among Stevens’s contemporaries, I believe there is a second connotation at work in the title: the necessity for poems to mirror our ontological climate in an ecological sense. In other words, the speaker’s concern for the poetry of the *times* is *part* of the poem’s focus on what the speaker describes as incapable of satisfying the human mind. Nevertheless, the thesis offered in the poem to redeem poetry from what is described as lacking is to make poetry that is compatible the inner ecological or ontological state of humans: “the imperfect” which is “so hot in us” and “is our paradise” (21, 23). The subject is presented as a sort of geometrical problem, the proverbial square trying to fit inside a round hole⁴. Therefore,

⁴ This commonplace description for the “problem presented in the poem,” the square fitting within the round hole, presents another way to describe the hybrid, never-ending nature of Stevens’ poetics: the practice of what Carl Jung called “squaring the circle,” or the archetypal mandala seems to accurately

the insufficiency of objective and/or imagistic poetry of the times to satisfy can only be remedied by making the poetic medium compatible with the inner ontological realities of readers.

“The Poems of Our Climate” is divided into three sections. The first six lines of the poem describe a bowl filled with water containing pink and white carnations, which on an afternoon soon after winter’s end is within a room reflecting a ghostly-white atmosphere:

Clear water in a brilliant bowl,
Pink and white carnations. The light
In the room more like a snowy air,
Reflecting snow. A newly-fallen snow
At the end of winter when afternoons return.
Pink and white carnations - one desires (1-6)

Line six ends by expressing a desire which is only revealed in the seventh line, when readers are made aware of a speaker who surprisingly deprecates the beautiful description of the bowl in the room.

So much more than that. The day itself
Is simplified: a bowl of white,
Cold, a cold porcelain, low and round,
With nothing more than the carnations there. (7-10)

The speaker expresses what he feels would be the collective human desire to want more than a reductive image representative of a day with its white, cold temperature and “cold

reflect Steven’s focus on joined opposites striving toward an elusive centrality or original point which will become a prevalent theme in this study of his poems. For more discussion on Stevens, Jung and mandala see: Michel Benamou’s *Wallace Stevens and the Symbolist Imagination* pg. 129-130, 135.

porcelain,” and only some carnations inside a bowl (9). The second section begins by granting the hypothetical conclusion that simple descriptions can remove human sentiment and interestedness associated with personal feeling, and provide an artistic rendering of a world which is like crystalline water. Nevertheless, the speaker goes on to finish the section by asserting that even if such a thing were possible— a pure, disinterested, crystalline art— people would still want and need more than this aesthetically white and clean smelling representation of the world. The last section endeavors to give an explanation as to why such simplicity can never satisfy humanity: human minds in a constant flux are eager for more than static imagery. People are interested not only in the new but are drawn, perhaps nostalgically, to what has “been so long composed;” something about human minds makes them long to re-visit the established (20). Despite the oxymoronic language found in line twenty two, “Note that, in this *bitterness, delight*,” the final four lines of the third section provide a consolatory tone and exhort people to celebrate this tendency of the mind to crave fluctuation (emphasis added 22). After all, the poem strongly implies (tongue firmly in cheek), since the mind is so inconstant itself, it only makes “sense” that it would be the perfect receptacle for the imperfect medium of language (emphasis added 22).

In “Wordsworth, the Bible, and the Interesting,” David McCracken explains how Immanuel Kant’s *The Critique of Judgment* (1790) addresses the issue of aesthetic beauty by “distinguishing among the pleasant (or agreeable), the good, and the beautiful” (19). McCracken presents Kant’s view that the pleasurable and the good: “are always bound up with an interest in their object” (Kant qtd. in McCracken 19). Kant posits that humans are

always interested in what they desire, and this interest is a corrupting force for the appreciation of what is beautiful. In making his argument for distinguishing what is merely pleasant or good to that which is truly beautiful, Kant points to this interestedness as a liability since “it leaves the judgment about the object no longer free” (Kant qtd. in McCracken 19). Therefore, according to Kant: “Taste is the faculty of judging an object or a method by representing it by an *entirely disinterested* satisfaction or dissatisfaction. The object of such satisfaction is called *beautiful*” (emphasis Kant qtd. in McCracken 19).

The first six lines of Stevens’s poem seem to comfortably express Kant’s definition of the beautiful. Something about the image is indelibly beautiful: it does not give “a pleasurable sensation, which leads us to desire it or objects like it; [a] sensation [that] makes us interested; ... [and neither is it] good, on the other hand – whether ... good in itself or good for something (the useful) - [which] is the object not of sensation but of will” (McCracken 19). However, it is this disinterested aspect of the description of the bowl in the room that the speaker assails as unsatisfying in “The Poems of Our Climate;” and, it will be precisely a matter of will, of self-interest, which in the opinion of the speaker is going to cause readers of poetry to “want more,” indeed, to “need more” (16).

In Kant’s aesthetic hierarchy, a work of art that inspired “need,” such as what the speaker in “The Poems of Our Climate” advocates for, would immediately exclude it from the category of the beautiful (16). Through these first six lines of highly descriptive and imagistic poetry, the speaker offers an example of art that the rest of the poem will

deem, in opposition to Kant's aesthetic theory, as unsatisfying. Brogan goes as far as calling these first six lines of "The Poems of Our Climate" an "Original" parody of Williams' descriptive poetry" (80):

[which] ironically comes to describe the elusive, even allusive, relation of world, mind, and word. Thus, although it may be a poem more "against" than "of" its climate, it is one that transcends its climate through the not-so-casual litter of its words. (80)

A good example of this parody described by Brogan can be found in the sudden turn that begins with "one desires" at the end of the sixth line and completes the thought with the enjambment "So much more than that," at the start of the seventh line. This enjambment surprises the reader with a refutation of the beautiful image of the bowl in the room, and does have definite aspects of parody; it is actually such a sudden turn, and so unexpected, that although it is a smart and biting statement of ridicule, it does not inspire laughter or humor as parody sometimes will. Instead it will inspire that which the poem will advocate for from that point forward: an interest in readers in knowing why they should desire more? Questions like: What was wrong with that? That was beautiful actually? What are you talking about speaker? are forced into the reader's consciousness by the line. The tenth line demonstrates the clearest tone of parody in the poem, when the speaker minimizes the bowl image by stating: "With nothing more than the carnations there" (10). Despite this, parody does not accurately describe the effects produced by the poem, not even up to that point. The reason why these effects of parody are initially lost on readers is because of the dissonance between the serious questions forced into their minds by the flippant dismissal of the image of the bowl in the room and the perceived

beauty of the image itself; Stevens does not set up the parody through an easily skewered straw man. In an approach that inspires an ennobling feeling of fairness, the very robustness of his poetic effort in presenting the image of the bowl in the room models an argumentative approach willing to confront the best representation of a contrary argument.

Apollonian and Dionysian Dialectic

Just as the strength of the argument upholding an objective or imagistic poetry comes by way of modeling a strong example of such poetry in the first six stanzas describing the bowl in the room, Stevens will appeal to an argument he believes is up to the task of confronting the apparent ability of the image to satisfy readers. To do so, Stevens uses Nietzsche's theories on the dialectic between Apollonian and Dionysian principles found in Greek tragedy⁵:

The Apollonian principle, in keeping with the characteristics of the sun god Apollo, is the principle of order, static beauty, and clear boundaries. The Dionysian principle, in contrast, is the principle of frenzy, excess, and the collapse of boundaries. (Magnus 23)

For example, in the second section of "The Poems of Our Climate" the sufficiency of the Apollonian principle is cast into doubt when the speaker states, "A world of clear water, brilliant-edged" (of clear boundaries) is simply not enough, "still one would want more, one would need more, / More than a world of white and snowy scents" (static beauty) (15-17). The Dionysian principle, in comparison, is elevated above the Apollonian

⁵ Put forth in Nietzsche's first work, *The Birth of Tragedy from the Spirit of Music* (1872).

principle in the poem because it is precisely the reality that “there would still remain the never-resting mind” (the principle of frenzy) “so that one would want to escape, come back” (the collapse of boundaries) which makes the “world of white” insufficient to satisfy humanity’s thirst for poetry (17-19). Besides these points of contrast there is another more nuanced one that operates in the poem and is reflective of the Apollonian and Dionysian principles: the contrast between sight and sound. In *Early Stevens: The Nietzschean Intertext* B. J. Leggett states:

As a shaping and individuating art that depends on the depictions of scenes and images, the Apollonian is of course exemplified in painting and sculpture. The destroyer of individuality and form, Dionysian art is exemplified by music, and the place of music in the origin of Greek tragedy and lyric poetry is Nietzsche’s central concern. (64-65)

An example of this contrast between sight and sound can be found by comparing the first imagistic section of the poem describing the bowl with the rest of the poem. The first section of the poem is clearly a picture which has no sound, there is a description of a bowl in a room with carnations in it. In contrast to this mute, picturesque beginning the final stanza speaks of things “composed” (with its possible denotation in regards to music) and of “flawed words and stubborn sounds” (20, 24). This distinction between sight and sound leads to another contrast evident through the lens of Nietzschean ideas in the poem: that of the individual and the collective experience. In Nietzsche’s conception of Greek art, the Apollonian principle is representative of the individual and the Dionysian principle is representative of the collective whole. The experience in the first six lines of the poem is of immediacy as the speaker describes the bowl in the room. He

then trails off into argument but maintains himself as part of the discussion through the use of indefinite pronoun “one,” instead of the more personal I, which is ironically self-referentially described as the “concealed / ... evilly compounded I” (12). While there is a connotation of the speaker, perhaps, speaking through his experience to the needs of a wider audience, it is not until the last four lines of the stanza that such a conclusion is made obvious with the use of “our,” the direct address to someone outside himself, “Note that,” and the inclusionary “us,” with us signifying an individual space inside each human where the imperfect resides (21-23).

The Apollonian and Dionysian dialectic on art is well represented in the poem. For example, the imagistic beginning of the poem describing the bowl in the room with its “lexicon of purity” is contrasted with language reflective of its imperfect nature in the poem’s last stanza where “oxymoron dominates” (Jenkins 39). The macro parody of the perfection of the bowl described earlier with its simple “lexicon of purity” representative of impeccability: “clear water,” “white,” “light,” “snow” is contrasted with the poetic arguments concerning the imperfect nature of the mind and the “oxymoro[nic] dominat[ion] Margaret Jenkins identifies in the last stanza (Jenkins 39; 1-2, 4, 8). I paraphrase Jenkins’s highlighting of the abundance of phrases or words that function as joined contraries in the last stanza, for example, “escape,” / “come back” ; “still remain” / “never-resting” ; “imperfect” / “paradise” ; “bitterness” / “delight” (Jenkins 39 ; 18-19, 21-22) The major theme of the contrast between Apollonian and Dionysian principles forming the bulk of the poem becomes miniaturized in these oxymoronic pairings. As a result, this playful hybridity of opposites enacts a sort of “mini-parody” of the structure

and theme of Stevens's poem. In other words, these pairings are representative of his subsumption into poetic imagination of contrasting philosophies on poetic art and their relation to mental ecology.

The last and I believe most salient difference (in regards to the poem) between the Apollonian and Dionysian principle is the idea that the "Apollonian naïve artist" content in his "dreamworld of appearance" is stuck believing in an illusion, while the Dionysian artist is able to see beyond the facade of "reality" (Leggett 66). It is a prime quality of the Dionysian principle, at the bottom of "desire, music, and aesthetic form," that Dionysian music is equated with the "inner spirit of [a] given phenomena" (Nietzsche qtd. in Leggett 66-67). Therefore, since the "imperfect is hot in us," the "flawed words and stubborn sounds" are from a Dionysian perspective truer than the Apollonian perspective, and, although also illusive, something in which to "delight," for "the imperfect is our paradise," and recognition of it as such a more accurate representation of our existential condition (21-24).

