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Reality Is Not a Solid. Poetic Transfigurations of Stevens' Fluid Concept of Reality

*A poet ought not to pick nature's pocket: let him borrow,
and so borrow as to repay by the very act of borrowing.*

S. T. Coleridge

Abstract: The main aim of this essay is to show that, for Stevens, the concept of reality is very fluctuating. The essay begins with addressing the relationship between poetry and philosophy. I argue, contra Critchley, that Stevens' poetic work can elucidate, or at least help us to understand better, the ideas of philosophers that are usually considered obscure. The main "obscure" philosophical work introduced in and discussed throughout the essay is Schelling's *System of Transcendental Idealism*. Both a (shellingian) philosopher and a (stevensian) poet search for reality. In order to understand Stevens' poetry better, I distinguish several concepts of reality: initial reality (the external world of the common sense), imagined reality (a fiction, a product of one's mind), final reality (the object of a philosopher's and a poet's search) and total reality (the sum of all realities, Being). These determinations are fixed by reason (in the present essay), whereas in Stevens' poetic works, they are made fluid by the imagination. This fluidity leads the concept of reality from its initial stage through the imagined stage to its final stage. Throughout this process, imagined reality must be distinguished from both a mere fancy and its products. Final reality is, however, nothing transcendent. It is rather a general transpersonal order of reality created by poetry/the imagination. The main peculiarity of final reality is that it is a dynamic order. It is provisional at each moment. Stevens (and Schelling too) characterizes this order as that of a work of art which is a finite object, but has an infinite meaning. Stevens calls this order "the central poem" or the "endlessly elaborating poem". If ultimate reality is a poem created by the imagination, one may ask who is the imagining subject. I argue that this agent is best to be thought as total reality, that is, as Being. Stevens, however, maintains that if there were such an agency, it would be an inhuman agency, "an inhuman meditation". The essay concludes, in a Derridian manner, with the claim that this agency cannot have any name; it is the "unnamed creator of an unknown sphere, / Unknown as yet, unknowable, / Uncertain certainty" (OP: 127). It is best thought as an X, as an unknown variable. Being has no name.

Keywords: Wallace Stevens, Friedrich Schelling, Samuel Coleridge, reality, imagination, transcendental idealism, central poem, central mind, Being

This essay addresses Wallace Stevens' philosophical project. Stevens' work – poetic, essayistic, aphoristic, letters, etc. – contains important philosophical insights that he developed primarily in his poetry. However, his prose work makes up a significant supplement to, or rather a commentary on, his poetic work. It is better to understand his essays this way rather than as independent works. Moreover, Stevens attempted to articulate the difference between the poetic and philosophical ways of developing philosophical insights. His essay “A Collect of Philosophy” is in this respect an indispensable resource. Stevens, rather schematically, connected poetry with the imagination and philosophy with reason. But he also identified “a poetic style or way of thinking” (OP: 268) in various philosophers, such as Plato, Bruno, Nietzsche and Bergson. Philosophy is, thus, not based solely on reason, but also, to a greater or lesser extent, on the imagination. And, indeed, Stevens wrote: “It is often the case that the concepts of philosophy are poetic.” (OP: 267) This approach gives philosophical concepts more flexibility. They can be elaborated upon by the imagination as well as by reason. In particular, this approach allows Stevens and any commentator to take a philosophical concept as something (else), that is, to metamorphose a concept. The topic of this essay is the concept of reality and its poetic metamorphoses in Stevens' poetry.

It is no wonder that many philosophical ideas Stevens was preoccupied with had been developed by philosophers (and some of whom influenced Stevens – directly or indirectly). In a philosophical essay, one can point towards this point of contact, and Stevens scholarship has already traced many plausible connections. These insights have to originate in a common source. Simon Critchley, in his influential philosophical work on Stevens, described this common source as follows: “It is not, therefore, a question of paraphrasing obscure poetic rumination in clear philosophical prose, but rather of trying to point towards an experience of mind, language and things that is best articulated in poetic form.” (2005: 4) Critchley, however, presumes that Stevens' poetry is rather obscure in comparison with philosophical prose. This is, of course, a matter of subjective attitude. I would like to propose that – given these points of contact – Stevens' poetic work can elucidate, or at least help us to understand better, ideas of philosophers that are usually considered obscure.¹

1 The idea that Stevens' poetry can illuminate philosophers' ideas (rather than the other way around) is advanced by Cook & Read (2009) who take Stevens' early poem “Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird” as a fine example of the “therapeutic” reading of Wittgenstein's philosophy.

Schelling's *System of Transcendental Idealism*

I shall begin with Schelling's transcendental idealism as presented in his early work *System of Transcendental Idealism* (1800). Schelling's work is, to put it mildly, obscure, and it is considered by many scholars to be wholly unintelligible.² Stevens was probably not directly acquainted with this book, but Schelling certainly influenced Stevens through Coleridge, whose *Biographia Literaria* draws very heavily upon Schelling's *System*. Moreover, in "Imagination as Value" Stevens cites a paragraph from Cassirer's *Essay on Man* about the metaphysical importance of the imagination in romantic thought. The key passage is this: "Schelling declared in his *System of Transcendental Idealism* that art is the consummation of philosophy. In nature, in morality, in history we are still living in the propylaeum of philosophical wisdom; in art we enter into the sanctuary itself. The true poem is not the work of the individual artist, it is the universe itself, the one work of art which is forever perfecting itself." (NA: 136) In his *System*, Schelling does indeed come to this conclusion, which marks our first point of contact between him and Stevens. Before establishing other points of contact, let us look at the basic tenets of Schelling's system and at the reasoning which leads Stevens to this conclusion.

The main task Schelling sets himself is to explain the foundation of knowledge, which is understood to be the concurrence of the objective (or nature) with the subjective (or the self, or intelligence/mind). The self is what can present, nature is what can be presented. The self is conscious; nature is non-conscious. It is also part of his main task to explain their identity. In order to pursue this task, one has to give priority either to nature or to the self. Both possibilities are feasible. The former option leads to a philosophy of nature, the latter to a transcendental philosophy, which is Schelling's topic in this book. This attitude has been called Schelling's *biperspectivism*. The task is now to explain, from the perspective of the subjective, how the objective comes to it, that is, how the objective supervenes upon the subjective while they coincide. A transcendental philosophy, thus, takes the self as primary and absolute and aims to explain how nature arises from it. The primacy of the self/intelligence over nature is for Schelling a presupposition, a principle of explanation that defines his transcendental approach. It is not a metaphysical fact or a conclusion like Kant's primacy of practical reason.

2 Schelling's *System* is an early work written under the influence of Fichte's philosophy. It is a transitional work between Schelling's philosophy of nature and his philosophy of identity. It is also his most systematic and polished (or, to put it another way, least obscure) work.

In the *System*, Schelling also describes the process of emergence of nature (of the objective world) from the self's basic activity. Schelling's key insight (shared with Fichte and Hegel) is that this activity, which constitutes nature, is also the same activity that constitutes the self. If this activity is conscious, it constitutes the self and if it is non-conscious, it constitutes nature.

The advantage of the transcendental approach is that the subjective, because of its actuality, is an object of direct cognition. The subjective thus becomes objective in the act of cognition. Transcendental cognition is essentially a knowing of knowing. This is what Kant calls transcendental apperception; for Schelling, following Fichte, it is an *intellectual intuition*: "a constant objectivizing-to-itself of the subjective" (9). This consideration is important because it already points towards Schelling's final union of nature and the self in art, for a work of art is essentially an objectification of the subjective. If the activity that constitutes nature is the same activity that constitutes the self, in order to unite them there must be an activity that is both conscious and non-conscious. Such an activity is, for Schelling, *aesthetic* activity. The product of this activity, the work of art, is the identity of the conscious and the unconscious, which are divided by an infinite gap. Hence, Schelling calls a work of art an "unconscious infinity" (225). This means that every work of art, though a finite object, has an infinite meaning or an infinite multitude of purposes that, for the most part, could not have been intended by the artist. In short, in the work of art, the infinite is finitely displayed. This is also Schelling's definition of beauty. These considerations lead Schelling to the claim that "the aesthetic intuition simply is the intellectual intuition become objective" (229).

