

## Stevens and the Crisis of European Philosophy

Charles Altieri

Department of English

UC Berkeley

Berkeley, CA 94720-1030

If you caught the intended allusion in my title, you probably also caught my mistake. I wanted to refer to Husserl's *Crisis of the European Sciences* (written 1934-37) but forgot the proper name, probably because I had not read the book in the first place. My ignorance seemed unimportant at the time I proposed this title because I was using it only as a framework for writing about how Wittgenstein's thinking might be employed to thicken the philosophical dimension of Stevens's poetry. That was all I could muster as an American pretending to have something to say about Wallace Stevens in Europe.

Once the prospect of being shamed before this audience led me to read the book to which my title alludes, I found this phase of Husserl terrific and exciting philosophy. Now if I could make his work apply to Stevens, I could have my topic. Unfortunately I am aware of no evidence that Stevens read the book. But the line of thinking it develops seems to me much more closely woven into Stevens' sense of the world than is any phase of Wittgenstein's thinking. It is not a matter only of Stevens and Husserl having parallel ideas. Husserl's capacity to blend the transcendental and the elemental in this book also helps immensely in seeing what is philosophically dynamic and engaging about Stevens's sense of the distinctive tasks his poetry had to perform, at least the poetry after *Harmonium*. More concretely, Stevens shares Husserl's sense of crisis, a sense that

scientific objectivity is driving out any metaphysical inquiry based on a transcendental approach to the activity of ego. [[And on that basis Stevens can propose that the vehicle disclosed by transcendental subjectivity is the force of imagination. Philosophy can define the importance of this faculty by showing how without it there cannot be a decent critique of how science objectifies the subject. It takes art, however, to appreciate the values disclosed by the activities of this transcendental subject.]]

Now I had two reasons to persist. That Stevens is engaged in a metaphysical project may not be startling news. That he does so by elaborating and then modifying the relation of a transcendental ego to the Husserlian life-world is considerably more promising as a topic, if only because that makes clear why his poetry has to concentrate on the agency of the self as producing and responding to the world. Stevens simply could not do the work in which he was most interested, and arguably which was most important to his culture, if he could have been satisfied with the motifs contemporary criticism emphasizes—that is with the description of actual phenomena or dialogical inclusion of other voices or attention to social formations and the dispositions of power they establish. More important, I am convinced that contemporary criticism for the most part fails to appreciate the force or the value of that compulsion to a metaphysical orientation—hence its displacement by the issue of Stevensian politics. Stevens metaphysical talk about the imagination and reality seems old news at best, evasions of the pressure of reality at the worst. But Stevensian metaphysics is not reducible to such themes—especially if read through Husserl who emphasizes how the transcendental ego is deployed and provides a ground for speculating on the role of the affects attributed to the stances such an ego

takes. Our efforts to intensify our grasp of Stevensian metaphysics are crucial to keeping vital the force and value of his poems, and by implication of poetry in general. And the better we grasp the force of his ideas as embodied in his poetry, the better we also realize how some aspects of these ideas enter into crisis and require further modification that also extend what we might call their existential bite.

Second, these developing interests in Husserl's text made me think I could make a substantial contribution to the topic of this conference. Not only had I found a European who would be helpful but I also found an issue—the idea of Stevens as engaged in a distinctive metaphysical project—that promises to take on fresh life in relation to this specific context. This vision of Stevens offers a possible polemical stance that might help frame our discussions. For I am somewhat skeptical of the positive form in which our stated topic is presented. Talking about Wallace Stevens in Europe remains on the same logical level as talking about the Americanness of Wallace Stevens. Both formulations risk forcing us into historical anecdote, influence studies, or attention to matters of reception and translation that at best nibble around the edges of Stevens' central concerns. In contrast, the thematics of imagination and reality may be old hat, but they at least orient us toward those central concerns and challenge us to come up with fresh ways of seeing how those concerns shape the force and value of Stevens' poetry. So I propose for the conference our posing in negative form the issue that I think is paramount for the organizers: what aspects of Stevens are not addressed well if we confine ourselves to Stevens relations to American contexts. Then we try to take up a perspective from which all national perspectives seem somewhat marginal to this poet who emphasized the distinctive “level of truth” at which the poet can be seen to

“compose his poems” (CPP 682)? And we can criticize the tendency to bind Stevens to American history and to American philosophy without insisting on corresponding European constraints on his, and our, imaginings. In particular I want to propose Husserlian phenomenology as a more sensitive and less jingoistic framework for talking about Stevens’ poetry than any model of pragmatism can provide. For Husserl captures the actual dynamics of how the ego is constructed, so we can talk about the dynamics of poetry rather than simply selected themes. That in turn better positions us to appreciate how the poems might address various cultural crises shared by Americans and Europeans.

This is Husserl’s most succinct definition of the crisis he saw facing the European sciences:

The genuine spiritual struggles of European humanity as such take the form of struggles between the philosophies, that is, between the skeptical philosophies—or nonphilosophies, which retain the word but not the task—and the actual and still vital philosophies. But the vitality of the latter consists in the fact that they are struggling for their own true and genuine meaning and thus for the meaning of a genuine humanity. To bring latent reason to the understanding of its own possibilities and thus to bring to insight the possibility of metaphysics as a true possibility—this is the only way to put metaphysics or universal philosophy on the strenuous road to realization.<sup>1</sup>

Husserl shared the sense, widespread among early twentieth century philosophers, that the successes of science had created a dangerous situation: as scientific procedures increasingly became the only way of securing what can be claimed as objective knowledge, the Cartesian domain of self-reflective consciousness became relegated to mere subjectivity and so divorced from any claim to value or significance for humanity in general. But his specific way of engaging this crisis is distinctive. Where Henri Bergson or William James would give up on metaphysics in favor of a new psychology, Husserl adapts Kant's transcendental perspective—not to secure categorical reason but to provide access to aspects of specific form-giving powers shared by all human beings who can be said to participate in the same “life-world.” He does also develop a new psychology but asks it still to do the work of metaphysical speculation.