"The Poems of Our Climate" is almost an ontological argument for the imperfect in art; almost, because, as is typical of him, Stevens undercuts the figurative presentation of the argument with an ironic ending:

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. (21-24)

In another *double entendre* reminiscent of the dual work of the title, "the imperfect" "Lies" (24). In other words, "the imperfect" is deceptive and also lies in a physical

location within the “flawed words and sounds;” and by implication, it “Lies” (in both senses of the word) also inside physical human beings, which have been nurtured and hard-wired to decode them (23-24). With this being the case, the existential ecology of humans becomes imperfect and single objective truth an impossibility. Therefore, in the last two lines of the poem the liar’s paradox taints any confidence made up to that point for the imperfect as necessary for effective art. The premise made in the poem in favor of the imperfect, itself, cannot be trusted if the premise holds true. Readers cannot trust the accuracy of the premise because if it is believed to be true, the medium of delivery, not to mention the basic inner inabilities of humans to decode truthful, unflawed words, even if they existed, means any and all arguments are inherently flawed and suspect. However, leaving aside this ironic undercutting of the argument made in the poem, ironically enough caused by the very nature of the argument made by it, it is possible to trace the argument made by the speaker up to that point as the following: the raw simplicity of art which arouses no human interest cannot succeed in the speaker’s view because humans must have poetry that reflects their ontological condition, or in keeping with the poem’s figurative language, their experiential ecosystem.

Therefore, the poem implies, “flawed words and stubborn sounds” must be located in poetry, in the form of sounds and words of which poetry must be made of, and in an experiential sense within the “never resting mind,” which is at home with them, because “The imperfect is our paradise” and “The imperfect is so hot in us” (18, 21, 23, 24). The poem’s rhetorical argument is intentionally and ironically undercut by Stevens for reasons similar to arguments that posit that Nietzsche’s perspectivism negates the

validity of his own arguments. Invoking the liar's paradox, skeptics of perspectivism interrogate the notion of the impossibility of establishing objective truth by pointing out that if there is no certainty, then why trust Nietzsche's certainty in the truth of perspectivism since, after all, it too is a position claiming a certainty, or truth? the claim of certainty that absolute truth is an illusion. However, I believe the rhetoric in favor of the imperfect in the poem out-shines, so to speak, the liar's paradox favoring its dismissal. This does not mean I believe the poem is philosophically dogmatic in nature—it is widely accepted that Stevens strove to avoid straightforward promotion of philosophies in his poetry. The use of irony to problematize, contradict or otherwise extend philosophical positions into never-ending discursiveness of his abstract ideas is common feature of his poetry. Good scholarship on Stevens is quick to point out the problems with trying to understand his poetry as promoting specific philosophies. I only mean to highlight that ambiguity is not immune to playing favorites, or perhaps more to Stevens's point, in the face of ambiguity our viewpoints are prone to default, according to inner ontological states, if at all possible, toward the simplicity of stable narratives. Stevens's introspective analysis of *how* and *what* we perceive as art complicates the search for truth as follows: even if the truest approach to knowledge fearlessly recognizes and studies the mechanisms capable of proving how strongly held beliefs can be proven wrong, or, at the very least unreliable, such investigations can just as well discover in this search that objective truth, itself, does not exist—leading to the obvious dilemma of the liar's paradox.

What implicit space for reader interpretation is created between the double meanings of “The Poems of our Climate,” between that which is considered timely or representative of the present time in poetry and what it is like to be human? Why engage in a hard parody, or in making fun of something that in its representation seems to resist the fun making? These implicit questions are embedded in the dissonance created in readers by the poem’s parody of imagistic/objective modern poetry that does not seem humorous, and are made even more urgent by the speaker doubling down in insisting it is a valid parody through an explanation that involves further contradictions that nevertheless appear to rely on “logic.” The interpretive space this contextual textual arrangement points toward is the extent pattern, expectation, and conditioning can have upon *how* and *what* we understand and how such questions relate to human *being*. As shown earlier, the fundamental thematic properties of Apollonian and Dionysian philosophical takes on art become hybridized into atom-like oxymoronic word pairings. In forming these oxymoronic pairings, an enactment of communication exposes the imagination’s power to create meaning out of fundamental textual patterns that derive from a mixture of societal and biological (and implicitly asks whatever else) influences of what it is to *be* for humans. To be or not to be is not the question, rather “what does it mean to be?” And “of what is being made?” These are some implicit questions the poem asks only to parody them. These questions so seriously and methodically embedded in the poem are themselves “laughed at” by pointing out the imperfection of the tools for attaining the desired knowledge. That is, the answer to the questions “what does it mean to be?” and “what is being made of?” appear impossible to ascertain objectively and/or

positively. The poem ends by proclaiming "the imperfect is our paradise" (23) but the statement's ambiguity is evident: does this mean we should stop trying to understand being and merely enjoy being? Or does it mean the joy of being is to be found and is precisely that of being a being that never rests in its search for understanding itself regardless of the possibility or impossibility of attaining success?

What Brogan identifies as the "not-so-casual litter of words," found in the poem, is also an example of how Stevens adds depth to his poetry through reliance on hybrid characteristics (80). This technique used by Stevens depends on the "combin[ation] [of] a static image ... with an act of the mind ... that is obviously created through an act of language—*through description itself*" (emphasis Brogan 89-90):

The light
In the room more like a snowy air,
Reflecting snow. A newly fallen snow
At the end of winter when afternoons return. (2-5)

This combinatorial technique works by inserting the simile of light being like a series of reflections on snow that climaxes with an afternoon at the end of winter. Thus, the series of fluctuations in the description of the static light in the room transforms the image into something more conceptual; something, requiring "the act of the mind' with its implicit movement and ambiguity, rather than that 'collection of solid, static objects extended in space,' with its implicit *stasis* and flat objectivity" (emphasis Brogan; Stevens qtd. in Brogan 82). Stevens also uses this technique in the last two lines of "Description Without Place," where "... the future must ... / Be alive with its own seemings, seeming to be like rubies reddened by rubies reddening." This "not-so-casual litter of words" becomes

another ironic complication to the whole argument of the poem since the description of the bowl in the room turns out to be not as static, and therefore Apollonian, as it first appears, and indeed has elements of Dionysian flux (Brogan 80). As Brogan notes:

“The Poems of Our Climate” immediately violates the possibility of objective description, primarily through the similes of its second sentence, ‘The light / In the room more like a snowy air, / Reflecting snow,’ which ensure that the descriptions are not merely objective. Quite subtly, but irrevocably, the words ‘like’ and ‘Reflecting’ disrupt the illusion of verisimilitude in language itself, debasing, in consequence, the very kind of poetry they pretend to imitate. (Stevens qtd. in Brogan ; 79-80)

Therefore it can be said that the presence of both concepts at work within the image constitute a hybrid synthesis by Stevens of the Apollonian and Dionysian dialectic, although one in which the Dionysian aspects are extremely subtle.

Steven’s Letters on “Climate as Ecology”

Grounding the poem’s imaginative subsumption of ideas, such as aspects of Kant’s and Nietzsche’s theories on aesthetics, with more temporal considerations from Stevens’s life exposes how his art and life cross-pollinated lived experience and imagination. According to Joan Richardson, during this time (1937-42) Stevens’s poetry often “reflected concrete details of his life. Through the poems’ images we see his repeated movement through the seasons of poetry writing: [that included] details from letters he wrote or received.” (151). Using Stevens’s letters as a context for “The Poems of Our Climate” does yield some striking correlations. For example, while Bloom identifies Keats as the source of this meditation by Stevens, a letter written in January 1938 to Ronald Lane Latimer may very well point to at least one other, more

contemporary, source of inspiration for Stevens, rooted in Latimer's desire to start a poetry press in Mexico:

I am very much afraid you might as well take your press to the bottom of the sea as to take it to Mexico City ... What chance would a Mexican have who brought his press to New York City with the idea of publishing Mexican poets? A much more practical idea would be to go to some place like say, Carmel, California... Mexico is very much a place for Mexicans. (Letters 329)

The theme of human ecology is strong in these comments, which begins a somewhat evolving exchange on the subject. In the exchange, Stevens's ideas continue to resonate with "The Poems of Our Climate." For example, note Stevens's next commentary on the location of the poetry press:

Why don't you and Mr. Richmond go to Ceylon instead of Mexico? In Mexico life is altogether without a thesis; it is a lot of scenery ... But in Ceylon the scenery is much finer; life is almost wholly a thesis; there is no end of sea and no end of mountains. (Letters 331)

Stevens believed that in order for his friends to find satisfaction in the place they would move to, the place had to have a "thesis" as well as beautiful scenery (Letters 331). If a place lacks a "thesis" it is just "a lot of scenery" similar to how the speaker of "The Poems of Our Climate" reduces the scenery in his imagery to "nothing more than the carnations there" (Letters 331 ; 10). Stevens does not elaborate on what he means by "thesis," and one is left to read between the lines to try and understand him (Letters 331). Reading between the lines it would appear that Stevens idea of a place with a "thesis" represents the capacity of a location's culture (especially its philosophy and art) to spark interest, conversation, and new knowledge in him and likeminded others (Letters 331).

And by consequence led me to believe, to be kind to Stevens, that for him the culture of Mexico did not present enough new areas of intellectual exploration. However, Stevens's hyperbolic claim that "In Mexico life is altogether without a thesis" can also be interpreted as demonstrating a gross lack of respect for what Mexican culture could teach him (Letters 331).

This letter by Stevens, besides introducing readers to notions of an ecological space, then known as Ceylon, now known as Shri-Lanka, which has scenery and is "almost wholly a thesis," also invites comparisons between Stevens's usage of Asian imagery (for example, the porcelain bowl and the soft-snowy white colors found in the poem) and his personal fascination with Ceylon during this time (Letters 331). According to Richardson, Stevens "projecting himself into the figure of the Buddha sitting on his windowsill ... imagined himself in Ceylon and the east because the orient seemed to hold the possibility of another type of life" (152). Richardson identifies how "Force of Illusions," later known as "A Weak Mind in The Mountains," published in the "July 10, 1938, issue of the *New York Times* elaborated on the powerful hold the idea of Ceylon had recently taken on the poet's imagination" (152). She goes on to establish a connection between this poem and an anecdote offered by Stevens in his letters about how "at night when [his] ... windows are open and the air is like ice," the Buddha, sent from Ceylon by his friend Van Geyzel, must wish he were sent back home (152). Considering that "The Poems of Our Climate" was published very near to this date, in the spring of 1938, Stevens's usage of the simile "The light / in the room more like a snowy air," is, perhaps, further evidence of the grip Ceylon had upon him (3). An even more

direct statement from the poem reflected in one of his letters to Van Geyzel can be found in its fifth line: “At the end of winter when afternoons return” (9). In April of 1939 he writes to Van Geyzel:

We are at a time of year when winter is over and spring, although it has begun, is scarcely visible, so that everything is washed out and colorless. This will tell you how welcome the brilliant colors of the saris are. (Letters 337)

This description came after the publication of “The Poems of Our Climate” but its similarity with the poem still insinuates a connection between the poem and Stevens’s infatuation with Ceylon. Besides the reference to the end of winter, the contrast between the “colorless” and the “brilliant saris” has echoes of the “Clear water in a brilliant bowl” at the beginning of the poem (Letters 337; 1).

Nietzsche used “tropes of “truth” and “error “to help reader[s] understand and confront the intuition for a final truth” as nothing more than an illusion (Magnus 5). This statement is applicable to the effect Stevens’s poem can produce in readers. However, in order for this effect to take place, readers have to get over their Apollonian satisfaction with the imagistic bowl in the room and requires a Dionysian exploration of the poem’s inner features. On December 8, 1942 Stevens writes to his friend Henry Church, an ardent reader of Nietzsche who has urged Stevens to read him, “The incessant job is to get into focus, not out of focus. Nietzsche is as perfect a means of getting out of focus as a little bit too much to drink” (Letters 431-432). Almost six years later, on October 25, 1948 in a letter to José Rodríguez Feo, invoking Nietzsche, he writes: “It is finished, Zarathustra says; and one goes to the Canoe Club and has a couple of Martinis and a pork

chop and looks down the spaces of the river and participates in the disintegration,” a description that sounds awfully close in tenor to the “imperfect paradise” the speaker of “The Poems of Our Climate” postulates is amenable to the ontological state of humans; a state of being more truly understood through the frenzied, unbounded union with the cosmic whole typical of Dionysian experience (Letters 621). Nevertheless, the illusion of a destination in “The Poems of Our Climate” is subjective. Stevens has subsumed the subject of poetic art and its relation to humanity into his imagination and reminded readers of humanity’s fraught relationship with language itself. A conclusion is not attained, instead Stevens offers in the poem a call to embrace the imperfection of the impossible to determine.