If the infinite opposition (between the conscious and the non-conscious) can be resolved in a finite product (of art), there must be a productive capacity of the soul that would accomplish this. This most primitive or primordial intuition is called *imagination*. The imagination is thus the power to resolve an infinite opposition in a finite product. This capacity is identical with the (non-conscious) capacity which produces the objective world/nature. The imagination thus produces the objective world in general as well as works of art in particular (this is the root of Coleridge's distinction between the primary imagination and the secondary imagination). The imagination is superior to reason: "What is commonly called theoretical reason is nothing else but imagination in the service of freedom." (176) The infinite opposition concerns not only works of art, but every other object and also the objective world as a whole. Hence, Schelling can maintain that: "The objective world is simply the original, as yet unconscious, poetry of the spirit" (12). It is "one absolute work of art" (231). Nature is the ultimate work of art; particular works of art are finite instances of this

infinite work. This is true for every object; particular works of art are just better approximations of the absolute work of art than other objects. Yet this ultimate poem is written in a "mysterious" script; it is a "riddle" that could reveal itself (232). Schelling concludes the whole *System* with the suggestion that this absolute work of art is like a new mythology – a collective work of art.

Art is thus superior to philosophy, because philosophy cannot express the non-conscious element of the soul and consequently cannot express the unity of the conscious and the non-conscious. Philosophy can only postulate the non-conscious ground of consciousness, but it cannot describe or represent it. Only art can. For philosophy, the absolute is still a riddle. Schelling's *System* only postulates the ultimate poem; the *System*, however, is not this poem itself.

Like every philosophical masterpiece, Schelling's *System* is a work full of tensions and problematic issues. We will focus on those issues that are also relevant for Stevens. The first issue is this: Schelling's position seems to be that nature/the objective world is (only) a product of an activity of the self. Does, then, nature exist independently of the self? Schelling's idealism is, however, a methodological principle of his transcendental philosophy. Schelling thus seems not to question the independent reality of the objective world. He furthermore maintains that nature is a product of conscious and non-conscious activities and their interplay, which is called imagination. Nothing is "actual in the absence of imagination" (71). Who is the agent of this imagination? Schelling assumes that there is an absolute consciousness beyond empirical consciousness. This move also marks Schelling's break with Fichte, who criticized Spinoza for postulating such an absolute consciousness without any justification. In order to avoid the lapse into Spinozism (or even Neoplatonism), Schelling can insist that the adoption of this transcendent agency is, again, only a methodological stance. If this were so, there would be a danger of another lapse, this time into Cartesian dualism. The ground of the duality of nature and the self and their pre-established harmony is not transparent for an individual consciousness. It can be apprehended only in an aesthetic intuition and expressed in the total work of art.

The second problematic issue is the question of whether Schelling's system is completed, whether it actually returns to itself. Schelling is very optimistic: "A system is completed when it is led back to its starting point. But this is precisely the case with our own." (232) But then his *System* would be identical with the ultimate poem. However, this is not the case. The *System* claims that the absolute identity of the self and nature is non-conscious. The *System* itself is something conscious; it can only point out where the absolute identity *can* be found, namely in art, in a new mythology. And even so, doubt remains whether a concrete work of art would fully reveal the ultimate identity of (or pre-established harmony

between) nature and the self. The worry is that there is no criterion or principle that would allow us to determine what the total work of art is. Schelling thus seems to have failed in accomplishing his main task: to provide the foundation of knowledge.

In what follows, I shall employ two main hypotheses: there are many points of contact between Schelling's *System* as presented above and Stevens' poetics, and Stevens' poetic way of developing these ideas can help us to understand better the problems of transcendental idealism that Schelling (and Coleridge) were facing. In the following analysis of a concept of reality, I will also pay constant attention to Schelling's *System*, especially to his concept of nature. The analysis will reveal that the relation between these two concepts is highly intricate.

Stevens' poetry of nature

Let us begin with Schelling's fundamental distinction between transcendental philosophy and philosophy of nature. A transcendental philosophy begins with the subjective and aims to explain how the objective comes to it or can be grounded in it. For Stevens, the task of both a philosopher and a poet is to search for reality, which he equates with God. Yet their points of departure are opposed to each other:

It is the philosopher's search

For an interior made exterior

And the poet's search for the same exterior made

Interior (CP: 481)

A poet takes the same route as a natural philosopher. For they search for reality; reality is something that cannot be presupposed as given. Reality is, rather, where the interior and the exterior come together. Reality in this sense is not the objective world or even the empirical world. Reality is analogous to Schelling's knowledge, i.e. the concurrence of the objective and the subjective. In the late poem "Not Ideas about the Thing but the Thing Itself" (CP: 534), Stevens develops this concept of reality/thing itself. If the exterior has to be made interior, then the poet is not searching for knowledge/ideas *about* reality, but for a knowledge *of* reality. The poem concludes "It was like / A new knowledge of reality." True reality and a knowledge *of* this true reality thus come together.³ Two points now need to be clarified: first, what is the notion of reality that Stevens begins with?

3 This concept of reality is similar to Schelling's (and Hegel's) concept of the Absolute: absolute knowledge is knowledge of the absolute.

(For he maintains that "Reality is the beginning not the end".) Second, what is the nature of the genitive connection "of reality" as opposed to "about reality"? Answering these questions will open the way to charting the transformation of the concept of reality from *initial* reality₁ via *imagined* reality_{IM} to *final* reality_P where all these modes of reality are encompassed in *total* reality_T.

In order to investigate these transformations of the concept of reality, a few methodological remarks are necessary. In "An Ordinary Evening in New Haven", Stevens states that reality is not a solid (CP: 489). Reality, which is arguably the most important concept in Stevens' poetics, is incessantly changing. So too is the concept of reality, which is, of course, itself part of reality. One of the tenets of his poetic way of dealing with philosophical concepts is that these concepts change instantly. The meaning of "reality" (and its cognates, such as "real" and "unreal") can change very rapidly, sometimes within a single line of verse (e.g. in "There was so much that was real that was not real at all." (CP: 425)).

Stevens is explicit on some occasions about what concept of reality he means. He sometimes qualifies reality with an adjective: "new reality", "floridest reality", "major reality", "total reality". These cases are the exceptions. On most occasions, he does not designate any specific mode of reality. This is by no means a flaw or mistake. Quite the contrary, it is typical of Stevens' poetic way of dealing with philosophical ideas, which is based on the imagination rather than reason. In order to outline the contrast between the imagination and reason, let us return to Schelling. He maintains that the imagination is the most primitive faculty of intellectual intuition. This faculty is a continuous activity, "a wavering between finitude and infinity" (1800: 176). The faculty of reason consists in fixing a certain moment of this activity of the imagination. Reason is imagination suspended or stopped. Reason is, in Schelling's words, the "ideal activity directed immediately to self-determining" (1800: 192); it is the "imagination in the service of freedom" (1800: 176). Stevens follows Schelling quite closely in this respect: "we live in concepts of the imagination before the reason has established them. If this is true, then reason is simply the methodizer of the imagination." (NA: 154; cf. OP: 279)

How can reason fix a concept? This is typically done by means of an adjective or an index, as in the present essay. The main methodological tool used in this essay is indexing, i.e. fixing a certain meaning of "reality" in order to inject some structure into Stevens' fluid concept of reality. This is something that goes against Stevens' poetic method and ultimately leads to a paradox, an attempt to name something that cannot be named – specifically, as will be established over the course of this essay, total reality.

The necessary angel – initial reality₁

Reality at the beginning, *initial* reality – which I will mark with an index as reality₁ – is defined by Stevens as “the object seen in its greatest common sense”, “a cliché”, “a world plainly plain”, “the corporeal world”, “an external world”, “absolute fact”, “*Lumpenwelt*”. Reality₁ is the world positively given, the sum of all positive facts. It is the world of nature, of its seasons, of the weather. Reality₁ is positive; there is no negation. Reality₁ in this sense is opposed to something unreal, something not real, something not actual. The imagination is the power of the mind that produces the unreal, or, rather, the real is transformed into something unreal by the power of the imagination. The newly produced unreal is thus not a creation out of nothing, but is always partly real. In other words, there are degrees of reality and unreality, i.e. the imagination (NA: 7). When Stevens speaks about “the pressure of reality” and “the pressure of imagination”, he must mean reality₁: “By the pressure of reality, I mean the pressure of an external event or events on the consciousness to the exclusion of any power of contemplation.” (NA: 20) *Fiction* is another name for a product of the imagination, i.e. for something unreal₁.⁴ A product of the imagination is also called simply an *image*. The imagination transforms a real₁ thing into an image of this thing. Reality₁ is, as Stevens puts it, the base (OP: 187); it is the necessary angel.