Husserl calls this phase of his philosophy “transcendental subjectivism” (CSE 97). Its basic premise is that the science's version of objectivism is “naïve” because it depends on what can be represented by its methods rather than inquiring into how the process of representation is grounded in the life-world of subjects (CSE 96). Philosophy has to discover what our capacity for representation involves so that there can be a shared world: we have to know how we develop orientations that establish a horizon of other people and other attentions as “part” of the framework establishing the object status of phenomena (CSE 108).<sup>2</sup> This requires a transcendental subject because any empirical subject we analyze will be simply a part of the world, not a condition for there to be world in the first place. Objectifying science, on the other hand, treats subject positions as causally determined by perceptions or by interests. Science assumes that the subject is caught up entirely in practical ends. It cannot “bracket” its own habits of seeing and so

cannot envision the subject as the source of possibilities for a world. But philosophy can establish such brackets by withholding the assumptions producing the “validities” or general practical expectations given by the practices we trust (CSE 135). For this frees reflection

to articulate a “general structure” within experience, “to which everything that exists relatively is bound, although the structure is not itself relative” (CSE 139).<sup>3</sup>

Imagine situations where we orient ourselves by feeling or where we construct objects by combining several sensory domains, or enact what Stevens claims for the imagination. Here the subject has to be constructed because it frames objectivity but cannot be made the object of a coherent predicate. This is the subject of the “life-world,” a subject requiring a different kind of objectivity from the objectivity of science. The objectivity of the life-world is established by a transcendental judgment about what is involved in “the world’s own manner of being” (CSE 123) so that it proves compatible with human existence. Different subjects will realize these powers differently, but the powers themselves will be recognizable across those differences—otherwise we could not have any sense of one world. Yet that sense of one world is fundamental because there is at the basis of our experience a sense that “the world ... does not exist as an entity, as an object, but exists with such uniqueness that the plural makes no sense when applied to it” (CSE 143). For example in putting sensations together one might stress sound or sight or smell, but other people develop knowledge that such preferences are part of one world

The most important aspect of Husserl’s theorizing for Stevens would have been (had he read him) the way that metaphysics and psychology fuse. What is objective is

the ability of subjects to constitute a world, or, perhaps better, what is objective is the inability of subjects at some level even to imagine the world being plural. Then, because this world cannot be an object, Husserl can make a startling move whose consequences have yet to be worked out. In the life-world manner replaces matter as the new objectivity:

Let us now shape this into a new universal direction of interest; let us establish a consistent universal interest in the “how” of the manners of givenness and in the *onta* themselves, not straightforwardly but rather as objects in respect to their “how”—that is with our interest exclusively and constantly directed toward *how*, throughout the alteration of relative validities, subjective appearances and opinions, the coherent, universal validity *world—the world comes into being for us... (CSE 144)*<sup>4</sup>

Husserl did not influence Stevens. But he makes a more important contribution to our understanding of Stevens: he makes articulate and significant various features of Stevens’s poetics for which Stevens lacked the technical language and the appropriate historical perspective. Stevens in fact would probably not have seen his projections about the transcendental ego as metaphysical inquiry nor have quite cast his project as opposing the ontology of objectifying foundational science. When he speaks of metaphysics he allies himself clearly with pragmatist values: “For all the reasons stated by Williams James, and for many more, and in spite of M. Jacques Maritain, we do not want to be metaphysicians.”<sup>5</sup> However this statement needs contextualizing. Stevens agrees with James when their opponent is the same—that is when metaphysics is cast as the effort to

establish an order of being that underlies appearance. Yet in other situations he plays a quite different tune. When he is not worrying about discredited models of judgment but seeking to reconcile imagination and fact he sounds very much like Husserl attempting to establish a non-foundational model of objectivity. (He sounds also like Emerson, but this metaphysical Emerson has not been of much interest to pragmatists.)<sup>6</sup> Consider for example this Stevensian stance in a letter of May 1948, written to Mc Greevey, “The mind with metaphysical affinities has a dash when it deals with reality that the purely realistic mind never has because the purely realistic mind never experiences any passion for reality” (L 597). And then there are the ways Stevens’s passion for reality is expressed, especially his propensity for copulative verbs<sup>7</sup> and for abstractions involving absolute terms like “real” and “unreal.” Finally there is Stevens’s own commitment to manner rather than matter. These are lines from “The Latest Freed Man:

[[ “I suppose there is  
A doctrine to this landscape. Yet, having just  
Escaped from the truth, the morning is color and mist,  
Which is enough: the moment’s rain and sea,  
The moment’s sun ...  
It is how he gives his light. It is how he shines,  
Rising upon the doctors in their beds  
And on their beds ...” [This ellipsis is Stevens; the others mine.]

And so the freed man said.

It was how the sun came shining into his room:  
To be without a description of to be,  
For a moment on rising, at the edge of a bed, to be,  
To have the ant of the self changed to an ox  
With its organic boomings ...  
It was how he was free. It was how his freedom came.  
It was being without description, being an ox.  
It was the importance of the trees outdoors.  
The freshness of the oak-leaves, not so much  
That they were oak leaves, as the way they looked.  
It was everything being more real, himself  
At the center of reality, seeing it.  
It was everything bulging and blazing and big in itself,  
The blue of the rug, the portrait of Vidal,  
Qui fait fi des jolinesses banales, the chairs. (CPP 187)

Stevens here is a metaphysician fascinated by how the feel for being “without a description of to be” can transform the ant of the self into an ox (while also recognizing the precariousness of this transformation). Such fascination trumps any affiliation with America: the psychological transformations derived from our senses of being are more elemental conditions and much better suited to the ambitions of a philosophical poet than any commitment to nationality (although he also recognized that nationality will out, just as disposition will out . In fact this turn to psychology as a way of returning to metaphysical questions affords affinities not just with the range of European

phenomenologists (extending to the Derrida of *De L'esprit*)<sup>8</sup> but also with the Wittgenstein who spoke of being “not interested in constructing a building, so much as having a perspicuous view of the foundations of all possible buildings.”<sup>9</sup>]]