How Hybrid Fusions Become Poetic Telepathy

Wallace Stevens although not typically identified with confessional poets, like, say, Sylvia Plath, is very much a poet whose ‘never resting mind’ is on display in his poetry. His search for a universal center, in opposition to a poet like Walt Whitman, masks any sense of self-indulgence aimed at swallowing human experience into an overt performance of self-expression. And, yet, the hunt to discover, to examine, to compare, to synthesize and to model experience and reality is relentless throughout his work. His push to comprehend the world and his relationship with it, seemingly, placed his work on a plane so abstract as to push the very limits of comprehension to a breaking point. However, Stevens’s poetry is not primarily about existential estrangement, although few poems capture emptiness as uncannily as “The Snow Man⁶.” To the contrary, its message

⁶ See “The Snow Man.” *Wallace Stevens: Collected Poetry and Prose*. Pg. 8.

is less estrangement than desire for harmony with the world. His poetry exposes an obviously profound and sincere hunger to get beyond a mere comprehension of things as they “truly are” in order to attain a world of imagination unfettered by systematizing facts. But refuses to do so before confronting those facts head on. Even while addressing the powerful consciousness grounding topic of warfare, Stevens leads readers to an experience of living in the world that pushes the boundaries of reason, yet travels through reason, to get to some instinctual bliss beyond the edges of epistemology. As if this experience can only be enacted by turning toward the reasoning that has estranged him from this original bliss, in “Dutch Graves in Bucks County,” he blazes a hybrid path melding past and present, modern technology and its older absence, into a poetic meditation about the genealogical cycle of human life and death on earth.

To do so, Stevens uses the concepts of negation, centrality, exception and simultaneity as a balanced stratagem that organizes the content of the poem into hybrid fusions. Through a careful calibration of these concepts Stevens attempts to stimulate the imagination of readers into obtaining an experience identical to that which the poem produced in his own mind. One inescapable fact about Stevens’s poetics is that, together with the aid of his essays, his poems often serve as invaluable guides to the study of his own poetry. Stevens often, not only yields moving poetry, but recycles conceptual elements as structural scaffoldings. In so doing, like a jealous lover, Stevens monopolizes and centralizes possible meanings and interpretations of his poetry, as if to say, if readers are to enter his poetry, it can only be through his imagination. Although I believe Stevens’s use of these four conceptual elements negation, centrality, exception, and

simultaneity is present and useful in analyses of a wide swath of his poetry, for my purposes here, I focus on how they are used in Stevens's meditative war poem, "Dutch Graves in Bucks County." My goal is to demonstrate how he hybridizes and balances these structural underpinnings in order to coordinate his subsumption of reality into the ecology of imagination. And to demonstrate the focus Stevens places on fashioning the poem in such a manner so that it becomes a portal through which he can produce a telepathic effect, as it were, wherein he transmits his poetic vision to readers.

"Dutch Graves in Bucks County"

It is commonplace to describe Stevens's poetry as difficult, even scholarly books and articles seem compelled to do so. However, his poetry published starting in 1943 and culminating with the 1947 collection *Transport to Summer* has the added distinction, to paraphrase Richardson, author of *Wallace Stevens: the Later Years*, of being the most difficult and seemingly impenetrable of all (188). Richardson compares the difficulty in engaging this poetry to the challenge of "facing actual battle" (188). The experience of battle is quite literally intertwined with the seeming impenetrability of Stevens's "Dutch Graves in Bucks County." The poem presents dramatic scenes filtered through the consciousness of a man in the midst of a modern war, who simultaneously engages in a one-sided conversation with his dead ancestors. One major effect the poem produces is to inspire a participatory attitude of nobility⁷ in readers as they become united with the

⁷ Although Stevens most direct definition of what he means by nobility comes across when he says "I mean that nobility which is our spiritual height and depth," he goes on to state he is not "thinking of the ethical or the sonorous or at all of the manner of it," which leaves the impression he means nobility can be understood as a spiritual feeling devoid of ethical considerations ("The Noble" 34).

meditation of a soldier in battle. This noble feeling comes across as a sense of hope even in the direst of circumstances, while nevertheless facing those circumstances head on. Stevens's accomplishes this rhetorical aim, of inspiring noble feelings, through a hybrid fusion of a series of negations, alternating certainties, and ambiguities that provide the illusion of simultaneity regarding the present situation of the speaker and the static situation of his dead ancestors. Amazingly, this poetic formula allows the poem to retain an illusion of nobility even while it slowly makes known very bleak ideas on war and human genealogies.

Eventually, this soldier's warfare experiences blossom into an escapist and illusory meditation, the bliss beyond epistemology mentioned earlier, on the global condition of humanity in space and time. But the poem begins with a slowly unfolding scene of aerial warfare that inspires in readers a strong sense of connection and consciousness to the very real and bleak scene it describes:

Angry Men and furious machines
Swarm from the little blue of the horizon
To the great blue of the middle height
Men scatter throughout clouds.
The wheels are too large for any noise. (1-5)

Only at the end of the third line of the poem can readers feel certainty that some type of aircraft is being described, a "swarm from the little blue of the horizon" might still be boats or tanks, or any other group of machines (2). It takes movement toward higher intensity, from "little blue ... horizon" to "great blue of middle height," for the image of ascending aircraft from this vague location to manifest itself (2-3). From the very first

line of the poem, the disposition of the pilots and airplanes provides a sense of elevation through increased degrees of feeling, the pilots are “Angry men” the machines “furious” (1). However, it is not until the third line that readers can tell what and who these machines and men truly are, namely, pilots and fighter planes. The stanza finishes with a strikingly strange vision: “Men scatter throughout clouds. / The wheels are too large for any noise” (4-5). The first of these lines negates the aircraft by having “men” spread out in the clouds, and the latter makes the wheels of the aircraft the main actor in the sky; their very largeness negating noise (5). Thereafter, begins the speaker’s contemplation of his ancestor warriors with negation continuing to be a key trait used by Stevens in the poem.

Negation in Stevens’s poetry is used as an aesthetic tool in his search for balance between imagination and reality, entities he sees as separate, imagination as unchanging and reality as mutable. He believes that imagination and reality occupy a relative field where the unchanging imagination interacts with the changing reality of the world. Reality, therefore, acts as a type of selective pressure which depending on how this mutable truth is brought to bear on imagination will manifest noble properties that “help people live their lives” (“The Noble” 30). Negation is carefully calibrated in “Dutch Graves in Bucks County.” At times it indicates mere absence, a concept exemplified by the title of a poem from *Transport to Summer*, “Description without Place,” at other times it is used to highlight a proposition, or to engage in matter versus anti-matter-like descriptions that mitigate or cancel each other out. By way of comparison, one of the identifying traits of Gabriel García Lorca’s poetry studied in a 1943 *Poetry* journal

article, describes Lorca's poetic experiments as "concerned [with] the possibility of extending poetry to include effects ordinarily only found in music and painting" (Honig 33). While Lorca is seen as "extending poetry" through addition of effects common in music and painting, Stevens's negation serves his methodology of stripping reality, of contracting it, until nothing but his imaginative vision is left for the reader— "wherein we may see the world through the poet's eyes" (Honig 33). Even here a caveat must be established that Stevens's usage of "the value of negativity (as negative space ...), derived from his reading in the literature of the East," also shares an effect appropriated from painting (Richardson 168).

Imparting little information, Stevens causes readers to struggle to enter into the speaker's vision. It is only when readers arrive at the first couplet, "And you, my semblables, in sooty residence / Tap skeleton drums inaudibly," that they realize they have experienced the imagery in the sky, in the first stanza, through the conscious lens of a first person speaker (6-7). The speaker introduces himself through the usage of the possessive pronoun "my" in each but the last couplet (5). Even within the stability of an established point of view, negation continues to be used as if to imitate the altered state of mind of a speaker amidst war. For example, the coffins of the speakers' semblables are stripped away to nothing but "sooty residences" and their bones tap "inaudibly" in his mind's eye (6-7). The speaker filters through his imagination the dead and brings to life a scene of men marching gloriously:

There are shouts and voices.
There are men shuffling on foot in air.
Men are moving and marching

And shuffling lightly, with the heavy lightness
Of those that are marching, many together. (8-12)

By starting the quintet with “shouts” and ending it with “many together” an appearance of concreteness and normalcy bookending the stanza contrasts with the ghostly hollowness of descriptions found within it (8, 12). The cause of this hollowness can be traced to the usage of irrational contradictions which negate themselves almost out of existence, as in the following example: “men shuffling on foot in air / ... lightly, with the heavy lightness” (9, 11). This trend will continue throughout the poem with puzzling descriptions such as: “semblables ... doubly killed,” and less irrational descriptions that nevertheless still emphasize the scene through the absence of an expected quality (20). For example, when the speaker describes how “The air attends the brightened guns, / As if sounds were forming” the capacity for firing aircrafts to produce sound is placed in doubt because the “as if” clause⁸ sets up the capacity of the guns to make noise as an improbability (16-17). However, from the perspective of the speaker the absence of sound is probable, since the distance of the aircraft allows for sight of flashes produced when the planes fire their weapons, but not the capacity to hear the rounds going off. By utilizing this tactic, Stevens forces readers to see the scene through the eyes of the speaker’s imagination.

⁸ In another context, Slavoj Žižek describes the use of this clause as a “modality” of “negation [that] assumes the form of disavowal—that is of feigning, of an ‘as if’ which suspends reality,” (2409). This description comes close to describing Stevens’ use of the clause; however, there is a poetic dissonance in its usage by Stevens which goes beyond this description, since, unlike Žižek’s application of the clause to what the sadomasochist engages in, a feigned scenario of abuse, Stevens uses the clause to suspend a *real* reality.

In the first seven stanzas, even with the back and forth structure of the anaphora “And you, my semblables” beginning each couplet after each quintet, strongly indicating comparison, some of the present day warfare scenes can be construed as happening in imagined scenes of war during the mid-seventeenth century⁹, when the speaker’s Dutch ancestors fought¹⁰ for their independence (6). This effect of the poem is caused because the first four quintets alternate from providing details clearly identifying the current age of warfare with others more ambiguous to identify. The first of these four quintets provides certainty that the scene it describes takes place in the speaker’s present by identifying machines in the sky:

Angry Men and *furious machines*
Swarm from the little blue of the horizon
To the great blue of the middle height
Men scatter throughout clouds.
The wheels are too large for any noise.

And you, my semblables, in sooty residence
Tap skeleton drums inaudibly. (emphasis added 1-7)

The second quintet is ambiguous, since soldiers simply march, it could be a vision of an older battlefield:

There are shouts and voices.
There are men shuffling on foot in air.

⁹ Alan Filreis states: “What he [Stevens] had learned of his Dutch forebears was that they had been forced to leave Holland because of war” (123). In a note, Filreis identifies the departure of Stevens’ forebears from Holland took place “in the mid-seventeenth century” (317n32).

¹⁰ Filreis makes mention of this mixing of relations between the old Dutch soldiers and the present day fighters when he states: “The second stanza and the next refrain confuse the relation a little, as the airy battle now seems to involve the Old Dutch. It is not an air war, but an infantry war made airy. “There are men shuffling on foot in air. / Men are moving and marching” (119-120).

Men are moving and *marching*
And shuffling lightly, with the heavy lightness
Of those that are marching, many together.

And you my semblables—the old flag of Holland
Flutters in tiny darkness. (emphasis added 8-14)

The third quintet once more provides certainty of a modern battlefield with its
description of “circles of weapons in the sun” and blazing guns (15):

There are *circles of weapons in the sun*.
The air attends the *brightened guns*,
As if sounds were forming
Out of themselves, a saying,
An expressive on-dit, a profession

And you my semblables, are doubly killed
To be buried in desert and deserted earth. (emphasis added 15-21)

The fourth quintet brings back the marching men, again ambiguous (men marching can
represent an older theater of war). However, the identification of the speaker as one of the
marchers removes any doubts the description takes place in the present:

The flags are natures newly found.
Rifles grow sharper on the sight.
There is a rumble of autumnal marching,
From which no soft sleeve relieves us.
Fate is the current desperado.