Another key insight is that reality₁ is *only* the base for something else. Products of the imagination are initially unreal₁; however, they are also in some sense real. Imagined things are not nothing. At the very least, an imagined thing, an image, exists in the mind. Let us call the reality of imagined things reality_{IM}. Then the real_{IM} is a part of the unreal₁ (though they are not identical with one another).⁵ As we already know, imagined things are transfigurations of real₁ things. But their mode of existence is defined precisely by their non-actuality. As Judith Butler aptly puts it in a Hegelian fashion, they “sustain a kind of thereness or presence that is the defining or configuring presence of absent things.” (1991: 273)⁶ The absence (unreality₁) of imagined things shapes the presence of things that are

4 Charles Altieri writes that “one might argue that [Stevens] understood ‘fiction’ not quite as ‘illusion’ but as ‘something made by the mind.’” (2013: 3)

5 This idea can be explained in a dialogue: “This is a picture of a unicorn.” “Yes, but the unicorn is not real₁. It is an imagined creature: there are no unicorns.” “Horses and horns are real₁ things. So the unicorn is partly real₁.” “Furthermore, the picture of the unicorn is real₁; it is here, in front of our eyes.” “Then, however, the unicorn is real_{IM} as an imagined thing.”

6 Moreover, Butler describes this modality of being as “a kind of structuring absence” (ibid.).

real₁. But beyond that, real and imagined things are parts of a greater reality. Stevens sometimes calls this kind of being "total reality":

An object the sum of its complications, seen
And unseen. This is everybody's world.
Here the total artifice reveals itself

As the total reality. (NA: 87)

The idea of the major reality, the all-encompassing reality, is very explicitly expressed in the poem "First Warmth" and its later version "As You Leave the Room":

Now, here, the warmth I had forgotten becomes

Part of the major reality, part of
An appreciation of a reality; (OP: 117)

Here is the later version of these lines:

Now, here, the snow I had forgotten becomes

Part of a major reality, part of
An appreciation of a reality (OP: 117)

This total reality, let us term it reality_T, exhibits a peculiar kind of paraconsistent logic: "It is and it / Is not and, therefore, is" (CP: 440). This is to be read: it is real₁ and it is unreal₁ and therefore it is real_T. This logic is the key point in "The World as Meditation": "It was Ulysses and it was not" (CP: 521). And again: Ulysses was real_T and unreal₁.⁷ Or in "An Ordinary Evening in New Haven": "Real and unreal are two in one: New Haven / Before and after one arrives" (CP: 485) The common real, i.e. real₁, and the imagined real, i.e. unreal₁, are two modes of existence within one reality_T. The total reality_T is the conjunction of all modes of being; it is Heideggerian Being, the "great Omnium" (OP: 128, 132). Reality_T includes reality₁ and reality_{IM}. This total reality is, however, not the reality a poet searches for. Why search for something which is already there? The question is, rather, whether there is something beyond empirical reality and imagined reality within the total reality. This question is equivalent to: is there something unreal₁ that is not real_{IM}, i.e. that is not the product of the imagination?

7 Butler also comments on this peculiar logic: "Not only was it Ulysses, and it was not, but this being and non-being in their uneasy conjunction constitute a different modality of being" (279).

I believe that the distinction between imagination and fancy that Stevens adopted from Coleridge comes into play here. Fancy puts things together by choice driven by an external purpose, the imagination by the will lying in the things themselves. “Fancy [...] is an exercise of selection from among objects already supplied by association, a selection made for purposes which are not then and therein being shaped but have been already fixed.” (NA: 10–11) The imagination is, in contrast, “a principle of the mind’s being, striving to realize itself in knowing itself” (NA: 10). Coleridge’s original characterization of the imagination expresses the same point: the imagination is “a repetition in the finite mind of the eternal act of creation in the infinite I AM.” (Coleridge 1997: 58) Here we are back in Schelling’s transcendental idealism. The root of this characteristic of the imagination lies in Schelling’s intellectual intuition as the power of the objectivizing-to-itself of the subjective. Now, products of the imagination are $real_{IM}$, as opposed to products of fancy, which are $unreal_{IM}$ and also $unreal_I$. Stevens follows Coleridge when he maintains that “There is always an analogy between nature and the imagination, and possibly poetry is merely the strange rhetoric of that parallel” (NA: 118). Hence, if the activity that constitutes the self is the same as the activity that constitutes nature/reality, then products of the imagination are also real as natural things. I am going to argue that this mode of reality is the reality that a poet searches for. It is the *final* reality. I shall index it as $reality_F$.

Stevens writes that the “poet has his own meaning for reality” (NA: 25). The subject matter of poetry is not external reality_I, but reality_F. The most significant characterizations of reality_F are “things as they are” and “the thing itself”. So, “Things imagined (the senses of the guitar) become things as they are.” (L: 360)⁸ In my notation, reality_F is the same as reality_{IM}. The imagination is “a power [...] to have [...] insights into reality” (NA: 115). Reality_F is not a transcendent reality like the Kantian thing in itself: “We live in a world plainly plain. Everything is as you see it. There is no other world.” (L: 360) Or, as he puts it in a key line from “The Man with the Blue Guitar”, “The earth, for us, is flat and bare. / There are no shadows.” (CP: 167) There is no transcendent reality beyond reality_I, i.e. the reality of facts. What, then, is the reality a poet seeks after? We have established the following connections: first, products of the imagination, i.e. $reality_{IM}$, are transfigurations of reality_I. Second, reality_F is a product of the imagination, i.e. $reality_{IM}$. Taken together, these claims amount to the claim that reality_F is an

8 Stevens expresses this claim very explicitly: “reality = the imagination, and the imagination = reality.” (L: 364)

imaginative transfiguration of reality_I. Stevens expresses this claim in a negative manner when he says that "Realism is a corruption of reality." (OP: 192) Reality_I is not reality_F. Is the necessary angel not, in fact, reality_F?

Order of things – final reality_F

How, then, to describe this difference between reality_I and reality_F? The main purpose of the imagination is to impose *order* on real_I things. Hence, reality_F is a re-ordering of reality_I. The idea of order is central to Stevens' poetics. Yet the concept of order is a complex one. Stevens considers three main kinds of order: (1) an established social and political order, (2) an individual personal order or order created by individual concepts, (3) a general transpersonal order created by poetry (or art in general), the final order.⁹ Order in the first sense is the order of reality_I. This order is at some times stable, at other times prone to challenge and change. Social or political orders often tend to resemble disorder or chaos: "A violent order is disorder" (CP: 215). The task of poetry is to find order in this apparent disorder. This task is tantamount to the poet's search for reality_F. First, the poet has to clear established order (reality_I) of images that are not put together by the mind itself. Such images are the products of fancy; they are unreal_F. The imagination thus sometimes works against other products of the imagination (and fancy) which we mistakenly believe to be real_I; they are violent "Plantagenet abstractions" (OP: 129). In order to arrive at reality_F, the imagination has to imagine the absence of other products of the imagination. This is a theme Stevens was preoccupied with throughout his career. In the early poem "Snow Man", the listener¹⁰ beholds or is invited to behold "Nothing that is not there and the nothing that is" (CP: 10). In the late poem "The Plain Sense of Things", Stevens states very explicitly that "the absence of the imagination had / Itself to be imagined" (CP: 503). In a remarkable passage commenting on his essay "The Noble Rider and the Sound of Words", Stevens writes:

When a poet makes his imagination the imagination of other people, he does so by making them see the world through his eyes. Most modern activity is the undoing of that very job. The world has been painted; most modern activity is getting rid of the paint to get at the world itself. Powerful integrations of the imagination are difficult to get away from. (L: 402)

It is now clear that the world that has been painted is the world as we find it; it is reality_I. The paintings that the poet has to get rid of are products of

⁹ Cf. Cook (2007: 87).

¹⁰ Cf. Ondřej Beran's remark in this volume (p. 144).

somebody else's past imagination. And, indeed, Stevens writes: "We live in mental representations of the past." (L: 722) Such products of somebody else's imagination are, following Coleridge's and Stevens' definition, products of fancy. They are, hence, unreal_F. In seeking for reality_P, these products of fancy have to be stripped away or, rather, imagined away. This idea is neatly expressed in the "Notes towards the Supreme Fiction":

To find the real,
To be stripped of every fiction except one,

The fiction of an absolute (CP: 404)

In these lines, the expression "fiction" is used in two senses: in its first occurrence, fiction means something imagined and unreal_P, whereas in the second occurrence, fiction is something absolutely real_F. The problem is how to tell real_F fictions apart from unreal_F fictions. As Stevens puts it in "An Ordinary Evening": "We do not know what is real and what is not." (CP: 472) Here, reality_F must be meant, because we plainly know what is real_P, i.e. we know – at least some – facts and we possess methods of distinguishing real_I (actual) facts from unreal_I (possible) facts. This is another formulation of the general problem of distinguishing between the imagination and fancy.