My case for Stevens as metaphysician now ironically forces me to play the pragmatist—what concrete practical differences does it make in our reading of Stevens to stress this metaphysical strain rather than specify various American features of his work? I suggest two basic differences in our reading, each with several corollaries. The first involves the possibility of fleshing out Stevens’s claims about the imagination by emphasizing the dynamic features they produce in his poetry; the second allows us to specify how the poems in the “Rock” render the transcendental ego a more intimate, more self-reflexive, and more supple force than it had been in Stevens’ earlier efforts to make poetry engage ontological questions.<sup>10</sup>

The parallels between Husserl and Stevens make it clear how Stevens’ concept of and feel for the “imagination” require focusing on the psychology of the transcendental ego within the life-world, even at the risk of alienating many poets and critics who prefer the more “meaty” dynamics of social encounter.<sup>11</sup> Here I will assume that the audience is familiar with Stevens’s repeated claims about imagination<sup>12</sup> and his consequent need to keep his concept as far as possible from what Lacan called the imaginary (and Simon Critchley “fancy”). Imagination is distinctive in fact precisely because it requires a more concrete, more immediate, and more capacious context for its operations than can be provided by any form of social analysis. Indeed that is why the concept depends on a transcendental ego—not the self who experiences but the self whose affective being must

be projected to explain the possibility of the experiences that we “realize.” Directly to p. 18]

[[Assuming familiarity with Stevens’s ideas about imagination allows time to analyze what a brief poem can do to dramatize the role of the transcendental subject and so “realize” its capacity to “piece the world together, boys, but not with your hands (CPP 177). This is “July Mountain,” a title that in itself suggests the instability of substance and the primacy of the “how,” since the mountain has only the substance given by its immediate temporal context in the life world:

We live in a constellation  
Of patches and pitches,  
Not in a single world,  
In things said well in music,  
On the piano and in speech,  
As in a page of poetry—  
Thinkers without final thoughts  
In an always incipient cosmos,  
The way, when we climb a mountain,  
Vermont throws itself together. (CPP 476)

The sequence followed in this poem is at least as important as what it claims. It begins by asserting the plural and collective subject because that is the perfect corollary of the ontology involved. When the object becomes only impressions, only “a constellation of pitches and patches,” it must be the perceiving activity that takes on substance affording the precisions of music or speech. But this condition of self-consciousness brings

significant danger. As the poem expands it seems almost to erase the object world because the subject seems so full of its own power. The poem seems to turn into a paean to the powers of imagination possessed by the thinker in this “always incipient cosmos,” a phrase whose abstraction indicates how far we have traveled from the particulars of sensation. Then the speaker or the poem seems to hear the increasing emptiness of the rhetoric, so that the conclusion turns instead to refocussing that consciousness on the particular scene.

Ultimately this expansive rhetoric proves a dialectical force reflecting a significant power of the imagination. As consciousness congratulates itself it also prepares a space beyond that way of viewing the world, a space where it can see the satisfactions possible in our own acts of seeing. For it prepares the possibility that the entire landscape can become an active force. It is not just a small scene that “throws itself together” but an entire state (albeit a small one). This concrete awareness may not have an object as grand as the “always incipient cosmos.” But it finds something better, something that makes us self-reflexively aware of what can reward the effort to climb a mountain in order to attune ourselves to what unfolds. It turns out that our activity in positioning ourselves makes it feasible to see the object as itself active, as throwing itself together without compromising its facticity. And, by another delicious stroke of irony, Stevens plays on the fact the subject of this last verb, the state of Vermont, is as transcendental as the subject doing the perceiving. “Vermont” in fact has no existence that can be perceived; it is like the university rather than the buildings that make up the university.<sup>13</sup> Its boundaries can be mapped, but there

is no corresponding substance except in the imagination. Yet the imagination responds to its affective reality as the continuation of the substance of the scene. Just imaginative care for sequence reveals how much the transcendental is at stake in the simplest perceptions.

Obviously there is much more to be said about the imagination, especially about the relation of the real to the unreal. But I will have to be content now to deal indirectly with this topic as I turn to my second theme—how Stevens’s metaphysical orientation takes a different turn in *The Rock*. Stevens’s philosophical lyrics in the thirties and the forties shared with “July Mountain” an intense version of the problem all poets face when they want to be philosophical. The more faithful the lyric is to the “how “of the transformations realized by the imagination, the more difficult it is to get any conceptual purchase on what may shared among these transformations. So how does the poet honor the immediacy of imagination’s work while establishing something capable of influencing discursive understanding? For much of Stevens’s career after *Harmonium* he relied on a meditative style that could make generalization part of the process of imagination coming to terms with its own powers. That is why his version of Husserl’s transcendental ego becomes so important. That transcendental ego builds upon the forces that discrete moments reveal, so that these seem not simply casual discoveries but the realization of what is involved in the ego’s having a world at the most fundamental level of its existence. And then the poetry could allow extended discursive passages, since in effect they stage the ego trying to appreciate what it in fact reveals in its actions.

One role the transcendental ego can play is to serve as a reflective focus for the powers it directly reveals.

However this severely limits the options available to Stevens's poetry and challenges it to elaborate inventions within a narrow range. In general his poems have to resist the appearance that they simply present a world perceived. Stevens's worlds are always possible worlds, worlds projected by the transcendental ego as it orients imagination in relation to what a scene offers. Therefore various distancing techniques are called for. He needs abstraction and playfulness and irony and constant self-reflexivity in order to maintain the distinctive space where ego is a power and an index of possibilities for constructing life-worlds rather than a needy agent in pursuit of specific ideologically charged desires. Analogously there is a strong desire to make the poetry itself not simply a mode of attunement to the world but a mode of self-reflexively tracking how the linguistic choices also provide in themselves modes of power. Language not only describes, but also exemplifies the consequences of certain paths to the world. As figures of capable imagination Stevens's lyrics not only bring vitality to what they encounter, they also establish means of intensifying or expanding mind's role in the life-world.