And you, semblables, are crusts that lie
In the shrivellings of your time and place. (emphasis added 22-28)

At this point, emotion gains urgency in the poem; the fluttering flags freshly caught in the
autumn wind causes the men to adjust their rifles from pride or jitters (22-23). The

statement, "Fate is the present desperado," adds to the sense of danger felt by the speaker and the troops (26). The previously established pattern of ambiguity gives way to the acute emotional reality of the situation for these marching soldiers beholding dogfights in the sky. Finally, as if to reward readers for their patient embrace of the back and forth between the ambiguity and certainty of the experiences described, in the couplet that follows, the speaker reassuringly states the semblables are safely in their "time and place" (28). The illusion of interconnectedness of this soldier with soldiers from a different time is confronted through emotion, revealing that all four quintets have been the present scene, none have been an imagined one where his ancestors fought. His ancestors buried "old flag[s] of Holland / Flutter[ring] in tiny darkness" (13-14) seem insignificant in comparison to the speaker's vision of the present and living soldiers' flags which "are natures newly found" in the "autumnal marching" (22, 24). This carefully calibrated imagery is presented in a back and forth movement that through an ambiguous/certain pattern of identifying markers clarifies and obscures the time periods and the actions in the descriptive meditations of the speaker. In so doing, Stevens creates an illusion that hybridizes the common experiences among soldiers of many generations while simultaneously minimizing the similarities of their situations. In other words, the poem works as a balancing act of negations at the service of imagination, wherein the negations provide space for the imagination to make illusion part of the experience of reading the text.

The next nine alternating quintets and couplets of the poem begin by identifying the speaker's semblables with an old "time and place," again minimalizing their

importance as mere “shrivellings” (28). The musical features of warfare, “battering of drums,” and “The bugles” and the intense usage of sound, in the ninth stanza, indicates upheaval amongst the marching men, perhaps caused because of some intensity in actual battle, which culminates in the last two lines of the stanza “... the most metal music, loudlier, / like an instinctive incantation” (29, 32-33). Almost in tandem with this tumult, the speaker’s meditation turns to what, if any, relation between generations exists across the gulf of time and place. The speaker boldly declares his semblables, “share nothing of ourselves” (35). However, as if reconsidering the harshness of the declaration, in the next quintet, the speaker states there is a “...will ... common to all men / Spelled from spent living and spent dying” (39-40). Despite the absolute declaration of the speaker that they “share nothing,” in what can only be categorized as an exception to that declaration, the speaker admits there is a “...will... common to all men” (39). Through this crucial exception, his meditation of what generations share with one another is carried along toward a balance that gives the appearance of compromise. Exception is employed by Stevens sparsely in this poem, but at a crucial junction, and is not a point to be beleaguered or to show angst over. To the contrary, it is simply stated as a natural state of affairs. This artful back and forth, as the poem draws to a conclusion, reaches out to include readers with the pronoun “we” and universalizes the plight of the marchers and the generations that follow by describing a global cycle reminiscent of the giant wheel at the beginning of the poem:

This is the pit of torment that placid end
Should be illusion, that the mobs of birth
Avoid our stale perfections, seeking out

Their own, waiting until we go
To picnic in the ruin that we leave. (71-75)

In his essay “The Noble Rider and the Sound of Words” Stevens points out: “to discover the work of art in the real world, and then to extract it ... everything like a firm grasp of reality is removed from the aesthetic field” (30). He emphasizes the extremes at which imagination interacts with reality along lines which are polar opposites, yet part of one continuum—“spiritual height and depth” (“The Noble” 34). Only the best balance between the two can achieve the supreme goal of attaining the elusive power of nobility, which has declined, Stevens contemplates, perhaps, by a “maladjustment between imagination and reality” wherein an over commitment to truth, even in the *poet’s* conception of reality, has hindered the work of imagination (“The Noble” 33). In other words, too much mimesis (no matter how personal the vision of it may be) in art is a fatal flaw in the formula since for Stevens the “peculiarity of the imagination is nobility” (“The Noble” 33).

The term nobility has moral connotations, but specific moralizing views are not part of Stevens’s usage of the terms in this essay. Instead, nobility is compared to the tidal forces of nature¹¹ that fulfills a function triggered by life circumstances, “the imagination pressing back against the pressure of reality” (“The Noble” 36). In Stevens’s view, truth is not paramount but imagination. Language and the sound of words have the power to move, and in so doing, the imagination of the poet is activated in the reader, and

¹¹ “But as a wave is a force and not the water of which it is composed... so nobility is a force” (“The Noble” 36).

the protective “violence from within” is made powerful against the “violence from without,” or the reality of life (“The Noble” 36).

Considering the reality of life in 1943, terms such as “violence from without” seem charged with the zeitgeist of WWII (“The Noble” 36). Indeed, it is hard not to fix Stevens’s poem, with his description of “Angry men and furious machines/ Swarm from the little blue of the horizon,” over European or Pacific skies during that war (“Dutch” 1-2). In the same *The Sewanee Review* issue as “Dutch Graves in Bucks County,” William Meredith’s “Navy Field,” also presents the image of aircraft at war; a battle damaged aircraft lands on to a Navy field for repairs. The first line identifies the image quickly as opposed to Stevens’s glacial unfolding. In that first line of Meredith’s “Navy Field” readers are clearly provided with the image of an aircraft in distress which, “Limped out of the hot sky a hurt plane, / Held off, held off, [a] whirring pretty pigeon” (1-2). War is figuratively, and in the starkest of realities for thousands of pilots, *in the air*, and the poets of the age are, to paraphrase Stevens’s terminology, pressed by the reality of life around them. According to Stevens’s concepts on poetry, these poets should find ways to tear from their reality something from which to craft an artistic imagining independent from its source in real life, with the purpose of assisting men and women with the intellectual capacity to appreciate art, “live their lives” (“The Noble” 30).

A letter written by Stevens on January 16, 1942 to Mary Owen Steinmetz, who at the time was working on a genealogy project for the Historical Society in Reading, resonates with this concept of ripped reality for art’s sake. In the letter, Stevens responds to Steinmetz’ inquiry of an ancestor of his named John Zeller. John Zeller turns out to be

Stevens's grandfather on his mother's side but is described by Stevens with the distancing description "my mother's father" (Letters 339). Despite the close familial relationship between them, Stevens's distancing from Zeller comes into focus when he states, "I don't know a thing in the world about him" (Letters 339). Despite his lack of knowledge of Zeller, Stevens provides Steinemetz with the name of Peter Scholls, Charles Evans Cemetery superintendent, because Scholls' mother knew John Zeller and may know who handled his estate (Letters 399). Stevens's assistance to Steinemetz is not without personal motivation. Although he writes "I know nothing of John Zeller," he does know of his portrait which he saw at his house growing up, he thinks "were oils," and recollects "they were certainly depressing," and asks for Steinemetz' assistance in the hopes he might "find out where those portraits are" (Letters 399).

The specific interest Stevens demonstrates in the letter is not to find out details about John Zeller the real man, even though in the letter he repeatedly emphasizes his lack of knowledge about him. Stevens succinctly puts into one sentence what is merely insinuated in the rest of the letter when he writes: "In short, I could find a portrait of the man you are trying to find something about" (Letters 399). This apparent lack of interest in the biographical person of John Zeller, in comparison to his clear interest in the abstraction of his person upon a portrait, may be a glimpse into the contemplation and focus burning inside Stevens leading up to his 1942 publication of "The Noble Rider and The Sound of Words" and his 1943 publication "Dutch Graves in Bucks County."

Another letter addresses his 1942 essay directly. Corresponding with Hi Simons on February 19, 1942, Stevens sets out to explain portions of "The Noble Rider and The

Sound of Words” not well understood by Simons, stating, “I am surprised that you have any difficulty with this” (Letters 402). His first sentence in the letter is indispensable to the overarching goal Stevens was after in his poetry during this time. According to Stevens, “When the poet makes his imagination the imagination of other people, he does so by making them see the world through his eyes” (Letters 402). During this period of his life, Stevens thought poetry necessitated the poet taking reality out of its natural environment and into the realm of imagination. Otherwise, the poet has no way of making these *other* people experience art. Therefore, a proper negation of lived reality was a goal Stevens set out to have for his poetry in order to strike a balance between what reality *meant to him* and his imagination; equating imagination with nobility, he sought to magnify its presence in his poems.

As 1943 came along and the world continued at war, the notion of fixing one’s mind as one sees fit gathers increased intellectual weight with the publication of Jean-Paul Sartre’s philosophical work *Being and Nothingness* and his play *The Flies*. Both works emphasized existentialist concepts that taught men to find freedom by not allowing nature nor other people’s morals to influence them, advocating instead for people to follow rules created by their own consciousness. Concepts also explored by Nietzsche who we know were read by Sartre’ and Stevens. Although Stevens seems to definitely be influenced by his Christian roots, his somewhat unique method of thinking about God shows a certain affinity with the ideas of Sartre’ regarding making up rules that one finds useful for oneself. I am speaking of Stevens’s conceptualizations of “willingly suspend[ing] disbelief” and of “benign illusion” (Letters 430, 402). Studied from another

angle, the seeming irrationalities and contradictions in Stevens's poetry at this time, also share attributes with André Breton's concept of Surrealism, which, to paraphrase Charles E. Gauss 1943 article, "The Theoretical Backgrounds of Surrealism," posited positivism and rationality had become antithetical to imagination (37). It would appear Stevens's poem approximates what Grouse claims is the "logic of Surrealism ..., two contradictory states ... synthesized into a new conception which contains them both" (38). The careful back and forth of ambiguity and certainty in "Dutch Graves in Bucks County" achieves the impulse of nobility by producing the same benign illusion Stevens advocates for in his letter to Hi Simmons, when defending his view of poetry as positive escapism. Responding to what appears to be some discomfort Hi Simmons has with this idea, Stevens provides belief in God as an example of a "benign illusion," which is comparable to the effect of "benign escapism" he seeks to produce in his poetry (Letters 402).

This information illuminates the poem's use of negation and simultaneity and how Stevens uses them to place readers into the same perspective as the speaker. And further illuminates how this strategy sets up and makes possible the final stanza and couplet of the poem, where Stevens uses these structural elements to position the reader into taking the speaker's place in a journey towards "a generation's center," meant to provide a convincing illusion of balance (82). Centrality is, therefore, a sort of ideal as well as a proper destination into which readers are herded through the power of the speaker's imagination to acknowledge their place among:

These violent marchers of the present,
Rumbling along the autumnal horizon,
Under the arches, over the arches, in the arcs

Of a chaos composed in more than order,
March toward a generation's centre.

Time was not wasted in your subtle temples
No: nor divergence made too steep to follow down. (78-84)

This central nucleus amongst the imaginative atom-like chaos of the speaker's descriptions and arguments, up till then, culminates in the last couplet's dropping the "and you, my semblables" anaphora (83). In doing so, through the semblables exclusion, the reader feels compelled to fill the vacuum of this ideal center. A direct address to ownership of the time spent in "subtle temples" through the pronoun "your," makes this effect unmistakable (83). The perception of hope the poem communicates occurs through negatives that highlight propositions. Therefore, readers are comforted by the closing couplet's assurances that "Time was not wasted" and again "No: nor divergence ... too steep to follow down" (83-84). For all of the assurances found in this last couplet, when considering the total context of Stevens's ideas concerning poetry relevant to him at the time, what is revealed is that "Dutch Graves in Bucks County" noble and "placid end / ...[is] illusion," a benign one, meant to help us live our lives (71-72). As Stevens's poem "The Ultimate Poem is Abstract" states "If the day writhes, it is not with revelations / One goes on asking questions," nevertheless, we can attain "the middle, if only in sense, / And in that enormous sense, merely enjoy" (20-21). Centrality, in this poem, however, is not just about affecting the inner feelings of readers. It also is a staging mechanism that orders the imagery of the poem. By placing the aircraft in the "middle height," the speaker beholding the action and marching on the ground, and his semblables in their coffins under the ground, the speaker assumes the center of the stage, and yet even the

planes and the ancestors attain a center of their own, the planes in the middle of the sky, and the semblables in the midst of their coffins (3).