The idea that the imagination has to strip reality_I of the chimeras of the past (imagination) is connected to the distinction between the *conscious* and the *sub-conscious*, which brings us to another point of contact with Schelling's transcendental idealism. Commenting in a letter on his poem "Sombre Figuration", Stevens says in a remarkable passage that: "The sub-conscious is assumed to be our beginning and end" (L: 373). Thus, Stevens goes on, the sub-conscious "is the beginning and end of the conscious" (ibid.). The imagination is usually a faculty that is fully conscious. Here, however, rather surprisingly, Stevens links the sub-conscious with the imagination and the conscious with reality. The world we live in, reality_P, is composed of the conscious and the sub-conscious. These two components are indistinguishable ("there are realities so closely resembling the things of the imagination (summer night) that [... they] are indistinguishable" (ibid.)) This, according to Stevens, "destroys the order of things". The imagination – the conscious imagination – has to strip partly sub-conscious reality_I of these "chimeras" (OP: 97; L: 374) – in order to restore the order of things, the order of reality_F. The poem "Sombre Figuration" concludes with the idea of the end of the imagination:

Even imagination has an end,
When the statue is not a thing imagined, a stone
That changed in sleep. (OP: 100)

The statue stands for reality that is stripped of all the sub-conscious products of fancy: "Farewell, then, to the chimera of the sub-conscious" (L: 374). Before moving on, a few remarks on the term "sub-conscious". It must not be confused with the Freudian term "unconscious" (*unbewusst*). Freud never used the term "sub-conscious" (*unterbewusst*). Stevens might have chosen this term in order to block Freudian connotations. When Stevens writes that the sub-conscious is also the end, he comes closer to Schelling's concept of non-conscious, which for Schelling is equivalent to nature. What is meant here is also the primary imagination, which is sub-conscious. Hence, the sub-conscious imagination is part of reality_I at the beginning, and the sub-conscious imagination produces reality_P, i.e. the reality at the end (of the poet's search).

When the established order_I is cleared of products of the violent imagination/fancy, the poet can impose her personal order. What concerns us here, then, is the way a poet, while introducing a personal order to reality_I, seeks for final order_P, harmony, i.e. for reality_F. Stevens wrote that "every competent poem introduces order" (L: 293) and, with reference to the important poem "The Idea of Order at Key West", that "every man introduces his own order as part of a general order" (L: 293). This powerful poem introduces a woman, "she", a muse who sings about the sea. In the course of the poem the muse becomes the maker of the world she lives in: "She was the single artificer of the world / In which she sang." (CP: 129) Following this development, the sea becomes the muse, the self: "And when she sang, the sea, / Whatever self it had, became the self / That was her song, for she was the maker." (ibid.) In the much-debated last stanza, this personal order is transformed into something transpersonal:

Oh! Blessed rage for order, pale Ramon,
The maker's rage to order words of the sea,
Words of the fragrant portals, dimly-starred,
And of ourselves and of our origins,
In ghostlier demarcations, keener sounds.

Her order imposed on the sea, which is the sea's true self, by her song, by her words, is part of the order of the enchantment of the world (the fragrant portals), which is the spiritual (ghostlier) order of ourselves, of reality_F. This order is created by words of a poem which become "words of the sea" and "words of the fragrant portals" and finally words of ourselves. Interpreters of this poem disagree whether the singing woman introduced in this poem is distinct from the lyrical subject (I address this issue in the final section of this essay). Our

present concern, by contrast, is how an order imposed by someone's imagination becomes part and parcel of the "rage for order". This is a restatement of the general problem of how, in a concrete situation, the secondary imagination is to be distinguished from fancy in order to reach or come back to the primary imagination. Perhaps the most explicit poetical examination of this problem is in "The Man with the Blue Guitar":

"But play, you must,
A tune beyond us, yet ourselves,

A tune upon the blue guitar
Of things exactly as they are." (CP: 165)

The man with the blue guitar is asked to play a tune that is beyond us, yet ourselves. The blue guitar stands for or alludes to the imagination. The man – the poet, an imaginative man – plays/imagines his own tune, which turns out to be a transpersonal tune ("ourselves") and, eventually, a tune transcending anyone's (secondary) imagination (a "tune beyond us"): a tune *of* reality_P, i.e. *of* things as they are. The tune is produced by the imagination, and, therefore, it imposes a certain order – initially the poet's personal order, then a transpersonal order and, in the end, a final order of reality_F. Here we have again the genitive relation "of things as they are" – "of reality_F" – which will be the subject of the next section. I want to make only a brief remark here: the genitive relation indicates that the tune becomes part of reality_F and not merely *about* it. Then, however, reality_F is produced/created by this very act of the imagination (that is, the act of playing the tune). Reality_F is not created completely anew by this act; rather, it is reordered.

We have arrived at an important, albeit paradoxical, feature of the final order of reality_F: it is not a static order, but a changing one. Stevens wrote that: "The only possible order of life is one in which all order is incessantly changing" (L: 291–92). In "The Man with the Blue Guitar", we read: "Things as they are / Are changed upon the blue guitar." (CP: 165) Stevens devoted many poems to the idea of change. To name just a few: "Of Modern Poetry", with its constant finding of new stages, "Human Arrangement", with "The centre of transformations that / Transform for transformation's self" (CP: 363), or the section "It Must Change" from "Notes towards a Supreme Fiction", with "a universe of inconstancy" (CP: 389). This change is paradoxical, because any change has to be conceived against some static background. Yet there is no such background if things as they are are the ultimate reality_F. Stevens was aware of this paradoxical situation. In "As You Leave the Room", he writes: "And yet nothing has been changed except what is / Unreal, as if nothing had been changed at all." (OP: 118) The most

explicit expression of the paradoxical nature of changing reality_F is expressed in stanza VI of "The Man with the Blue Guitar":¹¹

A tune beyond us as we are,
Yet nothing changed by the blue guitar;

Ourselves in the tune as if in space,
Yet nothing changed, except the place

Of things as they are and only the place
As you play them, on the blue guitar,

Placed, so, beyond the compass of change,
Perceived in a final atmosphere;

For a moment final, in the way
The thinking of art seems final when

The thinking of god is smoky dew.
The tune is space. The blue guitar

Becomes the place of things as they are,
A composing of senses of the guitar. (CP: 167–68)

The guitar/the imagination changes things as they are. What has changed, however, is the "place"¹², which is, in the last couplet, identified as the blue guitar/the imagination. The imagination itself has changed. Or the man with the blue guitar/the poet imagines that his (faculty of) imagination has changed itself. If it is only the imagination that has changed, then things as they are are the static background; they are "beyond the compass of change". The paradox is resolved

11 These two poems, "The Man with the Blue Guitar" (1937) and "As You Leave the Room" (1947–1955?), come from different stages of Stevens' poetic career. The ideas expressed are, however, arguably very similar.

12 A rethinking or, rather, a metamorphosing of the notion of place (and space and time) is a frequent motif in Stevens, e.g. in "Description without Place" with the opening line "It is possible that to seem—it is to be" (CP: 339). In "A Collect of Philosophy", Stevens follows Whitehead in abandoning the notion of *simple location* (OP: 273). Location is not the primary way in which things are in space and time. Rather, "everything is everywhere at all times" (ibid.), that is, everything is connected to every other thing, "every location involves an aspect of itself in every other location". These connections produce "in the imagination a universal iridescence" (ibid.). These connections are real_F and unreal_F, where our ordinary spatiotemporal connections are real_I and unreal_I. Hence, reality_F is produced in the imagination.

for a moment. Things as they are are “perceived in a final atmosphere”. This finality is, however, only provisional. A final order of things as they are is only for a present moment final. An order imposed by the imagination on things as they are is final and complete in the way that works of art are complete. On the one hand, works of art are considered to be complete, but on the other hand they can always be reinterpreted or transfigured (by contrast with the rigid systems of religions). We have again arrived at a point of contact with Schelling’s transcendental idealism. For Schelling, a work of art, although harmonious in its finite shape, has an infinite meaning. Stevens’ emphasis on the provisional character of this order is, however, an implicit critique of Schelling’s optimism about the completeness of his system. Reality_P, things as they are, is never completed; it is always changing or, rather, elaborating. For Stevens, then, reality_F is (like) an always-changing work of art, or (more specifically) like a poem. This hypothesis will be addressed in the final part of this paper.