I still cannot describe this level of exemplification very well. I will call it second-order reflection because the focus is not on what the poem encounters but on what it can exhibit of the mind's possibilities by attending to how it is disposed in this encounter. Among Stevens's several modes for exploring such self-consciousness I am especially interested in the way he deploys figures that take on importance because the process of the poem actually demonstrates the powers that the figures afford. I have written a good

deal on how Stevens deploys “as” in this way, and I have recently written about how that use of “as” makes sense of the dual role of the figure of the “exponent”—a referent for both the effort at discursive explanation and for the possibility of exponential increase in intensity by virtue of the poem’s handling of such exposition.<sup>14</sup>] I have to return to the topic again because this feature is one important aspect of what gets transformed in the last poems.

Think of how this passage from “Examination of the Hero in a Time of War” replaces argument by the intricate self-reflexive functions “as” establishes. It is almost as if we had to hear “as” in two ways—as a semantic operator clarifying the mind’s engagement with a particular line of argument and as a structural operator allowing poetry to elaborate how the poem’s hearing of its own language provides second-order reflections on possible principles of relationship it can establish within the domain of experience. The power gathered by our ability to use “as” makes for a different principle of identification. In effect it replaces the ways that allegory builds a sense of heroic substance by sustaining a chain of metaphoric equations:

It is not an image. It is a feeling.

There is no image of the hero.

There is a feeling as definition.

How could there be an image, an outline,

A design, a marble soiled by pigeons?

The hero is a feeling, a man seen

As if the eye was an emotion,

As if in seeing we saw our feeling

In the object seen and saved that mystic  
Against the sight, the penetrating,  
Pure eye. Instead of allegory,  
We have and are the man, capable  
Of his brave quickenings, the human  
Accelerations that seem inhuman. (CP 278-79)

The drama here is all in how we are led through different stages of thinking. Initially we are presented with sharp contrasts. After the feeling is separated from the image, a second contrast seems also to place on the feeling the burden of reconstituting those images once able to sustain the idea of heroism. Then the contrast makes the notion of image seem so remote that it must be entertained as a negative hypothetical. Perhaps the more abstract the reflection needed to maintain the idea of image, the more concrete the alternative becomes. So the poem considers itself freed to turn directly to the most proprioceptive of feelings. These feelings attach to the hero by virtue of their being engaged in the self's processes of thinking. Both the content and the form of the "as if" constructions require first seeing our seeing as itself a charged activity, then recognizing that we can work through to significant second-order feelings by refusing to let sight be consumed by its objects. Second-order feelings place the object within the frame afforded by the subject.

With feeling so abstracted, and thereby made so concretely a part of the activity of seeing, the poet can propose a clear alternative to allegory, yet maintain the discursive distance and substantial generality sought by the allegorical impulse. Where allegory is necessary to give significance to objects of sight, the concluding lines here can locate the

significant idealization simply in self-reflection on what the hypothetical emotions have brought to bear within the poem. Now the entire mode of apprehending the poem becomes a demonstration of what it claims about the hero. We can look beyond images to the feelings that we bring to them, and we can find in the quickening that occurs for those feelings the expansiveness and sense of possible lives that make heroism possible. While the poem cannot prove that heroes exist now, it does provide self-reflexive processes helping us recognize in ourselves desires and needs which will not let us accept any lesser state. This form of heroism does not rely on assumptions about character. It depends on just the opposite set of possibilities. It depends on recognizing and on willing the fluidity of individuation and hence of identification. Heroism lives because the poet's instrument can give immediate and shareable content to large abstractions like "capable," and "human" by locating them in the quickenings that they elicit. It is these quickenings that give us the richest possible modes of identification as individuals and as social beings whose conative intensities prove here entirely shareable. And it is these quickenings that make sense of Stevens's interest in the idea of the exponent, the discursive work that also functions as a means of raising material to more intense powers.

]]

*The Rock* manages to intensify this sense of human powers while making two major adjustments in how Stevens stages the transcendental ego and corresponding roles for the imagination. Traditionally any sign of will proves embarrassing to the work of meditation, just as a personal preface is an embarrassment to a work of philosophy. That fear of exposing neediness is a large reason why before *The Rock* Stevens had cultivated

an imposing distance enabling the poems to turn playfully on themselves and, more important, to keep subjectivity at a transcendental distance that could hope to establish the possibility of world-constitution rather than struggle to impose particular interests. *The Rock*, in contrast, tries to replace that distance with a sense of intimacy between writer and the consciousness displayed in the poem. A highly condensed play of perspectives replaces the sense that a single project keeps control of the details within the poem. And there are several experiments in inhabiting voices rather than displaying them as discrete and limited parts of the world. Second, Stevens absorbs second-order reflection within this sense of intimacy. The second-order reflection on what the transcendental subject makes possible as action within the poem becomes itself personalized so that it can stand for, and stand as, a kind of will that offers exemplary engagements with states of poverty and the necessities driving that poverty. Therefore the second-order dimension of experience turns psychological and personal: what matters is how the self-reflexive speaking can also constitute a mode of commitment taking responsibility for appreciating and for affirming what reality allows and refuses to allow the speaker's sense of self. Imagination remains as important as it ever was, although now it is extended from the faculty by which we engage the world to the faculty by which we take our stand on why that engagement might matter.

A quick example will help, then I want to elaborate these differences by contrasting my view to Simon Critchley's interpretation of Stevens's project in his late poems. This is "An Old Man Asleep," the first poem in *The Rock*:

The two worlds are asleep, are sleeping now.

A dumb sense possesses them in a kind of solemnity.