Stevens's prose and letters are invaluable guides to getting past the difficulties of the poetry he wrote between 1943 and 1947. Thanks to explanations he provided during this time, of his conception of the imagination and reality, and how they operate at opposite ends to achieve balance, the methods for achieving a sense of nobility in his poems are more readily identified. The tools of negation, simultaneity (an illusion attained balancing ambiguity and certainty), exception and centrality he combined to produce "Dutch Graves in Bucks County" open up the poem for interpretation and helps explain its effects. With this added context, it is possible to not only better understand how Stevens leads the reader to experience an attitude or emotion of nobility, despite the actual bleak denotation of Stevens's words and ideas in the poem about warfare and the chasms between generations over time, through his letters it is possible to perceive how his own methods of thinking about poetry and life interrelated. For example, by identifying how his ideas of, "willingly suspend[ing] disbelief" and "benign illusion" influenced how he viewed the role of poetry as compatible with escapism (Letters 430, 402). In the final analysis, by being sensitive to Stevens's use of negation to temper reality, the alternating ambiguities and certainties he uses to simulate simultaneity, a well-placed moment of exception, and his emphasis on centrality found in "Dutch Graves in Bucks County," a greater understanding is achieved of this imaginative work's noble forces.

Stevens's exploration of war experience in "Dutch Graves" is embedded with implicit questions regarding the motivations that cause soldiers to fight. The treatment of these motivations in the poem are tangled with ancient and modern considerations that are still highly relevant not just for readers, but for writers, speakers and humanity in general. After all, as Piero Boitani apply points out "a national ethos, [which celebrates the wrong notions of glory and nobility] leads to war, imperialism, and misery" (47-48). The sources of these motivations in the poem are worthy of further study and elaboration. In my reading of the poem, nobility is identified as a feeling that can be fabricated through topical and rhetorical treatment. The speaker does not betray the illusion by drawing an explicit warning as to what this means ethically. But the illusion is real enough that it can and, I believe, should make readers skeptical of the appeal of certain motifs, and at the very least, challenge them to not become overwhelmed by their rhetorical gravitas. I will highlight a few of these motifs from "Dutch Graves in Bucks County" that I feel the poem challenges ethically,¹² even while using them for the purpose of inspiring readers toward noble sentiments. The most obvious of these, national identity, is evident in the title as well as in the focus of the soldier's thoughts turning toward his Dutch ancestors. The appeal to national identity is a fundamental topic that harnesses and focuses reader attention but as soon as it does, it is complicated because the dead Dutch soldiers, who fought for Dutch independence, are buried on American soil. However, the trope of national identity, or perhaps more accurately described as mixed

¹² I do not wish to imply intentionality or non-intentionality on behalf of the poet with respects to why the poem can be interpreted to pose ethical challenges to these tropes (I have no knowledge to confirm or deny if he had such an agenda). I only mean to present my opinion of why I believe they do.

national identity, is a point of departure for more intricate and human tropes. For example, the well-worn, but ever resilient, trope of brothers in arms exerts a continual influence upon reader perception of the soldier's visions of his dead ancestors. For who does not know that soldiers fight not for countries, but for their fellow soldiers? In the poem, this trope is yoked to the automatic nobility society ascribes to military families who have genealogies of military service (semblables need not be a close relation, here is the fluidity, anyone can become through forbearers part of this tradition). Through the use of exception, Stevens, as demonstrated earlier, vacillates between what the soldier in the present shares with the soldier of the past in a way which renders the effect, the deeply felt and ingrained notion, that even though they *really don't*, they *somehow do* share a will in common. But, of course, the tropes I have just pointed out, embedded in the scene, provide more than sufficient explanation of what the soldiers share without having to say a word.

In *Poetry, Word-Play, and Word-War*, Eleanor Cook asks if this “flittering back and forth between categories, or else hovering over the gap” means that “Stevens is forever shifting, evading, flittering—that is playing irresponsibly with one notion of meaning after another?” (244). She answers her own question in the negative and instead offers an alternative for how to interpret what Stevens is doing. Cook identifies what Stevens does as not so much indicating a “space, a betweenness” but a “figure for it” comparable to a translation (244). In translation, a “mental space” is crossed from one non-understood language and is rendered understandable at a level which through language seeks to transcend the limitations of language and communicate an

unmistakable meaning through insinuation (244). Though I like Cook's translation analogy for what Stevens does in his poetry, I tend to disagree with her description of Stevens's shifting perspectives because they are undeniably present in his poetry and I do not think that their presence must be understood as Stevens "playing irresponsibly with one notion after another," but to the contrary represent a responsible and honest treatment of the inherent vagaries of meaning (244). However, at the level of individual elements of the poem, I think, undoubtedly meaning does emerge often in Stevens's poetry in ways which resonate with Cook's analogy of translation. Ultimately, I believe the contradictory statements of sharing and non-sharing made by the soldier united in some undefined yet felt exception translates to reveal the ingrained nature of his nationalist pride is the powerful metaphysical stuff of hegemony. This contradiction uniting sharing and non-sharing between the soldiers constitutes a hybrid synthesis of conceptual opposites with which to grant license to the imagination to formulate imagery and noble feelings in its interaction with the horror of war. Hence, demonstrating that even when faced with the empirical reality of the utter disconnection between soldiers of the present and the past, the subsumption of this reality into the flexible ecosystem of the imagination is influenced not only by the immediate reality of warfare, but by the constructive power of society exerting pressure upon the soldier. And, of course, as readers are impelled along the poem from this very close first person meditation, this question of what soldiers of the past share with those of the present also tests for the presence of similar subjective attachments in readers.

Raymond Williams's discussion of the complexity of hegemony is instructive and illuminating not only to a discussion of the contents of the poem, but also the history surrounding its publication. Some of this history behind its publication is given close scrutiny in Alan Filreis's *Wallace Stevens and the Actual World*. In his analysis of hegemony Williams states:

In any case, what I have in mind is the central, effective and dominant system of meanings and values, which are not merely abstract but are organized and lived. That is why hegemony is not to be understood at the level of mere opinion or mere manipulation. It is a whole body of practices and expectations; our assignments of energy, our ordinary understanding of the nature of man and of his world. It is a set of meanings and values which as they are experienced as practices appear as reciprocally confirming. It thus constitutes a sense of reality for most people in the society, a sense of absolute because experienced reality beyond which it is very difficult for most members of society to move, in most areas of their lives. (Williams 1429)

Even in the visceral heat of battle that seems to move the speaker to disavow any true relationship between himself and his dead semblables war experience, hegemony holds—it does not matter that the experiences are not the same, they are still experienced as reciprocally confirming. The poem states there is a "...will... common to all men" (39), that resonates with Williams's description of "a sense of absolute ... beyond which it is very difficult for most members of society to move" (Williams 1429).

This aspect of the poem, the validity of the relationship of the past with the present, is not only an essential theme of the poem, it is also fraught with political and ethical questions which helped instigate its production. In the space Filreis dedicates to the poem in *Wallace Stevens and the Actual World*, he shares a sort of true to life instance

of “Stevensian translation¹³” that takes place between Alan Tate and Stevens leading to “Dutch Graves” publication in *Sewanee*. The whole affair reads like the anatomized plot of a spy novel. The current editor of *Sewanee*, Andrew Lytle, is seen by Tate as being incapable of keeping the publication’s literary standards because of the pressures of the war. In an ironic twist of affairs, Tate’s request for Stevens to send a poem to *Sewanee*, where Tate was co-editor and soon to be taking over, something Stevens knew would happen, leads to the publication of a poem that will oppose ideas on war expressed by Tate in one of his poems. The first impression one gets when reading about Tate’s complaints about Lytle is that Tate is trying to push Lytle out in order to move into his position. However, this impression is proven unwarranted because Lytle is among Tate’s supporters and saw this transition of Tate into his post “as a means of fending off aesthetic compromises brought on by the war mentality” (Filreis 118). While Stevens supports Tate, confident in his ability to see the publication through the war, it is a sentiment qualified by doubts of “Tate’s temperamental capacity for forging the necessary agreement with reality” (Filreis 118). According to Filreis, “The future, Stevens thought, was more internationalist and politically heterodox than perhaps Tate could tolerate” (118). The poem that Tate has lobbied Stevens for and which Lytle receives a year after Pearl Harbor, on December 8, 1942, is the “strongest opposition to the sort of skepticism Tate expressed, in, say, the “Ode to the Confederate Dead,” where

¹³ I perceive the exchange as a “Stevensian translation” because of how Stevens’ messages to Tate and the content of the poem he sends to *Sewanee* communicate a mixed message: that although Stevens is for Tate becoming editor of *Sewanee* for reasons having to do with the war, he is also in a sense against him for reasons having to do with the war.

he had commemorated the fallen southern soldiers of the past in order to complain about ‘the fragmentary cosmos of today’” (Firleis 119; Tate qtd. in Firleis 119). The central opposition between the poems concerns the effect of the past on the present. As we have seen, despite the speaker’s own insistence to the contrary, of actually sharing nothing with them and them nothing with him, “Clearly, the emotional validity of “Dutch Graves” derived from Stevens’ personal identification with his semblables versions of himself as Dutch soldier” (Firleis 121). In contrast, for Tate, “moderns learn nothing from the past, that they return to the war dead for an emotional shudder and nothing more” (Firleis 121). Therefore, according to Firleis, “Dutch Graves” is “a rejoinder to Tate’s attack on subjectivity itself in the context of the New Critics’ wartime literary politics” (121):

[And in] contesting this sort of skepticism, what certainly seemed to many American intellectuals in late 1942 to be out-and-out defeatism [no doubt aided by a poem titled “Ode to the Confederate Dead”] ... in offering his “Dutch Graves in Bucks County” as his reply to Tate’s famous “Ode”—Stevens came as close as he would to the new nationalism. (119)

Stevens’s famous statements: “[the] violence from within protecting us from the violence without” and “the imagination pressing back against the pressure of reality” are understood best in the context of warfare when he, somewhat demurely, concludes, “It seems, in the last analysis, to have something to do with our self-preservation; and that, no doubt, is why the expression of it, the sound of its words, helps us live our lives” (“The Noble” 36). It is helpful to recognize how self-preservation is being used here in a very Darwinian sense. The sound of what is noble, in Stevens’s view, seems to imply this

sentiment is hardwired into our species. Another way to understand the real world consequences of the aesthetics of nobility is expressed by James Merrill. In a pointed note, Cook attributes to him “the most telling criticism of some of Stevens’ writing about war” and goes on to quote the following lines by Merrill: “‘How gladly with proper words,’ said Wallace Stevens, / ‘The soldier dies.’ Or kills” (Merrill qtd. in Cook 212). Therefore, the process of sublimation commonly associated with Freudian thought, the healthy transformation of unsavory unconscious drives (for example drives of violence which often lead to war) into artistic or other pursuits is inverted by Stevens, who posits the exterior pressures of reality on the mind can produce imaginative counter-measures with which to transform the real violence of war into noble words that will inspire self-preserving actions.