Let us consider again for a moment Stevens’ idea that the blue guitar/the faculty of the imagination itself is changing. This means that the man with the blue guitar, i.e. the poet, the imagining subject, is changing. “The blue guitar / And I are one.” (CP: 171) The subject is thus not a static underlying thing – a *subiectum*, ὑποκείμενον – which is the condition of all change. The subject is, rather, something closer to Hegel’s self-developing subject. The existence or even the postulating of such a subject, however, undermines all we said about the ultimate character of reality_F. If reality_F is produced by the imagination, then there must be an imagining subject behind it all that constitutes the (transcendental) condition of the existence of reality_F. And, indeed, Stevens considers this idea of a transpersonal mind imagining reality_F. He gives it a variety of names, e.g. “central mind” (CP: 298), “creator”, “master of all force” (CP: 97), “master of the mind” (CP: 148), “giant” (CP: 442), “Ruler of Reality” (CP: 485). Stevens playfully employs this idea, sometimes as a hypothesis, as part of a dialectical argument, at other times in a mocking tone.

We have arrived at three main ideas that are central to Stevens’ idealistic poetics: (1) the genitive connection “of” reality_F/things as they are, (2) taking reality_F as a total poem (or reality_F being this poem), and finally (3) the central mind or the agent of the transpersonal imagination producing reality_F. I will address these complexes in turn.

The grammar of “as” and “of”

The aim of this section is to establish connections among several complex motifs of Stevens’ poetics. I have already indicated that the genitive relation “of” refers to something, or a product of the imagination in particular, being a part of a

whole, of reality_p, and not merely *about* it. Since products of the imagination are, as we have already established, images, we can conceive the genitive relation as the relation between an image and that which is depicted. An image is not merely *about* its object, i.e. about that which is depicted; rather, an image *resembles* its object. The imagination transforms a thing into its image. Stevens explores the imagination's activity of creating resemblances using the preposition "as", e.g. in "sun as horn" (CP: 269), "Young men as vegetables" (CP: 278), "this shadow as / A human thing" (CP: 300), "the whole world as metaphor" (CP: 332), "The World as Meditation" (CP: 520). Initially, resemblance is, quite naturally, a relation between two (real_r) things (NA: 71). Such resemblances can be found in or read from reality_r. Stevens also, however, considers resemblances between real_r things and imagined (i.e. real_{IM}) things and finally between two imagined things or concepts (NA: 72). And of course, such resemblances are created by the imagination. E. Alexander (2015: 68) points out that Stevens' use of "of" functions as a kind of counterpoint to "as". "Of" marks the emergence of a certain perspective, or a certain aspect, whereas "as" picks out corresponding qualities emerging under this perspective. Let us investigate these two prepositions in more detail.

Charles Altieri has already provided a thoroughgoing analysis of the grammar of "as" in Stevens. He connects the grammar of "as" with "processes of analogical thinking" and adds:

Beginning with "The Man with the Blue Guitar," Stevens manifests a substantial and growing interest in how the "interaction" or "inter-relation between things" becomes a crucial "source of potency" in the lyric [...]. This sense of multivalued equivalences leads Stevens to what the grammar of "as" can offer. [...] I can characterize that mode of attention as an "aspectual thinking" that dominates the poetry of *Auroras of Autumn*. (2013: 41)

The peculiarity of "as" is that "unlike the copulative verb, it states equivalences that mark the activity of the subject in the formulation of the object" (42). "As" thus highlights the activity of the imagination that creates various aspects or perspectives that define the object. Altieri's analysis draws substantially on Wittgenstein's considerations about aspect seeing. I argue elsewhere (2015, chapter 17) that within Wittgenstein's thinking "as" internally relates two concepts (or imagined, i.e. real_{IM} things). For Wittgenstein, however, reflexive cases of internal relations make no sense. "It would have made as little sense for me to say 'Now I am seeing it as ...' as to say at the sight of a knife and fork 'Now I am seeing this as a knife and fork.'" (Wittgenstein 2009: PPF §122/p. 205^e)¹³ In what follows

13 Cf. Mácha (2015: 183) for more examples.

I would like to show that such reflexive cases of “as” are crucial for Stevens’ poetry, most notably in the phrase “things as they are”. There are variations of this phrase, such as “Things as they were, things as they are, / Things as they will be by and by . . .” (CP: 178) and “And as I am, I speak and move / And things are as I think they are” (CP: 180). On many occasions, the subject, the “I”, is – one would say in a Fichtean manner – reflexively related to itself. Here is a list of some such cases:

It is what it is as I am what I am (CP: 146)
 You as you are? You are yourself. (CP: 183)
 There as he is / He is. (CP: 235)
 As I am, I am (CP: 395)
 I have not but I am and as I am, I am. (CP: 405)

Other instances of this reflexive relation involve real or imaginary things or persons:

The departing soldier is as he is (CP: 306)
 the grandson sees it as it is (CP: 462)
 The gay tournamonde as of a single world / In which he is and as and is are one.
 (CP: 476)
 He has thought it out, he thinks it out, / As he has been and is (CP: 485)
 Each person completely touches us / With what he is and as he is (CP: 505)

And finally, this reflexive relation can involve processes or even abstract things:

One’s tootings at the weddings of the soul / Occur as they occur. (CP: 222)
 The world lives as you live, / Speaks as you speak (CP: 268)
 The words they spoke were voices that she heard. / She looked at them and saw them
 as they were (CP: 402)
 wax, sonorous, fame as it is (CP: 403)
 To see their lustre truly as it is (CP: 432)
 He speaks / By sight and insight as they are. (CP: 473)
 The need to be actual and as it is. (CP: 530)

The aim of these long lists is to show that reflexive cases of the relation that “as” expresses are ubiquitous in Stevens’ poems. How can a thing resemble itself? How can a thing be an aspect of itself? Wittgenstein is right in proclaiming that such expressions make little sense in everyday language. I think, however, that the grammar of “as” is different within Stevens’ poetics, and we can make sense of reflexive “as” relations. The main idea is this: if, as Altieri maintains, “as” marks the activity of the subject’s imagination in creating the object, the reflexive use of “as” would express the product of this activity, that is the thing as it is, the thing itself. As we already know, “the thing as it is” or “things as they are” express $real_F$ things, i.e. reality_F.

The imagination produces images of things. If the product of the imagination is the thing itself, then the $real_F$ thing (or the thing as it is) becomes its image.

That is, the distinction between an image and that which is depicted (or the distinction between a thing and its image) vanishes or, rather, is sublated. "As and is are one." (CP: 476) This is, I think, the meaning of the much-discussed line "the intricate evasions of as" (CP: 486). In reality_p, all images of things, all As as Bs, are evaded – apart from the reflexive "as", all things are *as* they are. The reflexive "as" in "things as they are" is irreducible and hence an intricate marking of the fact that reality_F is the product of the imagination.¹⁴ The world, reality_p, is an image, "the chief image": "The world is no longer an extraneous object, full of other extraneous objects, but an image. In the last analysis, it is with this image of the world that we are vitally concerned." (NA: 151)¹⁵ In Stevens' poetry, this idea is usually entertained as a hypothesis, e.g. in the opening section of "Description without Place": "It is possible that to seem—it is to be, / As the sun is something seeming and it is." (CP: 339) Stevens adds that the sun is an example here to make the hypothesis possible. The sun is also the source of all life and, in the end, the symbol of reality_F (cf. Cook 2007: 113). Similarly, the opening section of "The Sail of Ulysses" sets out the hypothesis of the identity of knowledge and being: "If knowledge and the thing known are one / [...] Then knowledge is the only life, / The only sun of the only day" (OP: 126). Ulysses, the seeker, the poet, seeks for reality_p, that is, for knowledge *of* reality_p, rather than for knowledge *about* reality. This brings us to the final topic of this section: the genitive relation "of".

My task of explaining the genitive relation "of" is made easier by Jennifer Bates' (1999) brilliant study. She provides a detailed analysis of the late poem "Of Mere Being" based on Hegel's account of metaphor. The genitive "of" is related to the Greek "genesis", γένεσις, meaning origin, source, beginning, production, creation. In "Of Mere Being", the genitive makes the experiencing subject *of* Being, and Being *of* the subject. Subject originates in object and object originates in subject. Now, in metaphor, "we are drawn into the image [...], into the possibility of connection; we are drawn into the possibility of connection as an engendering relation. This engendering is [...] the generative 'of' of the symbolic

14 In the "Notes", Stevens writes: "To find the real, / To be stripped of every fiction except one, / The fiction of an absolute" (CP: 404). Reality_F is stripped of every fiction, every "as", except the fiction of itself, except the reflexive "as". This is a supreme fiction. Cf. however K.-F. Kiesow's essay in the present volume, which argues that the central poem is an ontological notion whereas supreme fiction is concerned primarily with the social role of faith. From my point of view, a supreme fiction is a supreme finite approximation of the central poem, which is infinite.