The self and the earth—your thoughts, your feelings,  
Your beliefs and disbeliefs, your whole peculiar plot;

The redness of your reddish chestnut trees,

The river motion, the drowsy motion of the river R. (CPP 427)

This is not not a simple poem of reconciliation to old age. But to appreciate the full resonance of that simplicity we have to engage some difficult questions. Why does the poem switch from the passive “are asleep” to the more active “are sleeping.” Why represent this sleep by referring immediately not to persons but to the two worlds of self and earth? Why make repetition so dominant in the poem, as if the river R were really the river of Nietzsche’s Eternal Return. Why connect the density of sound so closely to the motif of repetition? Why almost at the center of the poem switch from third-person description to second person address? And why does the poem so confidently identify with what apparently remains another person’s peculiar plot, only to conclude with an overwhelmingly general and abstract description.

All these questions are elicited by the poem’s effort to develop a transparency compatible with intimacy, a very difficult task because we usually equate intimacy with the kinds of identification that require leaps into what cannot be seen. So the poet must give the sleeping person a psychology, albeit a psychology so elemental that it can be adapted to the very bare facts of the situation. That is why the poem moves from “asleep” to “are sleeping”; why the sleeping is attributed to an elemental relation between self and earth; and why there is such smooth transition between that general condition

and the terms of direct address, “your thoughts, your feelings, . . . .” It is as if the poem found a level of being where the condition of address and the condition of description were almost identical. But to realize this identity we need to open ourselves to a different order of being that the practical one to which we are accustomed. We have to produce an imagined world in which we can honor “your peculiar plot” while recognizing that this plot consists largely of simply sleeping. But it is his sleeping, as all of the markers of address in the poem insist. All these general terms do not preclude address but solicit it, as if agency could be fully recognized and invoked by accepting the minimal yet completely expansive shift that occurs when something compels us to move from description to address.

This movement seems to me to constitute a double affirmation—of the power that the individual still has to take responsibility for his meanings, and of the sleeping itself as an acceptance of continuity with the rest of being—without complaint and without regret. The ease with which the poem combines levels of being has to be attributed to the person sleeping, if only because that ease is so connected to a repetitiousness that itself becomes an affective feature of the old man’s world. But even in this repetition there is evidence of the peculiar plot. How otherwise can we explain the resonance of “drowsy” in this poem? The addition of “drowsy” to the repetition of “river motion” provides a little climax in relation to the poem’s use of address, because even when the self is reduced almost to the object it can elicit something excessive and at least somewhat distinctive. Here I have to admit that the distinction is mostly on the level of sound, since “drowsy” so exaggerates the o sounds in the line that it takes the line itself beyond description to an affirmation of peculiar presence. But that seems to me an utterly brilliant means of

expressing how pervasive the sense of human presence can become as the unreal takes up active residence within the real at its most elemental.

[[Critchley enters my story now for several reasons. The most important is that his book is by far the clearest and most elemental rendering of Stevens's general poetics. Critchley brings a wide philosophical framework to bear and he is a very persuasive writer, so his arguments are likely to prove influential. This likely influence becomes the more disturbing when one thinks as I do that what underlies Critchley's reading of the late poems is perhaps the only model of value on which many contemporary philosophers trained in European traditions can agree. I refer to the ideal of "letting be" and a corresponding eagerness to celebrate what manages to resist the ego's demands and the rhetorician's skills. I think this model is neither sufficiently rich in its affirmations nor sufficiently dark in its sense of tragedy to be adequate to late Stevens. (The appropriate sense of tragedy has to involve finding an aspect of the will that can come to terms with necessity.) Finally Critchley's claim that "no one appears to have picked up the shift of philosophical weight to be found in these poems"<sup>15</sup> proves an irresistible challenge for my attempting to develop why it matters to read Stevens in a Husserlian light.

Critchley's basic argument about these late poems is bold and sharp. *The Rock* is driven by two basic correlated desires. Stevens wants to show one can give up a sense that the ego matters while retaining the assertive powers of poetry: "the moment of the ego's assertion, in swelling up to fill a universe without god, is also the point at which it shrinks to insignificance" (87). (No more oxes out of ants.) And given this diminishing of the ego, the status of the object in lyric poetry has to change. Reading Stevens's "cure of the ground" as "the desire to be cured of the desire for poetry" (83), Critchley argues

that in a new realism “poetry can be brought closer to the plain sense of things, to things in the remoteness from us and our intentions” (84).<sup>16</sup>

Perhaps the best way to challenge Critchley’s view is to suggest that he stresses only what seems the subject matter and severely underplays how this subject matter still relies on how the poems establish figures of capable imagination. Critchley emphasizes the situations the late poem’s face rather than the situatings the poems afford if we read them as exemplary acts of mind. Therefore he pretty much ignores formal aspects of the poems and does not even ask how Stevens may be altering his vision of how he can make relevant for experience what these second-order aspects dramatize. In my view these poems do not want to escape poetry but to test its power to build modes of response adequate to the stripped down world the poems confront. That is why I want to stress how often perspectives change in these last poems or voices get introduced as conditions of response and will in relation to how things appear.<sup>17</sup>]]

Had we world enough and time I would turn to “To an Old Philosopher in Rome” because this poem is probably Stevens’s richest in composing a theatrical space for the encounter with elemental things. This space is defined by an intricate dialogue--literally between “we” and “you,” and figuratively between very close focus on “a confusion of bed and books” and the speculative distance that can search for “the human end in the spirit’s greatest reach.” In developing this space the poem makes Stevens’ most powerful statement of how formal relations composed by this search afford an exemplary state of will. [[The closing movement of the poem first returns to the particular context of Santayana’s room against the backdrop of the bells of

Rome. Then the poem expands to register how the bells remain audible yet their force requires the reach only imagination can provide:

It is a kind of total grandeur at the end,  
With every visible thing enlarged and yet  
No more than a bed, a chair, and moving nuns,  
The immensest theater, the pillared porch,  
The book and candle in your ambered room. ]]

The total grandeur of a total edifice,  
Chosen by an inquisitor of structures  
For himself. He stops upon this threshold,  
As if the design of all his words takes form  
And frame from thinking and is realized.