“Examination of the Hero in a Time of War”

“Examination” was first published in *The Harvard Advocate*, on April 1942, for its 75th anniversary issue, about a year and half before “Dutch Graves” appeared in *Sewanee* in the winter of 1943. The poems evidence a transition by Stevens in how he chose to present war and nobility in his poetry, from a perspective grounded in actual soldiers and battle to one which focuses almost exclusively on the abstract presentations of ideas related to the topic of warfare. The most striking difference in his poetic presentation of war and nobility in these poems can be inferred through the off-repeated mentioning by critics of how quickly “Examination” abandons the initial imagery

situating the poem amongst actual soldiers at war¹⁴. Indeed, the first three sections of the poem, made up of sixteen in total, clearly abscond from any brief illusion of taking place within the consciousness of soldiers grounded in battle in favor of a series of philosophical discourses poetically turning upon what the poem sees as outdated discourses on heroism. The poem begins from a first person point of view, which implicates the speaker within the action of what through the title readers expect will involve war:

Force is my lot and not pink-clustered
Roma ni Avignon ni Leyden,
And cold, my element. Death is my
Master and, without light, I dwell. There
The snow hangs heavily on the rocks, brought
By a wind that seeks out shelter from snow. Thus (1-6)

However, as soon as the poem situates readers within the first person perspective and a setting amongst rocks, snow and the specter of death, the voices of others are presented, as if through the narrative lens of the first, and the dominance of the first voice is subsumed by the idiosyncratic perspectives of other soldiers:

Each man spoke in winter. Yet each man spoke of
The brightness of arms, said Roma wasted
In its own dirt, said Avignon was
Peace in a time of peace, said Leyden

¹⁴ In Howard Bloom's view, the poem does away with any realistic connection to soldiers in war from the outset. In *The Poems of Our Climate* he states, "War seems to me only a trope in *Examination of the Hero*... testing out the poet as hero... the soldier who speaks the opening lines of the poem is Stevens himself, still fighting the old war of the imagination (158-159). And according to Patrick Redding, "Contrary to expectation, "Examination" does not examine episodes of soldierly conquest or deeds of martial bravery. There are no scenes from the trenches and barely any reference to the imagery or settings of modern war. Except for the first three stanzas, "Examination" restricts its attention entirely to the nature and scope of heroism outside the context of warfare (24).

Was always the other mind. The brightness
Of arms, the will opposed to cold, fate
In its cavern, wings subtler than any mercy,
These were the psalter of their sybils. (7-14)

The second section begins by uniting the soldiers' voices under a common hope, and so a natural continuation of the earlier section seems to take place. However, although readers are led to settle into the soldiers' perspective, it is short-lived:

The Got whome we serve is able to deliver
Us. Good chemistry, good common man, what
Of that angelic sword? Creature of
Ten times ten times dynamite, convulsive
Angel, convulsive shatterer, gun,
Click, click, the Got whom we serve is able,
Still, still to deliver us, still magic,
Still moving yet motionless in smoke, still
One with us, in the heaved-up noise, still
Captain, the man of skill, the expert
Leader, the creator of bursting color
And rainbow sortilege, the savage weapon. (15-26)

Although the first line of the stanza, "The Got whome we serve is able to deliver," appears to unite the men under the banner of a common hope, no sooner as it does, it immediately disjoins them (15). Therefore, the enjambment "Us" stands alone and provides the illusion of containing the men like specimens caught between microscope slides (16). The immediate mentioning of chemistry, in another context, points backwards to this isolation of the soldiers as specimens to be examined¹⁵. This language situates the

¹⁵ Stevens' poetic examination of the soldiers shares echoes of Nietzsche who in *On Truth and Lying in a Non-Moral Sense* states, "What do human beings really know about themselves? Are they even capable of perceiving themselves in their entirety just once, stretched out as in an illuminated glass case? (765).

poem in an objective, in the scientific sense, plane of analysis. And highlights the positivist connotations of the word examination in the title. In other words, this examination seems to be a clinical endeavor. Yet, Stevens here is playing with incongruities, surprising readers by hybridizing what is normally at odds. The poem is invoking God (Stevens uses the Dutch variant Got, which highlights his interest in his ancestry during this time) and the scientific positions which have rendered belief in divinity troubling for many, and impossible for some, since the dawning of scientific explanations for human development found in texts like Darwin's *On the Origin of Species*. Hence readers get conflicting semantic messages alternating with each other yet forming a cohesive message: "Got" is thus able "to deliver" but "good chemistry" is just as able to explain "common man" (15-16). The echo of Darwin's "common decent" is being bounced off ecclesiastical responses that affirm the "rock of our salvation, he is able to deliver us" rooted in the story of the Hebrew youths thrown into the fiery furnace by King Nebuchadnezzar¹⁶.

From this backdrop the proper theme or subject of analysis in the poem is introduced with another enjambment. The questioning *what*, left dangling at the end of line sixteen, introduces the subject of the hero in a rhetorical question continued on line seventeen: "Of that angelic sword? Creature of" (17). The "angelic sword" is mystical language for the hero, and although this mystical description of the hero is placed side by side and identified with the word "Creature," the mystical cannot claim creation of the

¹⁶ See Daniel 3:17: "Our God whom we serve is able to deliver us."

creature (17). The visual pairing of “angelic sword?” and “Creature” seems to cast doubt and minimize the mystical origins of the hero (17). The mystical is acknowledged perhaps for having arisen first, as a hypothesis, but its miniscule and questioning appearance draws attention to the overwhelming theoretical knowledge modernity has to explain the origins of the hero as “Creature” (17). This is what is meant when critics say Stevens dramatizes inner conflicts. Beginning the subject of his poetic study of the heroic by means of a mystical trope he immediately proceeds to deconstruct its essential properties, even while using it as a vehicle to continue his meditation. He literally dresses concepts in the garb of what are perceived as its conceptual rivals and presents them as hybrid formulations.

Another Darwinian allusion begins in the following enjambment which further situates the “Creature” in evolutionary discourse (17). Thus, line eighteen begins by highlighting the creature as belonging to or being composed of one of the most important findings for the plausibility of evolutionary theory: deep time. The end of line seventeen, “Creature of,” continues at line eighteen, “Ten times ten times dynamite, convulsive,” with its connotations of deep time and the big bang. Having hybridized the mystical and the scientific, he dramatizes the conflict in honest real world terms. The creature and his knowledge become one and the same, metaphorically, he is “convulsive / Angel, convulsive shatterer, gun, / Click, click, the Got whom we serve is able” (18-20). Humanity’s world-view-altering knowledge has broken down its former beliefs in the mystical. Even in striking a high and serious tone, Stevens can include parodic elements which are a testament to his sharp wit. The clicks which follow the Angel transformed

into a metaphorical gun signals the gun-angel has no more bullets. The resulting pairing of “Click, click, the Got whom we serve is able,” is disarmingly, forgive the pun, humorous and scathing at once (20). Or, alternatively, the imagery can be interpreted as a horrific metaphoric vision, wherein the death of God is dramatized to such a degree as to suggest excess; and modernity in anthropomorphic guise, literally having emptied its gun, continues to fire on the mortally stricken deity.

But as if the previous description were not enough, the irony of the deity’s modern dilemma is further dramatized with biting pairings of *double entendre* word play that reinforce the image and idea of incapacity began with the gun imagery in line 20. If one reads the word *still* as non-movement instead of as a synonym for continuation, and latches on to this double meaning, a parody of the deity’s non-ability and/or existence can be perceived running steadily from line 20 to line 22, where it discontinues briefly, and reappears at the beginning of line 23:

Still, still to deliver us (the irony here involves the illogical pairing of stillness and deliverance) still magic, / still moving (these still pairings highlight the dissonance of magic without movement and the illogical proposition of something still moving) yet motionless (a funny instance of overkill, the proverbial *badabing* of comedians) in smoke, (this pairing is a play on the colloquial term “up in smoke;” as if the whole idea of God has been incinerated) still / One with us (notice the play on Emanuel or *God with us* in the previous grouping) still / Captain (the parody stops by highlighting the uselessness of an inactive and/or dead leader) (emphasis added 21-23).

Although impossible to know for sure, such scathing poetry on the condition of the deity might also inform the choice of Stevens’s use of the term “Got” instead of God;

intentionally or not, however, it is undeniable that the letter change works as a type of euphemism to lessen the considerable sacrilegious shocks of this section.

However much the presence of the mystical is diminished or ridiculed in the poem, as we have already seen, there is an ambiguity to this criticism which draws attention to itself and opens a gap for questioning what underlying principle of the mind is to blame for the surprising lack of fixity distinguishing knowledge from practice and truth from imagination. The question these hybrid poetic experiments are designed to instigate in readers are brought on by shocking the mind with the realization of its dependence on pattern and inherited discourses of knowledge, as it reacts to an evolving context of what constitutes the latest consensus establishing reality. The underlying reasons which open up this gap in the text spring from the power of mysticism to still carry poetic voice in the current modern climate, which is made clear since despite its debunking message, the placement of the debunking message attacking mysticism presented in the style and discourse of mysticism lays bare the impotence of denotation to despoil mysticism of its ability to establish an unmistakable numinous atmosphere and tone. As if in mirror relation to the dramatic presentation of the poem, which becomes an exercise where seeing becomes an invitation to see again, or to study with greater intensity, the criticism of mysticism is conspicuously ambiguous, precisely, because of its self-conscious commentary on mysticism's power to still carry poetic voice despite being forced to carry a debunking message against itself. In its overboard display of anger toward God, as well, the poem places the divine on a dramatic pedestal that enacts mysticism's hardness despite its having been assailed, even to the point of excess, by

modernity. Even if “the Got whom we serve” is shooting an empty weapon, has been the victim of overkill, or both, so to speak, (when one interprets *still* as continuation) he is “Still, still [able] to deliver us, still magic, / Still moving yet motionless in smoke, still” (21-22). However, he is “One with us, in the heaved-up noise,” in a presence of language and its rhetorical influence and not in any direct spiritual way (23). The imagery is congruent and also incongruent with the biblical description of the three Hebrew youths who in defiance of Nebuchadnezzar’s commandment to worship the golden idol state God is able to deliver them from the fiery furnace, and, who, once tossed inside, dancing, unharmed by the flames, produce no smoke¹⁷; additionally, Stevens plays with Nebuchadnezzar’s identification of a fourth dancer which joins the three and whose appearance is like the son of God by the reference “One with us, in the heaved up noise” (23) The reference to “heaved-up noise” is also rooted in the story of the Hebrew youths whose cue to worship the idol involved a succession of musical sounds (23). Therefore, the reference is another associative inversion equating the golden idol with the divine fourth companion in the fire (23). But the ambiguity of the imagery being accurate and inaccurate at once is not arbitrary, in the exchange, Got is humanized with no incarnation. He becomes, “Captain, the man of skill, the expert / Leader, the creator of bursting color / And rainbow sortilege, the savage weapon” (24-26). It is hard not to pause here and see some affinity between this line and the title of Thomas Pynchon’s famous WWII novel *Gravity’s Rainbow*. The collapse of the centrality of Western mystical tradition is

¹⁷ See Daniel 3:27: “The fire had no power, nor was an hair of their head singed... nor the smell of fire had passed on them.”

dramatized by conflating the rainbow, the sign indicating the end of the deluge and God's promise to never drown humanity again with the weapons of modern war. "Rainbow sortilege" becomes not an occasion for doves to fly, as they do from the ark in Genesis once the rain abates, but the very reason rockets, fire bombs and bullets take to the air in a war where only total victory means absolute peace, and where prophetically a truly "savage weapon," the atom bomb, will bring it to a close (26). The multiple meanings attributed to the word "sortilege," which can refer to the casting of lots or to sorcery, is also included in the subversion of the rainbow as a sign of permanence originating from the immutable word of the divine (26). In contrast to which, "rainbow sortilege" is but a sorcery, a magic created by mortals, a promise of nothing, the opposite of assurance, a sign as inconstant as the drawing of lots (26). Finally, even the resemblance of the word *sortie* to "sortilege" should not be taken for granted: the similarity of these words adds to the transformative effect of the hybrid descriptions dressing the new with the old in this stanza (26). The technique of simultaneity works in this poem differently than in "Dutch Graves," it is not calibrated to produce an egalitarian sensation of balance, through an artful yet ambiguous back and forth, in this poem, simultaneity works in an evolutionary mode, dramatizing atavisms of the past still attached to the present.