15 In the essay "A Collect of Philosophy", we read: "The material world [...] has become immaterial. It has become an image in the mind." (OP: 272)

imagination.” (ibid.: 161) It is crucial for such an image that it is marked by a certain imperfection in contrast to the thing depicted. This imperfection lies also in the nature of the genitive (ibid.: 155), or with Stevens: “The imperfect is our paradise.” (CP: 194) The poem “Of Mere Being” uncovers the flux of engendering of imperfect images and their pointing “to their end, to how they are incomplete” (Bates 1999: 163).

Equipped with this analysis, we can say that the poem “Of Mere Being” itself is a part of this flux of Being, of reality_T. It is “the flux / Between the thing as idea and / The idea as thing.” (CP: 295)¹⁶ This poem itself is a part of this flux and because it is only a part of the flux, it is, in this sense, imperfect. This poem, and indeed any poem, is a part of the final order (which is, in a sense, never final). This is expressed in “An Ordinary Evening”:

The poem is the cry of its occasion,
Part of the *res* itself and not about it.
The poet speaks the poem as it is,

Not as it was: part of the reverberation
Of a windy night as it is, (CP: 473)

The poem (meaning any poem) is of the *res*, i.e. of the thing itself, i.e. of reality_F. Reality_F is the order of being, of reality_T, that consists of the flux of the imagination that engenders imperfect or incomplete images¹⁷ that, as the poet searches for this order, for reality_F, return back to their origin. We have now arrived at a point that brings us back to Schelling’s ultimate poem. For Stevens too, reality_F is an ultimate poem. I shall focus on this nature of reality_F as a poem in the next section.

16 “Of Mere Being” is not the only poem that directly addresses Being as the realm beyond thought, beyond the mind, beyond knowledge. In “Extracts from Addresses to the Academy of Fine Ideas”, we read:

Where is that summer warm enough to walk
Among the lascivious poisons, clean of them,
And in what covert may we, naked, be
Beyond the knowledge of nakedness, as part
Of reality, beyond the knowledge of what
Is real, part of a land beyond the mind? (CP: 252)

17 Imperfect images are “lesser things”: “Too much as they are to be changed by metaphor, / Too actual, things that in being real / Make any imaginings of them lesser things.” (CP: 430)

Central poem – final reality_F

In this section, I argue that the order that makes up reality_F is that of a poem which Stevens variously labels the “central poem”, the “ultimate poem”, “pure poetry” or the “poem of poems”. Milton Bates adds to this list the following terms: “a ‘primitive,’ or archetype; an ‘orb,’ or planet; an ‘essential poem’; a ‘huge, high harmony’; a ‘miraculous multiplex of lesser poems’; a ‘vis’; a ‘principle’; a ‘nature’; a ‘patron of origins’; and a ‘skeleton of the ether’” (2007: 58–59).

Stevens seems to express the idea that reality_F is already poetry in “The Man with the Blue Guitar”. In canto XXII we read:

Poetry is the subject of the poem,
From this the poem issues and

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

An absence in reality,
Things as they are. (CP: 176)

Stevens made the following comment on this canto: “The purpose of writing poetry is to attain pure poetry.” (L: 363) This is a restatement of the basic task of the poet: the search for pure poetry is the search for reality_F. Given the analysis of the genitive “of” above, we can say that the poem is *of* (pure) poetry. Poetry is the ground of the poem. In the movement from poetry, there is an absence of things as they are, i.e. reality_F. This means there is something unreal_P, like products of fancy. This is the poem’s imperfection. There is, however, reality_F at the beginning and at the end.

Stevens examined the notion of the central poem in his essays from the 1940s and in several poems, most notably in “A Primitive Like an Orb” and “An Ordinary Evening”. Let us turn to the former. The first stanza begins with the line: “The essential poem at the centre of things” (CP: 440) This poem is a “difficult apperception” for us, for “dear sirs” or for the poet. I take this to mean that it is difficult for the subject to realize that, or recognize whether, they, the subject, are imagining the essential poem. Apperception is another name for the intellectual intuition that lies at the foundations of Schelling’s and Coleridge’s systems. When Stevens problematizes this notion with the adjective “difficult”, he is undertaking an implicit critique of their approaches. The second stanza develops this idea: “We do not prove the existence of the poem. / It is something seen and known in lesser poems.” Lesser poems are the imperfect poems from the previous paragraph; lesser poems are *of* pure poetry, *of* the essential poem, *of* reality_F. Lesser poems issue from the central poem and they return to it. This flux, this cycle of the imagination, is symbolized by an orb (like an orbital cycle of a planet).

The essential poem is seen and known in lesser poems. If the essential poem is nothing but transcendental, it does not exist separately from the lesser poems.¹⁸ In other words, the essential poem is a composition of the lesser poems, as we read in stanza VII: “The central poem is the poem of the whole, / The poem of the composition of the whole” (CP: 442). The central poem is the composition, the final order of reality_r. Stevens opens stanza III with “One poem proves another and the whole / For the clairvoyant men that need no proof”, and continues:

The lover, the believer and the poet.
 Their words are chosen out of their desire,
 The joy of language, when it is themselves.
 With these they celebrate the central poem,
 The fulfillment of fulfillments, in opulent,
 Last terms, the largest, bulging still with more, (CP: 441)

The central/essential poem is celebrated in lesser poems and, more importantly, it is “the fulfillment of fulfillments”. This is, again, a reflexive genitive construction like the reflexive “as” in “as it is” or “as they are”. The central poem does not bring *some* fulfilment that would be acceptable for us, like the “poem of the mind in the act of finding / What will suffice” (CP: 239). The central poem is *the* fulfilment of fulfillments, the essence of all fulfillments, the paradigmatic fulfilment. The fifth stanza concludes with this long sentence: “It is / As if the central poem became the world, / And the world the central poem, each one the mate / Of the other” (CP: 441). Some commentators (e.g. Leuschner 2010: 73) have taken these lines as Stevens’ distancing himself from the identity of the central poem and the world; it is only “as if”. The expression “world” is ambiguous here. The central poem is *as if* reality_r, as if Being, which also includes something unreal_r. The central poem *is*, however, (identical with) the true reality_r.¹⁹ Stanza VIII brings additional characterizations of the central

18 See Steinman (1977: 13–4) for an endorsement and discussion of this claim. Cf. also Stevens’ claim from his “Adagia”: “Every poem is a poem within a poem: the poem of the idea within the poem of the words.” (OP: 199) Every lesser poem is a poem within the poem of the idea, within the essential poem.

19 Failing to draw this distinction, Kronick, in my view quite wrongly, maintains: “The essential poem, consequently, is a rumor heard in lesser poems; it is a poem of / The ‘whole,’ a poem about and never the whole itself.” (1983: 93) The essential poem is not *about* the whole, it is *of* the whole, *of* Being, *of* reality_r. Similarly, Benardete (1996: 181) claims that “this essential poem may even prove to encode metaphysical reality itself.” Which reality? The essential poem is proven by and in lesser poems. It does not encode anything else, it is not about anything else. Closer to my view, Pietrzak (2011: 224) claims, following Bloom, that the central poem “evokes Heidegger’s renditions of the

poem: a “vis”, a “principle”, the “meditation of a principle”, an “inherent order active to be itself”, a “nature to its natives”, a “repose, utmost repose”. The last line of the stanza breaks with these familiar descriptions by introducing a *giant*, a mythological figure. The central poem is maybe embodied in a giant, maybe transformed into a giant (cf. Steinman 1977: 13), or maybe the giant is the agent of the meditation of the central poem. At any rate, the harmonious picture of the previous stanzas is disturbed by the image of a giant. If the central poem is the true reality_p, it cannot be grounded in something else, in a giant. Introducing a giant is a “difficult apperception” from the beginning of the poem. Such an agent cannot be named: “A definition with an illustration, not / Too exactly labelled” (CP: 443). We see “his fated eccentricity” as opposed to the centre of the poem. The giant is, in the end, “the giant of nothingness”. These problems concern, however, the giant, and not the central poem as several commentators (e.g. Kronick (1983) and Leuschner (2010)) have maintained. I will address the problem of the agent of the central poem in the next section.