Will is how thinking and realizing become one, raising the world to theater while simultaneously reducing the world to transparency. Therefore it is not a major exaggeration to suggest that Stevens's entire career might be summarized as the exploration of the founding difference between "real" and "realized." What changes is the gradual shift from what imagination does to what people can do because of the imagination's power to create theater while resisting the temptation to let that theater present fictional plots.

Given my time limits, I will concentrate on "The Plain Sense of Things" because Critchley often invokes it, because it is of a manageable length, and because I want to test my reading of the poem:

After the leaves have fallen, we return  
To a plain sense of things. It is as if  
We had come to the end of the imagination,  
Inanimate in an inert savoir.

It is difficult even to choose the adjective  
For this blank cold, this sadness without cause.  
The great structure has become a minor house  
No turban walks across the lessened floors.

The greenhouse never so badly needed paint.  
The chimney is fifty years old and slants to one side.  
A fantastic effort has failed, a repetition  
In a repetitiousness of men and flies.

Yet the absence of imagination had  
Itself to be imagined. The great pond,  
The plain sense of it, without reflections, leaves,  
Mud, water like dirty glass, expressing silence

Of a sort, silence of a rat come out to see,  
The great pond and its waste of lilies, all this  
Had to be imagined as an inevitable knowledge,

Required, as a necessity requires. (CPP 428)

The best way to see what is distinctive in this poem is to contrast it with “The Snow Man.” That poem had two basic commitments, starkly realized. One was to define as cleanly as possible a world reduced to what demands “a mind of winter.” The other was to make manifest the continuing presence of some kind of synthetic force that in fact could serve as the minding of that winter because it has the power to contain the entire scene in an elaborate single sentence. “The Plain Sense of Things” offers neither that concentrated reduction of the scene nor that particular model of compositional power. Instead the pacing is much slower, the language no longer driven by a single syntactic structure. Why? What about the absence of imagination can Stevens render in this mode that he could not in the earlier poem?

Both poems treat the “inert savoir” as if it were a response to world in which it is impossible for adjectives to enhance being: being seems deprived of any qualities that relieve its absolute thereness. “The Plain Sense of Things” also has to contend with a sense of history (“a fantastic effort has failed”) that prevents it from realizing the kind of present tense established by “The Snow Man” single synthetic sentence. So in the later poem the mind keeps on doing the work of comparison, unwilling or unable to give up on the possibility of still being able to choose adjectives even if they have to take negative form. For even when the adjectives fail, the mind seems capable of varying the modes by which it views this bleakness. At this negative center, even the silence turns out to elicit analogies.

None of these analogies has transformative power. Yet the entire series makes the absence of imagination less a fact to be registered than a transcendental condition to be

inhabited by observing what it elicits. After choice is mentioned, the poem turns swiftly to the transformation of a “great structure” into a “minor house,” a measuring of loss that soon generates a strange form of negation: “no turban walks across the lessened floors.” Then there is a second comparison based on physical observation, and finally a bleak generalization about failure that in its turn generates further analogies. It seems that the imagination must describe the negative as well as the positive, so that the sense of absence of imagination becomes the imagination’s feel for its present situation. Negatives populate scenes so that we can feel a non-presence within them. Then with the abstract statement that “the absence of imagination had/ Itself to be imagined,” the mind tries to articulate its own heightened response to what turn out to be its own figures.

By the time the poem utters this abstract generalization it is putting into the mode of necessity what it had already discovered on the order of simple description. It is entering the domain where will is called upon to engage what is described. Not surprisingly, this generalization makes a major change in the poem. The discursive mode has to handle a shift from describing a situation to describing a mental state while maintaining the same distance and flatness it had directed toward the scene. Stevens’s response to that challenge is magnificent. He turns to “the great pond, the plain sense of it,” even though no pond has been mentioned. Consequently the pond hovers between one imagined as actual and one that exists primarily as part of a metaphor for how the absence of imagination can be imagined. Projected description and self-referential metaphoric reach become strangely identical.

This identity is celebrated in the great figure of the “rat come out to see.” Again the rat could be part of the imagined scene. But it also could be the mind’s figure for its

own pushing itself on the scene so as to find ways to figure the absence of imagination. The rat parallels the mind's uncomfortable but somehow fated presence as witness to this desolation, and as one more feature of the desolation that has to be imagined. Now, though, "imagination" is no longer an abstract term. It becomes just what can encompass an identification with how this rat emerges in this situation.

Appreciating the rat requires recognizing why any analogue with a human observer would limit the poem. Confronted with this scene, the most the mind can do is compose an emblem for its own estrangement in a bizarrely intimate way. By having a figure of consciousness that is also a figure of non-identity with the self the poem can encompass the scope of the poverty it confronts. Yet for this knowledge to take hold the poem also has to go beyond the figure of the rat to a more capacious mode of agency. That figure binds the mind to pure contingency: the poem gives no reason why the rat emerges, nor does it explain why the figure seems so apt for the situation. Nonetheless the bond to that contingency seems not contingent at all: all this had to be imagined. As the mind seems forced to confront absolute contingency, it reaches also for a corresponding accommodation to necessity.

The daunting nature of that task becomes the poem's richest evidence for why it has to call upon imagination. Only imagination can establish the theatrical terms by which there can be figures for the viewing of this poverty. And only imagination can bring to bear a sense of this poverty as inseparable from our destiny as human beings. Needing to pursue a plain sense of things in this most unplain way is the price we pay for having the investments we do in recognizing and appreciating our situations. But this price seems worth paying, so long as we can imagine imagining a quasi-identification with this rat as

a basic aspect of that poverty. Such imagining provides an instrument for coming to terms with a fatality too comprehensive and abstract to be engaged by discursive reasoning. Figures are absolutely necessary for dealing with the plainest possible sense of things. And figures require a version of agency capable of directing these figures—both cognitively and affectively—hence the role that the second-order considerations about consciousness have to play in the poem.