The previous close reading is one way to interpret the various intricacies of relational meanings and slippages that can be understood depending on the context and knowledge with which readers interact with the text. From the gaps that these embedded messages spring forth and behind all of these hybrid inversions and contradistinctions, an overarching question can be inferred arising between these positivist and mystical

discourse materials. An invisible finger, so to speak, arising from the “heaved-up noise” may be indicating the need to explore a new frontier where science and mysticism blend into an even newer sense of what constitutes reality (23). The mind being the obvious ecological site for discovering the contours of this new reality. The poem’s linguistic explorations of the flexibility of meaning, points toward the need to continue the search for the holy grail separating our understanding of the purely physical world from the semantic mental ecology of imagination. It seeks through poetry to spur a hunger to know the secret within the mind that makes it capable of transubstantiating the water of material knowledge into the wine of qualia represented by feeling. In other words, why should an age that understands the “death of God” still be influenced by the accoutrements of mystical aesthetics? The criticism of mysticism is ambiguous in the poem, I believe, because the ambiguity is designed to prompt readers to become interested in questioning what constitutes knowledge, to desire to become knowledgeable about knowledge in a way that will lead to an examination of imagination as an immutable organizing principle of mind. Stevens’s approach synthesizing the past and present to calibrate how he wants readers to experience warfare in “Dutch Graves” and “Examination” are different. The underlying concept of simultaneity as an organizing pattern is drastically tweaked by Stevens so that it performs a different patterning effect that orders reader perception of the relationships of hierarchy and importance in the contents of the poems. Nevertheless, through the concept of simultaneity, whether used in an egalitarian balance or in an atavistic evolutionary mode, Stevens is still able to undermine any sense of confidence in any one argumentative position, precisely, because

of how he structures contrary arguments in the poems with hybrid traits that constrain their interdependence. The cybernetic reality of relations pulls back the curtain on how much pattern influences our perception of reality. By inducing our minds to organize the atavistic relationships structuring “Examination” or to do so with the egalitarian set of cues found in “Dutch Graves,” Stevens demonstrates the ability of mind to use form to manipulate semantic content.

Both poems also share a consistent type of word-play that, I believe, demonstrates Stevens’s cultural integrations of literary techniques emulating African American aesthetics. The cultural integration that Stevens uses in these poems goes beyond the merely thematic and involves matters of poetic technique and style, although, as with text generally, distinctions between theme and technique are not mutually exclusive. The technique Stevens uses over and over again is the double descriptive, a textual practice categorized by Zora Neale Hurston in her essay “Characteristics of Negro Expression” (1934)—published less than a decade apart from “Dutch Graves” (1943) and “Examination” (1942)—as one of the greatest contributions African Americans have made to language in the United States¹⁸. In the essay, Hurston provides a list of word pairings as examples of the African American double descriptive and many of them are similar to word pairings by Stevens in his poetry. For example, it is hard not to see affinity between Stevens’s “semblables, doubly killed” in “Dutch Graves,” and Hurston’s

¹⁸ In *Characteristics of Negro Expression* Hurston states, “But the Negro’s greatest contribution to the language is: (1) the use of metaphor and simile; (2) the use of the double descriptive; (3) the use of verbal nouns” (1011).

double descriptive “kill-dead” example, or say, the multiplying imagistic effects of Hurston’s example, “De watch wall” and Stevens’s “pink-clustered / Roma” and his “azure-doubled crimsons” descriptions, which accomplish the same multiplying feat with the features of the sky that Hurston shows African Americans have done with the features of a wall (“Dutch” 20; “Examination” 1-2, 222; Hurston 1012). At other times, the spirit of the double descriptive resides in the nearness of words. Hence a doubling effect takes place in the following pairs, “Still, still,” “shatterer, gun” and “dance, the music,” which correspond to Hurston’s “Speedy-hurry,” “Chop-ax,” and “Sitting-chairs” examples (1012). Though Stevens’s use of repetition has been noted by scholars, I have not, as of yet, seen it tied to its African American double descriptive roots. In “Examination,” there are numerous such examples and listing all would beleaguer the point. But here are two more which stand out, even more, because Stevens uses them back to back in a double, double descriptive pairing, so to speak, which forms most of line 34: “...*accurate, exacting eye. Sight*” (emphasis added). Therefore, it is important to recognize Stevens’s hybridization of the aesthetic and conceptual characteristics of diverse cultures, such as his use of Asian aesthetics of negative space, is an integral component of his imaginarily-unending poetry. Living together with disrespectful and insensitive attempts at cultural bricolage, there is also evidence of Stevens’s adoption of African American aesthetic innovations to the English language which become fundamental in much of his poetry. In other words, Stevens truly uses parts of the world to hybridize his poetic harmonium of one. As for how the double-descriptive furthers Stevens’s desire for his poetry to become a portal transferring the content of his mind into that of his readers, Hurston’s

commentary is eye-opening. According to her, the genesis of the double-descriptive comes from a “speaker [who] has in his mind the picture of the object in use. Action. Everything illustrated” (1011). The verb connected directly to the noun to form a hybrid word, this simple pair of differentiating bits, can turn “chop-ax” into a phenomenal forest of inner experience; and is so doing, the double-descriptive reveals the efficiency of the differentiating patterning properties of mind/imagination that Stevens so restlessly explores in his poetry (Hurstons 1012).

The first line of section three suggest a return to the opinions of the soldiers, “They are sick of each old romance, returning, / Of each old revolving dance, the music....” (29-30). The poem returns to scientific/clinical language: “How strange the hero / To this accurate, exacting eye. Sight” (33-34). As soon as readers begin to think again of the men amongst the rocks, snow and death, it is short-lived, they are regarded as “sick” subjects confused about what to make of the concept of the heroic (29). In their consciousness the subject of the hero sounds “Like a euphony in a museum / Of euphonies,” their vision of the hero, “a museum of things seen” (31-32). This suggestion of artificiality of the concept of the hero as being comparable to a museum piece echoes Hurstons’s essay “What White Publishers Won’t Print” with its description of an “AMERICAN MUSEUM OF UNNATURAL HISTORY... [made up of] an intangible built on folk belief ... uncomplicated stereotypes ... made of bent wires without insides at all,” wherein she assails American caricatures of distinct cultures (1024). These insights of the men are recognized by the speaker for their intensity. Therefore, “In war, observes each man profoundly. / Yes...” (37-38). However, this ability of the soldiers to

inspect closely proves unreliable and, in a critical moment of exception, their insights gleaned directly from the fray are described as "... sudden sublimations" (38). In the speaker's view these insights are nothing more than the result of psychological defense mechanisms (the word sublimation also connotes intense chemical transitions, which alludes to the earlier description of the men as "Good chemistry") made manifest in the heat of battle, "to combat what his exaltations / Are to the unaccountable prophet or / What any fury to its noble center" (40-42). And here, with this excuse shaped into an exception, with this "Yes. But..." Stevens seems to leave behind any pretense of a literal war setting amongst rocks, snow, soldiers and death suggested earlier (38). The line, "To grasp the hero..." spearheading section four, places readers firmly in the lecture hall, amongst the thralls of an epistemological treatise on the subject of the hero (43). However, he will return briefly to the soldiers, or perhaps just one of them, in the end of section five:

Soldier, think, in the darkness,
Repeating your appointed paces
Between two neatly measured stations,
Of less neatly measured common-places. (67-70)

Up to this point, stanza five has been an exploration of fortune's causes, of the why for things. It suggests "common fortune," may be "induced by nothing" or "the entrails / Of a cat" but the opinion of the speaker of the compromised condition of the soldiers "to grasp the hero" is not lost or changed in the exchange of thought on causation (59, 60, 61, 63, 42). The "neatly measured stations" of the soldier are closer to the "improvisation of the cuckoos / in a clock shop... Soldier think, [the speaker asks of them or him] in the

darkness,” and easier to determine, than “rain in a dry September” (66, 67, 69, 65). Why else is the speaker asking the soldier to think in terms of “less neatly measured common-places,” if not because the constraints of the soldiers’ circumstances seems to render the cause of their thoughts overly predictable (70)? It is a tall order from the speaker to ask the soldier who is in the midst of a war to take on a different perspective and to see the world from a position that he does not inhabit; and yet the argument of the speaker is commensurate with a type of objective examination which would guard against obvious contaminations to the accurate determination of condition, while trusting fate with that which it cannot logically, due to complexity or some unknown factor, be taken into consideration. This will be the last fore into situating the poem amongst the soldiers. Unlike the exception in “Dutch Graves” concerning what past and present soldiers share, this exception, or reason for not relying on the soldier to provide the definition of what formulates the hero, has a reason for existing that is explained by an appeal to positivist reason.

However, like “Dutch Graves,” the use of exception in “Examination” is a crucial one. It is from here that Stevens can formulate his poem on the definition of the hero from an abstract point of view, one, presumably, more objective and untainted than what can be discovered by hewing only to the experiences of soldiers. Stevens believed that in “the violent reality of war, consciousness takes the place of imagination” (“The Immense” 251). It may be this perceived threat of consciousness over imagination that for Stevens made linking nobility too close to soldiers at war problematic. Yet he successfully does so in “Dutch Graves.” One way to resolve the apparent conflict is to

recognize that in “Dutch Graves” it is the illusion of nobility that is represented, while in “Examination” Stevens sought to arrive as close as he could to what he ideally thought should be labeled heroic in the modern world, that is, “The common man ... / The common hero” (57). The exorcism of the heroic from the battlefield to the common man who “studies the paper / On the wall, the lemons on the table” is negated, however, by the poem itself because clearly in the poem “the hero is not a person,” “The hero is a feeling, a man seen / As if the eye was an emotion / As if in seeing we saw our feeling (99, 160-162). What are readers to make of this? The final section confronts this dilemma when it states:

But was the summer false? The hero?
How did we come to think that autumn
Was the veritable season, that familiar
Man was the veritable man? (217-220)

The speakers’ answer is that during an excess of “Summer, jangling the savages diamonds and / Dressed in its azure-double crimsons,” the older conceptions of the hero may still call for “the large solitary figure” (221-222, 224). In other words, the feeling of heroism is assignable to people according to environmental settings that match it intuitively, who and what is heroic, ultimately, is a matter of aesthetic perspective. However much positivist ideals seek to cleanse it from subjective contaminations, an “Examination of the Hero” is, in Stevens’s as in the present day, quite possibly the dirtiest enterprise known to humanity. But, even so, “Unless we believe in the hero, what is there / to believe?” (71-72). There is call within section six to take hold of the concept and to reconfigure it “For every day. In a civiler manner” (74):

Devise devise, and make him of winter's
Iciest core, a north star, central
In our oblivion, of summer's
Imagination, the golden rescue:
The bread and wine of the mind, permitted
In an ascetic room, its table
Red as a red table-cloth, its windows
West Indian, the extremest power
Living and being about us and being
Ours, like a familiar companion. (75-84)

This section is a utopian vision for the heroic which calls to mind Martin Heidegger's essay "Language" (1950) and its usage of Georg Trakl's poem "A Winter Evening" to illustrate his idea that language speaks and is speaking, not expression. Heidegger's insistence on listening and responding to "what is spoken purely" appear to share a very similar meaning to Stevens's poetic effort to "device, device" (75) and both activities involve resisting the "residue of speaking long past," and turning to original speaking (988). And for Heidegger, "what is spoken purely is the poem" (988). The similarities in this section to Trakl's poem are most concrete in the simple presentation of bread and wine on a table in a room with a window; as in Trakl's poem, the winter is also present but is hybridized with summer in a display of temperamental balance. Stevens formulates a complex metaphor where the hero is a hybrid world made of the seasons of winter and summer in simultaneous presence; the winter to destroy within him all egotistic motivations, the summer to enliven his salvific imagination, the red table signifying the hero's universal human character, and its window embracing extreme difference. In the process of description the hybrid hero is personified as present within its own world, as embodied within it, and us with him. This metaphor resonates with Heidegger's idea of:

The di-ference [which] carries out world in its wordling, carries out things in their thinging. Thus carrying them out, it carries them toward one another. The difference does not mediate after the fact by connecting world and things through a middle added on to them. Being the middle it first determines world and things in their presense, i.e., in their being toward one another, whose unity it carries out. (993).