In 1949, one year after publishing “A Primitive Like an Orb”, Stevens further developed the motif of the central poem in “An Ordinary Evening in New Haven”. The opposition between the central poem and the agent of the imagination – which is explored in “A Primitive Like an Orb” – is addressed in terms of a *meditation*. This long poem opens with “the never-ending meditation” or “the perpetual meditation”, which is the meditation of the central poem (“a larger poem”) and “[p]art of the question that is a giant himself”, i.e. the agent of this meditation (CP: 465–6). The central poem is, furthermore, termed the “poem of pure reality” in canto IX:

We seek

The poem of pure reality, untouched
By trope or deviation, straight to the word,
Straight to the transfixing object, to the object

At the exactest point at which it is itself,
Transfixing by being purely what it is, (CP: 471)

The poem of pure reality is our ultimate aim, the ultimate aim of the poetic subject in the plural, which, as we already know, is reality_r. The poem of pure reality is at the intersection between the word as it is and the object itself. The word is

elusive concept of Being” and furthermore equates the central poem “with the supreme fiction of a First Idea” (225). I claim, in contrast, that the central poem is a certain order of Being, not Being itself. The central poem is reality_p, not reality_r. However, in the section “Central mind” below I vindicate the idea that reality_r/Being is the agent imagining the central mind.

untouched by a trope, or more specifically, by a metaphor which sees a word as something else and thereby deviates from the word into something else. A metaphor is a way of reaching the central poem, not part of the central poem itself. The object is the most exact point of its being. The poem of pure reality is thus located in the centre of reality between word and object, between language and the world, which means the poem is reality_F. Any particular poem, any “lesser poem”, “is the cry of its occasion, / Part of the res itself and not about it.” (CP: 473) The development of this motif culminates in canto XXVIII with these lines of utmost intricacy:

This endlessly elaborating poem
 Displays the theory of poetry,
 As the life of poetry. A more severe,

More harassing master would extemporize
 Subtler, more urgent proof that the theory
 Of poetry is the theory of life,

As it is, in the intricate evasions of as,
 In things seen and unseen, created from nothingness,
 The heavens, the hells, the worlds, the longed-for lands. (CP: 486)

This canto opens with a conditional clause: “If it should be true that reality exists / In the mind [...], it follows that / Real and unreal are two in one” (CP: 485). In this elaborating poem, the theory of poetry is displayed *as* the life of poetry. Yet there is a subtler hypothesis (that does not really need any proof due to the “difficult apperception”): the theory of poetry is the theory of life. The “as” is changed into “is”. This is the intricate evasion of “as”. This reality that exists in the mind is the life of poetry, pure poetry untouched by trope, by metaphor, by “as”. And this “reality changes from substance to sub[t]lety” (NA: 174), that is, reality_F is not a metaphysical substance, the ground of all that there is; it is not Being, but rather the subtlest order. Reality_F is also life; it is the endlessly elaborating poem, the poem of pure reality_p, the central poem. Stevens expressed this ultimate point in many shorter aphorisms like: “The mind renews the world in a verse” (OP: 129), or “the world arranges itself in a poem” (OP: 191). For the theory of poetry is the theory of life, this arrangement into reality_p, i.e. into a poem, into the central poem, is also marked by the transfiguration of the notion of reality, which is the main topic of the present essay. Reality_p, taken as appearance which is opposed to transcendent reality (Spinoza’s substance or the Kantian thing in itself), is transformed into reality_p which is not a substance or something transcendent, but rather a subtle poetic order. In “Three Academic Pieces”, Stevens renders this transformation into the theory of poetry as almost a deductive inference: if

“poetry is a part of the structure of reality_[I]”, then “the structure of poetry and the structure of reality_[F] are one”, which is the same as “poetry and reality_[F] are one, or should be” (NA: 81).

Stevens is thus in agreement with Schelling that nature/reality_F is a poem, the ultimate/central poem. There are, however, several differences. Schelling's *System* points towards (or is about) the central poem, whereas Stevens' poetry, his lesser poems, is (part) of the central poem. For we can have experiences with these particular poems, and can thus experience the central poem itself. We pose an, at least partial, criterion for determining the central poem. In this epistemic sense, in contrast to Schelling's *System*, Stevens' lyrical project is completed. However, the central poem itself is something inherently incomplete. It is an “endlessly elaborating poem”. Reality_F is not a solid, as expressed in the final lines of “An Ordinary Evening”:

It is not in the premise that reality
Is a solid. It may be a shade that traverses
A dust, a force that traverses a shade. (CP: 489)

Reality_F (or maybe reality_T) is traversing, in motion. It may be a shade traversing a dust (possibly a product of the imagination) or a force behind this shade (possibly the imagination itself or an agent of the imagination).

If reality_F is the product of the imagination known as the central poem, then this poem must reveal the identity of itself with the self, i.e. with the agent of the imagination. The agent must become aware that she is actually imagining the central poem. In Schelling's *System*, this awareness is accomplished in the intellectual intuition, in the apperception. This apperception, this becoming aware of the central poem, is anything but easy for Stevens; it is a “difficult apperception”. This brings us to our final topic, which we have already touched on several times: the agent that imagines the central poem.

Central mind – total reality_T

We have established that nature (nature outside us as well as our inner nature), reality_p, is a product of the imagination.²⁰ Yet the imagination is a faculty or a power of the mind. Is there such an imagining agent; and if so, how can we characterize it? Throughout his works, Stevens examines several possibilities without ultimately endorsing any of them. In this section, I argue that the agent of the imagination is best thought of as reality_p, that is, as Being. This is the basic

20 Reality_F is an ordering of reality_I which is not a product of the imagination. Reality_I exists prior to the imagination. Stevens thus cannot be labelled an idealist.

tenet of every idealism. This Being is, however, something negative, or is even (identical to) nothing or nothingness; it is Nietzsche's dead God. Furthermore, reality_T/Being has no name, or at least no unique name, which implies that there is no final unity of reality_T. Reality_T is an encounter, not objectivity.²¹

Before we dig into Stevens' various characterizations of the imagining agent, let us briefly look at the hypothesis that there is no such agent. Butler, in her analysis of the poem "World as Meditation", writes that "it is unclear whether the meditation, which we might expect to belong to some meditating agent, has come unmoored from that agency, making the world a kind of free-floating meditation [...]. If the world is the agent of meditation, or the activity of meditation conceived without an agent, then it is this curious presencing that, having no inherent temporal continuity, reveals itself in inadvertent and transient ways." (1991: 274) For the present discussion, the key point is the question of whether the meditating agent can be *unmoored* from the meditation, that is, from an activity of the imagination. Stevens comes close to answering this question in the negative when he writes "we cannot tell apart / The idea and the bearer-being of the idea." (CP: 466) Stevens does not say that the idea and its bearer-being *are* inseparable, but rather that we cannot *tell* them apart. In order to arrive at this conclusion, it is worth focusing on Stevens' attempts to name the agent, that is, to tell them apart from each other.

In the early poem "Negation", Stevens writes that "The creator too is blind", and furthermore is the "[i]ncapable master of all force" (CP: 97). This is not Hegel's self-conscious Absolute Spirit, but rather the evil creator or the ignorant Demiurge of Gnosticism.²² Even if the negative picture of the creator is somewhat amended in the second stanza, it remains the case that the negativity is the inherent feature of the creator and not of our epistemic access to him. Reality_T/Being is inherently negative.

Another attempt to name reality_T is the notion of a central mind, which recurs in several poems. In "Man and Bottle" (CP: 238–9), the central mind is a destructive force, destroying the romantic dream of the final unity ("Romantic tenements of rose and ice"). The notion of a central mind occurs again in "Chocorua to Its Neighbor" (CP: 298). Chocorua, one of Stevens' mythological giants, meditates:

My solitaria
Are the meditations of a central mind.
I hear the motions of the spirit and the sound
Of what is secret becomes, for me, a voice
That is my own voice speaking in my ear.

21 In this paragraph, I follow valuable suggestions by Charles Altieri.

22 Cf. Žižek (2016).

Here we have a positive description of Chocorua's conscious identity with the central mind, which is, in effect, the central mind's being conscious of itself, its self-consciousness. This picture is, however, disrupted in the next stanza:

There lies the misery, the coldest coil
That grips the centre, the actual bite, that life
Itself is like a poverty in the space of life,
So that the flapping of wind around me here
Is something in tatters that I cannot hold."

Chocorua is a mythological figure, "image, / But not the person [...], thought, / But not the thinker" (CP: 299). He becomes one of the names of the central mind: "The collective being knew / There were others like him". This is, again, an attempt to *unmoor* the meditating agency from the meditation itself. In doing so, Chocorua, being identical with the central mind, loses its personhood and its mind-hood, its mentality. Chocorua is a mountain which only represents the central mind. Another central agency – the collective being – has to be postulated in order to assimilate Chocorua into the order of Being, that is, into reality_r. Mythological being, or Being as mythology, is principally divided Being.²³ The central mind is beyond "human things"; its unique name is "more / Than human voice" – but "that cannot be" (CP: 300).