“The Snow Man” could rely on its single sentence in order to establish how the mind might be adequate even to this bleak situation. Ultimately lucidity is possible. Here the situation is quite different. There certainly can be a parallel movement toward containing and recasting the series of reflections elicited by the plain sense of things. But even a mobile Stevensian sentence is not the appropriate vehicle. Rather than rely on a single sentence, this poem can only prevent the absence from dominating the sense of imagination by bringing to bear an even more plastic power, the power provided by the “as.” That power brings to bear a range of interpretive contexts that seem inseparable from the process of self-reflection, even as they become sufficiently abstract to prevent any single image of the self from taking form. And here that power gathers the self-reflexive dimension characteristic of Stevens’s poetry to perform a second-order task in practical life.

First, there is the simple assertion of what we might call a mode of vision: all this had to be imagined in the mode that necessity requires. All this has to be attuned to the contingent emergence of the rat as the locus for realizing a bleakness that itself may be elemental rather than contingent. But this sense of necessity cannot be encompassed by description. We have to reflect on what is afforded by the series of “as” expressions as

they connect the contingent and the necessary. Our thinking and our figuring all become aspects of our recognizing that we are not so much describing the absence of imagination as ritually manifesting where we are positioned when we make that attempt. We have to align entirely with necessity, but at a distance, in another tree, provided by everything that our ability to use “as” makes visible.

Such use proves most important for its giving sharp content to the “we” that begins as only a hopeful assertion in the poem’s first stanza. This “we” evokes a transcendental ego’s power to adjust to necessity, and it embodies the power to feel what one shares with others even as one is most sharply confronted with one’s own isolation. The power to generalize proves inseparable from the second-order power to see that it takes generalizing in order to stage the absence of imagination in its full theatrical presence. (One’s own absence of imagination would be banal in comparison.) Yet for all this generalization, this power can only be realized by the individual’s accepting the condition of our fully fleshing out the worlds that “as” produces—namely that each of us align with the sense of necessity. “All this” parallels the function of the entire sentence in “The Snow Man.” It gathers the situation and simultaneously offers itself as provocation to take responsibility for the poverty involved by finding figures for everything the plain sense affords. The final figures give the feeling for what the scene had lacked—not as a fiction but as a bleak assessment that satisfies because it raises the level of transparency that can be taken into intimate being. That may be all that is left viable as a concept of the will, and it may suffice.

## Endnotes

---

<sup>1</sup> Husserl. *The Crisis of European Sciences and Transcendental Phenomenology*, Translated by David Carr (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, (1970), p. 15. Hereafter CES. I will cite some passages from this work in my notes to support my generalizations. My emphasis on this book gives my essay a very different slant from the two critics I know have also written on Husserl and Stevens: Thomas Hines, *The Later Poetry of Wallace Stevens: Phenomenological Parallels with Husserl and Heidegger* (Lewisburg: Bucknell University Press, 1976), and Paul Kenneth Naylor, "The Idea of It: Wallace Stevens and Edmund Husserl," *The Wallace Stevens Journal* 12 (1988): 44-55.

<sup>2</sup> "We are objects among objects ... as being here and there, in the plain certainty of experience, before anything that is established scientifically. On the other hand, we are subjects for the world, namely, as the ego-subjects experiencing it, contemplating it, valuing it, related to it purposefully ..." (CSE 105).

<sup>3</sup> For this claim in opposition to science consider CSE 99: "It is a philosophy which, in opposition to prescientific and scientific objectivism goes back to knowing subjectivity as the primal locus of all objective formations of sense and ontic validity, and in this way seeks to set in motion an essentially new type of scientific attitude and a new type of philosophy." Even Kant and his heirs do not produce valid science because they do not establish "cognitions ultimately grounded, i.e. not ultimately, theoretically responsible for themselves."

<sup>4</sup> "Whatever exists, whether it has a concrete or abstract, real or ideal, meaning, has its manners of self-givenness and, on the side of the ego, its manners of intention in modes of validity; to this belong the manners of the subjective variation of these modes in syntheses of individual-subjective and intersubjective harmony and discrepancy. ... For each subject this intention is the *cogito*; the manners of givenness (understood in the widest sense) make up its cogitatum according to the "what" and the "how," and the manners of givenness in turn bring to exhibition the one and the same entity which is their unity" (CSE 166-67).

<sup>5</sup> CPP 679. The passage goes on to sound very metaphysical, with emphasis on how "the imagination never brings anything into the world but that, on the contrary, like the personality of the poet in the act of creating, it is no more than a process, and desiring with all the power of our desire not to write falsely, do we not begin to think of the possibility that poetry is only reality after all, and that poetic truth is factual truth ..." (CPP 680).

<sup>6</sup> Pragmatist philosophers tend either to continue the project of scientific objectification, putting a human face on it by aligning with scientific practicality rather than empiricist ontology (like Dewey) or by collapsing metaphysics into psychology. Even when James turns to matters of religious belief, he is satisfied to cast the issue in psychological contexts that take him as far as possible from addressing the metaphysics of the relevant claims. For my sense of the limits of pragmatism, see my "Practical Sense--Impractical Objects: Why Neo-Pragmatism Cannot Sustain an Aesthetics." *REAL: Yearbook of*

---

Research in English and American Literature. Winfried Fluck et al, eds. Tubingen: Gunter Narr Verlag, 1999: 113-36. I find some sustenance in “ WSJ on Dewey.

For the works I argue with see Patricia Rae and Richard Poirier and someone in

<sup>7</sup> See in this regard Roger Gilbert’s excellent essay, “Verb of Mere Being: A Defense of Stevens’s Style,” *Wallace Stevens Journal* 28 (2004): 191-202.