There is a tension in the proposition Stevens's poem makes for making the hero anew. There is an angst in Stevens's poem which carries over in the surprising and, as far as I know, only prose statement purposely placed after a poem of his in this fashion, as if it were a continuation, an overflow, or some sort of commentary on it or beyond it. The miniature essay, two paragraphs and a sentence in length, is titled "The Immense Poetry of War." It is a sobering document which does not rest easy with the utopian image of the Hero Stevens wishes would become incarnate in all of us discussed earlier. In it, Stevens capitulates imagination to fact because in his understanding, "in war, the desire to move in the direction of fact as we want it to be and to move quickly is overwhelming," furthermore, "Nothing will ever appease this desire except a consciousness of fact as everyone is at least satisfied to have it be" ("The Immense" 251). Nietzsche articulated the battle between fact and imagination as taking place between the "man of reason" and the "man of intuition"—the reasonable man ever concerned with his needs, with "how to cope with calamities of life by providing for the future, by prudence and regularity, the other by being the 'exuberant hero' who does not see those calamities as real when it is disguised as beauty and appearance" ("On Truth" 773). Stevens's conclusion seems to be that in a time of war there is no place for the "exuberant hero" ("On Truth" 773). The "victories and defeats of nations, is a consciousness of fact, of fact on such a scale that

the mere consciousness of it affect the scale of one's thinking and constitutes a participation in the heroic" ("The Immense" 251). Typical of Stevens, it is a cryptic message, but it clearly implies the nation and the heroic and one's participation in it is akin to an irresistible gravitational force. What this participation entails by Stevens is not articulated other than to say that it affects "one's thinking" ("The Immense" 251). It is hard not to read between the blank space separating "Examination" and "The Immense Poetry of War" and not sense that, perhaps, the composition of the essay involves some self-preservation. It is positioned like a detour sign at the end of *Parts of the World*, as if to immediately stave-off criticism for creating a utopian-everyman-hero safely reading the newspaper while American GI's fight and die overseas. It would appear, based on this prose statement, Stevens felt the heat-rays of the "Summer, jangling the savagest diamonds," and the "azure-doubled" crimsons" of his day granted him no other way out except to embrace the wore-out, "large ... solitary figure" of the hero (271, 272, 274).

Connecting Stevens's conception of heroism and democracy with his days as a student Patrick Redding points out:

"Examination of the Hero in a Time of War" appeared in *The Harvard Advocate* in April 1942. The date and place of publication lend an additional pathos to this wartime poem: it is as if Stevens, writing in the wake of the attack on Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941, was addressing an earlier version of his college self (and perhaps of his Harvard teacher, Santayana, as well). (35)

I would like to dovetail another element of pathos to Redding's statement connecting the date and place of publication of the poem to Stevens's days at Harvard. 1898, the year Stevens begins his journal while at Harvard, is the year the United States invades,

subdues and eventually colonized Puerto Rico¹⁹, Guam, Cuba and the Philippines after waging a war of imperial ambition. Redding begins the essay by summarizing various views people have entertained on what politics Stevens had in mind when he used words like “hero,” “major man,” and “nobility” (23). According to her, “Their conclusions have been surprisingly contradictory” (23). As early as 1942, Hi Simons noted that Stevens’s hero “bore some suspicion of resemblance to a sort of *fuehrer*” (Simmons qtd. in Redding 23). However, in my opinion, Simmons travels too far for his example; for me the notion of a “major man” fits nicely with the image of rough riding Teddy Roosevelt’s imperial pursuits during the Spanish American War. Theodore Roosevelt perhaps is not Stevens’s political ideal for the hero, but after his election to the Presidency, in no small measure attained because of the reputation he gained from his participation in the Spanish American War, he definitely embodied something with that soft walk and big stick that he carried around the world like a policeman on a beat. And certainly the pervasiveness of President Theodore Roosevelt’s heroic aura, which endures to this day, must have been felt by Stevens as a young Harvard student.

According to Redding, “As a poet writing in wartime, there is no question that Stevens was a touch defensive about his apparent irrelevance to the struggle against fascism. In the midst of the intensities of warfare, the poet felt a deep need to justify the life of the mind on moral grounds—to show that struggles with words and ideas have real consequences, too” (42). However much this may be the case in his poem “Examination,”

¹⁹ Another famous Modernist, William Carlos Williams, the son of a Puerto Rican woman who fanned his literary interests, is five years old. For a thorough study of how Williams’ Puerto Rican roots influenced his poems see: Julio Marzán’s *The Spanish American Roots of William Carlos Williams*.

in his short prose piece placed immediately after it, “The Immense Poetry of War,” as stated earlier, Stevens made clear that in his opinion the intensity of the stakes of war severely constrict the life of the mind because: “In the presence of the violent reality of war, consciousness takes the place of imagination” (“The Immense” 251).

Redding believes that in “Examination” Stevens “challenge[s] our assumption that heroism needs to be linked to fighting and violence rather than expertise and creativity” (32). Although admitting that Stevens presents counter-arguments in his poem “voicing the reservations being nursed in the minds of his readers,” Redding still feels confident in stating Stevens “*planted himself firmly on one side of the debate*. That is to say, even when *Stevens committed himself to articulating a democratic idea of the hero*, he did not shy away from the problems and paradoxes such an account tended to generate” (emphasis added 40, 23-24). This quote shows some trepidation in its phrasing, but its emphasis is on Redding’s belief that Stevens has staked out a position that firmly places him on the side of the need for the hero to be a democratic figure. I would not be so bold in planting Stevens into any single side of debate within this poem. What is made clear in the poem is the transitory nature of heroism and the belief that a time has come for a new conception of the hero that can ensure self-preservation. However, as times change, in my reading, the image of the hero is capable of reverting to earlier conceptions that would include undemocratic ones. The examination of the hero is therefore unending and potentially variant as environmental circumstances change. Which means the usage of the trope of the hero for undemocratic and unequal treatment of peoples is not necessarily out of the question for Stevens, in this reading of the poem, but justified if the

instinct for self-preservation calls for it. Such an indeterminate or ambiguous ending for a poem by Stevens is hardly surprising. Stevens's subsumption of reality into the ecosystem of imagination like the "rubies reddened by rubies reddening" in the last line of his poem "Description Without Place" often keeps on going and going to places without stable descriptions. However, just because the subsumption of reality into the ecosystem of the imagination may appear to go nowhere, does not mean such imaginings have not come from somewhere and will not find destinations in the real world. Despite Stevens's claim that the poet is not and should not be constrained by ethics or political considerations²⁰; his claims that his poetry is not personal, and so forth. There comes a point where I think such statements instead of illuminating an interpretation of his poetry, as his discussions on nobility and imagination does in his prose, seem to obfuscate the ethical implications of his usage and exploration of hybrid characteristics in much of his poetry. It also betrays the very instability of the medium of language, text, and circumstance since it is not difficult to find statements by Stevens that express a fully conscious embrace of the political impact of literature and poetry²¹. Stevens's profound understanding of the power of literature to influence political movement is perhaps

²⁰ For example in "The Noble Rider and the Sound of Words" he states "In this area of my subject I might be expected to speak of the social, that is to say sociological or political obligation of the poet. He has none" (27).

²¹ In *Wallace Stevens and the Actual World*, Alan Filreis highlights Stevens' flexibility on this matter when he states of Stevens "his idea that a poet must make 'an agreement with reality' in terms that would have appealed to his refugee audience... in ways we can only assume he knew would be understood as attuned to the Franco-American rhetoric of total war, just then resurgent—a fine sense of the occasion that could not be conveyed in *The Necessary Angel*. When one makes an agreement with reality, Stevens told his special audience, and when one acknowledges that poetic truth embodies a 'factual truth,' then one's poetry 'is a moment of victory over the incredible' and 'what was incredible is *eliminated*'—and then, and only then, 'something newly credible takes its place'" (100).

nowhere clearer than in a journal entry of his on April 30, 1907. In this entry, he quotes an excerpt from *The Nation* No. 7 (London) p. 255 only to follow up with a gloss giving his answer to the aesthetic question the quote presents:

We must leave it to the aesthetic critics to explain why that is—why it is easier for nearly everyone to recognize the meaning of common reality after it has passed through another's brain—why thousands of kindly people should have contemplated negro slavery day by day for years without emotion, and then have gone mad over "Uncle Tom's Cabin."

[Stevens's gloss] It is because common reality is being exhibited. It is being treated objectively. (*Souvenirs* 179)

There is no doubt Stevens was interested in the phenomenological aspect and epistemological treatment of the integration of imagination and reality. But to ignore the ethical honesty with which he chooses to simultaneously engage, examine and allow for differences to harmonize, disunite, compete and complete each other is to relegate his poetry to some sort of free-floating pleasure game devoid of lessons. Even if a choice is made to exile Stevens's poetry to a world of pure imagination, as Gloria Anzaldúa has said, "Nothing happens in the "real world" unless it first happens in the images in our heads" (2106). This ethical quality to his poetry I feel deserves greater acknowledgement. As Stevens said in "Of Modern Poetry," modern poetry "...has to face the men of the time and to meet / the women of the time..." (8-9). It must face, but why, for what purpose? To simply resonate? 'To find what will suffice,' would be a typical Stevensian reply. But his methodology, purposely or not, his habit of considering, reconsidering, affirming and doubting, dramatizing conflict and ambiguity, acknowledging and hybridizing different perspectives has strong ethical resonances. For example, Anzaldúa

heavily ethical ‘in your face’ criticism is based on the exploration of hybrid conceptions of identity and how people who embody many diverse cultures, often, must attempt to harmonize conflict and ambiguity in their lives and communities. It does not matter if she never read Stevens, what matters is that Stevens’s poetry has real world ethical implications that even in their very abstract nature have affective power to not only help “people live their lives” but to do so as “The *new mestiza* copes by developing a tolerance for contradictions, a tolerance for ambiguity ... Because the future depends on breaking down old paradigms” (“The Noble” 30; Anzaldúa 2100).

The truth is poetry and reality often overlap. For example, it would take a Stevensian act of “willingly suspend[ing] disbelief” to ignore how after the attacks on 9/11 the trope of the hero has become more and more undemocratically inclined in the United States in a way that correlates strikingly with Stevens’s poetically-imagined conception of an environmentally contingent feeling of heroism (Letters 430). Such an environmentally contingent conception underpinning “heroic” motivations protecting the American way of life has been a reality in the United States since its founding that has consistently been invoked to justify subjugation and all sorts of uncivil, undemocratic dehumanizing actions in ways that directly contravene its founding principles of inalienable human rights based on equality. In other words, Stevens’s contingent heroism and nobility is consistent with the political reality of the past and our present and at its heart there is no way to separate such a contingent belief from its appropriation as an exceptional tool to justify all manner of atrocities. The realization that the American ideal of freedom can so consistently live together with the suppression of freedoms should give

us pause in an over-celebration of hybridity as a concept geared always toward an acceptance of ambiguity and tolerance in a morally positive direction. Hybridity has been celebrated for its capacity as a concept to breakdown old paradigms, rigid categories, and absolutes that often form hegemonic ideas and feelings. Stevens hybridized concepts, language and cultures with the goal of simulating the effect these combinations had inside his imagination in the imagination of his readers. Unfortunately, upsetting rigid standards is not always a good thing and hybridity can and has been used throughout history to dress the unsavory, like imperialism, war, slavery, oppressive dictatorships etc... in garments of religion, art, pageantry, patriotism, and material self-interest. In sharing his poetic imagining of the world, Stevens has furthered an argument he also at times entertained: the argument that somehow the world itself is the ultimate poem. If it is, I hope we are near living the speaking of these lines:

Each false thing ends. The bouquet of summer
Turns blue and on its empty table
It is stale and the water is discolored.
True autumn stands then in the doorway.
After the hero, the familiar... ("Examination" 224-228)

Besides hoping against hope for some cosmic voice to get on with the utopian parts of the ultimate poem, in the meantime, I believe it is imperative to give careful attention to how diverse modes of persuasion are shaping the content of the world. Against the background of this understanding of the influence of language and thought vis-à-vis the material world and the present intertwinement with history, the greatest virtue hybridity has as a concept is its capacity to be a mediating tool that can help us understand how this

process whereby we create and are created by our reality operates. This focus on studying the hybrid characteristics of Stevens's poetry has proven to be a valuable pinpointing heuristic that organizes attention to crucial linkages within the text, as well as, functioning as a self-reflexive cue that promoted the identification of interrelations of ways these hybrid conceptions and findings relate to lived experience. Hybridity as a rhetorical/aesthetic device in Stevens's poetry is an attractive site of study for applying discerning methods of textual analysis dedicated to understanding how the "parts" of the "whole" operate together as forms of influence in literature. The analysis of how hybrid characteristics influence texts is one approach among others that can be used to study the relationships that reproduce and are reproduced by the interplay of imagination and reality that is so central to Stevens's poetry, and beyond poetry, influence our *being* in the world.

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