The notion of a central mind is, for the last time, taken up in "Final Soliloquy of the Interior Paramour" where Stevens says that the world imagined (i.e. the central poem, reality_p) is the ultimate good. Yet he also presents the main hypothesis of the poem: "We say that God and the imagination are one" (CP: 524). God or imagination are termed as "light" and "central mind". The question is whether God is the (faculty of the) imagination or the imagining agency. Regarding this, Stevens proposes the following syllogism in his "Adagia":

1. God and the imagination are one.
2. The thing imagined is the imaginer.

The second equals the thing imagined and the imaginer are one. Hence, I suppose, the imaginer is God. (OP: 202)

23 "The voice of the central man does not issue from the undivided source of nature's sun. It is the offspring of a meditative doubleness that reflects a discontinuity both within and without, a radical difference between the human and natural orders, a gap at the center, at the site of intended unification where the crisis of the divided self is supposed to be resolved." (Ackerman 1987: 97)

From the conclusion, it is evident that God is the agent of the imagination and not the faculty of the imagination only or the object of the imagination.²⁴ God is also the central mind, as we read in the last stanza. It is clear, however, that the central mind is not our mind. We live out of this light or mind “in the evening air, / In which being there together is enough.” (CP: 524) The central mind is not our mind and we do not reach it. The poem is thus not about the paramour’s or our elevation to a godlike status through our imagination; it is, rather, about realizing, as Leggett writes, that the paramour’s mind “does not contain or imagine the world; he is contained within the world’s imagination, the imagination of a ‘central mind.’” (2005: 176)²⁵ The central mind is not something we have to search for or seek to reach. The central mind, reality_p, is *not* the objective of the poet’s search; that is reality_p, the world imagined, the ultimate good. Our minds are, at the same time, parts of the central mind, of total reality_r. We just do not want to fully recognize and express this fact (CP: 288), nor do we have to do so. In other words, realizing the “difficult apperception” is no longer the ultimate purpose.

We have already discussed the image of the giant from “A Primitive Like an Orb”. This giant is one of the series of mythological figures that aim to capture the agency imagining reality. Every attempt to name such an agency in its unity has failed. Let us look at another attempt whose failure is very instructive. In “An Ordinary Evening”, Stevens writes:

A scholar, in his Segmenta, left a note,
As follows, “The Ruler of Reality,
If more unreal than New Haven, is not

A real ruler, but rules what is unreal.”
In addition, there were draftings of him, thus:
“He is the consort of the Queen of Fact. (CP: 485)

What is at stake here is the unity of reality_r. The Ruler of Reality rules reality_p, i.e. he rules what is unreal_i. Who then rules what is real? The Queen of Fact. Being/Reality_r is thus divided into the Ruler of Reality and the Queen of Fact, into the ruler of reality_p and the ruler of reality_i. The central mind consists of two minds – the Ruler and the Queen. We have arrived again at the line: “Real and unreal are two in one” (ibid.). What remains to be explained is their mystical marriage.

Let us come back to “The World as Meditation” (CP: 520–1). Penelope meditates: “The trees had been mended, as an essential exercise / In an inhuman

24 For this interpretation, see Leggett (2005: 172).

25 I have omitted Leggett’s convincing argument that the interior paramour is the poet himself, not his muse as many commentators have maintained.

meditation, larger than her own." If there were any agency imagining the natural world outside her (the trees), it would be an inhuman agency. The essential exercise that is also mentioned in the opening quotation from George Enesco: "But the essential exercise of the composer – meditation – nothing has ever suspended that in me." (Cook 2007: 289) The essential exercise is very close to Coleridge's "eternal act of creation in the infinite I AM". But Stevens maintains, contra Coleridge and his predecessors including Schelling, that the I AM is inhuman, not my own.²⁶

What comes out here – and this will be my final point – is that the imagining agency/central mind/reality_T/Being cannot be given any unique name. All the names we have already considered are mythological ones capturing a certain aspect of reality_T; they are in fact hidden descriptions expressing its totality, eccentricity (ex-centricity), inhumanity, blindness, ignorance, incapability, etc. In the late poem "The Sail of Ulysses", "the true creator", who is "creating from nothingness", is contrasted with the "unnamed creator of an unknown sphere, / Unknown as yet, unknowable, / Uncertain certainty" (OP: 127). As soon as this unknown creator enters or is imagined by the self, it becomes "The great Omnium [that] descends on us" (OP: 128) or that "descends on me, / Like an absolute" (OP: 132). The great Omnium is another description of reality_T, expressing its totality.

This idea of the impossibility of naming is expressed in the first stanza of "It Must Be Abstract" (CP: 381):

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

The ephebe, the addressee of the poem, should never postulate an agency imagining the first idea. This is because all gods that could be conceived in the place of such an agency are dead. Phoebus–Apollo is dead. "But Phoebus was / A name for something that never could be named." This is why we had to let Phoebus die. Phoebus has also never been a unique name of the sun/Being. The stanza concludes with the explicit claim: "The sun / Must bear no name".

26 Butler (1991: 274) tries to resist postulating any meditating agency here: "we might expect a divine agent to occupy the originating point of that meditation, but instead we find the activity reproducing itself, without an agent and without a teleological purpose. [...] Meditation is 'inhuman' in the sense that the natural world is exercised by that activity, but also because it is indifferent, even cruel, and without a final purpose."

Stevens tried to give Being many names that also turned out to be descriptions. Even “Being” is not the name of Being. What are these descriptions of? Stevens, following Kant or perhaps Fichte,²⁷ addresses Being as a variable X. Here is the climax of “The Motive for Metaphor” (CP: 288):

The A B C of being,
 The ruddy temper, the hammer
 Of red and blue, the hard sound—
 Steel against intimation—the sharp flash,
 The vital, arrogant, fatal, dominant X.

Here we have a series of descriptions of X, of an unknown variable “that would never be quite expressed”. It is a “difficult apperception”, a difficult unity of nature and the self. It is the unknown name of Being, a name that is not.

Schelling argues that the ground of identity between the absolute subject (the conscious) and the absolute object (the unconscious) “can be neither subject nor object nor both at once, but only the *absolute identity*” (1800: 209). Hence, the absolute agent of the imagination (engendering reality_F and the self) cannot be conceived as a subject, but rather as mere Being. Schelling furthermore maintains that this ground of all beings is the “eternal unknown, which, like the everlasting sun in the realm of spirits, conceals itself behind its own unclouded light”. For this transcendental agency is wholly unknown, it “cannot, in fact, have any predicates whatever”. This absolute unknowability is, however, weakened by the fact that we can find *traces* of its identity “in the lawfulness which runs [...] through the free play of choice in history” (ibid.). This is, again, a tension within Schelling’s *System*. Is the transcendental agency wholly unknowable or can it be known through its traces? Finally, as we already know, Schelling postulates this transcendental agency as a methodological stance, not as a metaphysical claim.

27 Stevens probably did not intend to refer to Kant or Fichte or to any other philosopher in particular. The affinity is, however, striking. In Kant’s *First Critique*, the transcendental object = X is just a “something in general” (A109); it is the pure concept of an object in general, the concept of the transcendental object which is the concept of a *thing in itself*. (Cf. Hickey (2001: 119) for an argument that all these concepts are identical.) Yet Kant uses the form “= X” for the transcendental subject as well: “a transcendental subject of thoughts = X, which is recognized only through the thoughts that are its predicates” (B404). Kant does not make fully explicit that these two Xs are identical, i.e. that the transcendental subject and the transcendental object are identical. Their identity is quite explicitly postulated in Fichte’s *Science of Knowledge* and, of course, in Schelling’s *System*. Cf. also Chris Genovesi’s discussion of the “dominant X” in this Kantian context on pp. 96 and 105f. in the present volume.

We can take Stevens' poetry as a kind of partial confirmation (and also an elucidation) of these ideas that make up the core of Schelling's transcendental idealism. For Stevens, the ground of the identity of subject and object lies outside the individual self. Then, however, this agency can be reached by predicates (vital, arrogant, fatal, etc.) or mythological names (giant, Phoebus, Chocorua, etc.). These predicates express partial aspects. This agency (reality_r) is, at the same time, unknown, because its detachment from its products (reality_p), as a speculative or methodological stance, an "as if", introduces the duality which dooms to failure any attempt to capture in language this agency in its unity.

I conclude with the claim that to speak of mere Being itself (Being as Being, reality_r) is more than human voice is capable of. Being has no name. This is also Derrida's critique of Heidegger in a nutshell: "There will be no unique name, not even the name of Being." (1968: 27)^{28,29}

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28 This far-reaching thesis is anticipated in Feuerbach's critique of Hegel's idealism: "A being that only thinks and thinks abstractly, has no idea at all of what being, existence, and reality are. Thought is bounded by being; being qua being is not an object of philosophy, at least not of abstract and absolute philosophy. Speculative philosophy itself expresses this indirectly in so far as it equates being with non-being, that is, nothing. But nothing cannot be an object of thought." (1986: 40)

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