<sup>8</sup> Clearly there is significant work on Stevens inspired by these developments within the phenomenological tradition. But all of it that I know has followed what we might call the Heidegger-Derrida axis because that line of thinking makes it possible to speak of “being” and even of “spirit” without worrying about a transcendental subject. But in my view if one ignores the transcendental subject one ignores a plausible ground for Stevens’s idea of imagination and eviscerates the constitutive roles it can play.

<sup>9</sup> Wittgenstein, *Culture and Value*, translated by Peter Winch (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980, p. 7. Wittgenstein also contrasted himself to Frank Ramsay who “was a bourgeois thinker. I.e. he thought with the aim of clearing up the affairs of some particular community. He did not reflect on the essence of the state—or at least he did not like doing so—but on how *this* state might reasonably be organized ... whereas real philosophical reflection disturbed him until he put its result (if it had one) to one side and declared it trivial.” These remarks date from 1930 and 1931, before Wittgenstein had located the paths the Philosophical Investigations would trace but well after he had become disillusioned with the foundational metaphysics of his *Tractatus*.

<sup>10</sup> One painful aspect of spending much of one’s life on a poet’s work is that it becomes impossible to acknowledge the depth and scope of one’s debts to other critics—for their provocations as well as for their insights. Suffice it to say that I have wanted to talk about Stevens as metaphysician and phenomenologist ever since reading J. Hillis Miller’s *Poets of Reality* in grad school. And for this paper I found James Longenbach, *Wallace Stevens: the Plain Sense of Things* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991) most useful for its provocations and Bart Eeckhout, *Wallace Stevens and the limits of Reading and Writing*, (Columbia: Missouri: University of Missouri Press, 2002) for its capacious grasp of the scholarly responsibilities one takes on in writing on Stevens.

<sup>11</sup> This is an example of the kind of criticism that I think is so bound to its own demands it cannot see the distinctive strengths of poets who manage to be individuals: “If Wallace Stevens is a master influence in fifty years, if the best poets of America look to him as an avatar of integrity and achievement, if their subjects are his subjects, their passions and their stances ones by which we recognize him—then the break between poetry and American culture will be complete, poets will have made their final retreat from the world in which ordinary men and women live, and those of us who are devoted to poetry will have become such absurdly specialized and grotesquely sensitive creatures that conferences like this one will have to occur in some huge bubble to keep us all from getting infected by the real world.” I quote from Christian Wiman, “Position Paper: Wallace Stevens,” *Wallace Stevens Journal* 28 (2004): 240. After thinking about George Bush making two Supreme Court appointments I want to ask where I sign up for this bubble.

<sup>12</sup> Stevens’s general claim about the imagination is that it is “the power of the mind over the possibilities of things” (CPP 726). But we have to place that general comment in conjunction with the many specific properties Stevens gives to that power. Among those are the capacities to make sense exceed all metaphor (370), to ally with our sense of nobility as the “force” (and not a substance) that the mind does not add to human nature but employs as a “violence within that protects us from a violence without” (CPP 665), to

---

“bring about fluctuations in reality in words free from mysticism” remaining independent of one’s desires to elevate or idealize it (CPP 639-640), and to destroy the false version of itself as “some incalculable vates within us” while functioning like light to add “nothing except itself” and yet utterly transform our sense of the value of what we encounter (681).

<sup>13</sup> I borrow this reference to the university from Gilbert Ryle, *The concept of Mind*.

<sup>14</sup> For example in my “The Pound/Stevens Era.” *The Wallace Stevens Journal* 26.2 (Fall 2002): 228-50, and my *Painterly Abstraction in Modernist American Poetry*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 1989. Here I bring in the idea of the exponential even though I cannot demonstrate it because it is Stevens’ ultimate figure for the intensification of powers in both the projected ego stance and in what language affords that projective ego:

The major abstraction is the idea of man  
And major man is its exponent, abler  
In the abstract than in his singular. (CP 388)

Major man is our fiction of our own fullest self-satisfactions. And because those satisfactions must include an idea of themselves, major man is abler in the abstract than in his singular. The good news is that for major man that abstract is also inseparable from singularity, most pronouncedly as the vehicle for identifications that do not require reaching beyond our thinking processes to shadowy images of selves we think we are or want to become. Poetry need not build up idealizing notions of its subject matter because it can put all its energies into how this individual expounding takes place. Rather than build make-believe worlds, poets need be concerned only with the making of a “vivid transparence” (CP 380) that quickens our appreciation of what our relations to the world make possible. The abstraction necessary for a philosophical poetry exists not in the ideas but in the scope of the direct thinking by which the exponential stance engages its subject. And because the magnification of intensities depends on simple expoundings, our senses of empowerment come with an inescapable social horizon. We are bound to each other through the qualities of expounding that our language can produce. I describe this state at some length in my *The particulars of Rapture*, pp. 154-55. And Stevens describes it better in “A Collect of Philosophy” (CPP 864).

<sup>15</sup> Simon Critchley. *Things Merely Are: Philosophy in the Poetry of Wallace Stevens* (London: Routledge, 2005), p. 63.

<sup>16</sup> A longer statement of Critchley’s is worth quoting: “We see things in their mereness, in their plainness and remoteness from us, and we accept it calmly, without the frustrated assertions and juvenile overreachings of the will. Such calm is not thoughtlessness, but rather thoughtful, insight that comes from having things in sight. At its best poetry offers an experience of the world as meditation, the mind slowing in front of things, the mind pushing back against the pressure of reality through the minimal transfigurations of the imagination” (88). Put crudely, I am suspicious of this account because it does not correlate either with the paucity of things in late Stevens or the marvelous outflow of lyrics (which is hard to explain as all motivated by emerging disbelief in the lyric).

<sup>17</sup> These poems are much less about things than about people accommodating themselves to things, as in *Lebensweishheitspielerei*:

Each person completely touches us  
With what he is and as he is,  
In the stale grandeur of annihilation. (CPP 430)