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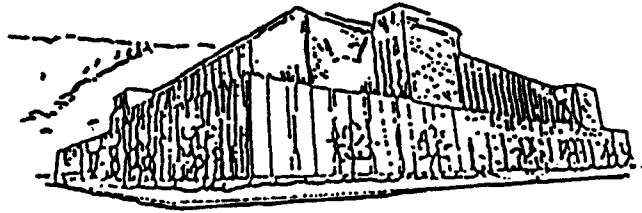Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarworks.umt.edu/etd

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WALLACE STEVENS' NOTES TOWARD A NEW IDIOM

By

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B.A., University of California at Berkeley, 1990

Presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements

for the degree of

Master of Arts

University of Montana

1995

Approved by

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Chairman, Board of Examiners

Dean, Graduate School

May 25, 1995
Date

UMI Number: EP35951

UMI

Dissertation Publishing

UMI EP35951

ProQuest

Keller, James., M.A., May 1995   English Literature

Wallace Stevens' Notes toward a New Idiom   (94 pp.)

Director: William Bevis

This examination of Stevens' "Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction" will engage contemporary and postmodern positions toward Stevens' "Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction," and will also investigate the current state of Stevens criticism. The thesis follows various strains of postmodern critique as far as they apply to "Notes," before moving on to a methodology more aptly suited to the structure and style of this poem. That methodology will be phenomenological, on the model of Merleau-Ponty, Derrida and later Heidegger.

While phenomenology and deconstruction both break down the clear distinction between conceiving subject and perceived object, Merleau-Ponty and Stevens proceed to explore the phenomenon of preobjective experience. Stevens' "Notes" catches the disclosure or referential arising of perceptual and linguistic meaning and discloses this process of disclosing. The analysis offered in this thesis applies a phenomenology of perception and meaning to "Notes," and calls upon Merleau-Ponty's work for explication. These essays offer a phenomenological poetics and propose that Merleau-Ponty's thought remains amenable to the Heideggerian "deep-structure" called en-owning. This takes an analysis of "Notes" to the deep-structural level of language detailed in competing accounts by Derrida and Heidegger. Stevens' poem addresses this deep structure, revealing the process of making sense from non-sense. The way we make sense of the world serves as the implicit subject of the poem and guides the poem's style and content. The poem also comments upon and celebrates the power of poetry to reveal the process of revealing.

This study concludes that "Notes" reveals the idiom appropriate to sense-making without naming and limiting it. This idiom reveals necessarily incomplete contexts that, despite their incompleteness, resonate for a time among themselves and other such contexts to give a familiar world without self-present, stabilizing identities.

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Introduction

"The poem refreshes life so that we share,
For a moment, the first idea." Wallace Stevens, "Notes
Toward a Supreme Fiction"

"When the voice of the god or the poet is missing,
one must be satisfied with the vicars of speech that
 are the cry and writing." Jacques Derrida, Edmund
Jabes and the Question of the Book 73.

"The nature of art is poetry. The nature of poetry,
in turn, is the founding of truth. We understand
founding here in a triple sense: founding as bestowing,
founding as grounding, and founding as beginning."
Martin Heidegger, Poetry, Language, Thought 75.

Late twentieth century Western philosophy finds itself
obsessed with leveling previous sources of authority,
values, and meaning in all human affairs. And this leveling
is no mere iconoclasm. When Nietzsche decides to
philosophize "with a hammer," and undermines Western notions
of an extra-worldly source of meaning, he still takes
as given the autonomy and authority of the individual who
posits meaning and values. One hundred years later,
however, even the notion of a meaning-giving self gets
pulled into differance, the play of shifting interpretations
that gives minimal sense to the world while destabilizing
meaning and authority.

In this thoroughgoing destabilization, postmodernism
and technological nihilism share the same project: both
of these undermining forces manifest themselves in a
stylistic tendency to acquire ever-increasing amounts of
flexibility, to grow ever more cynical vis-a-vis authority

and to level meaningful differences by rendering everything
equidistant. The postmodern emphasis on play tends,
generally speaking, to trivialize, aestheticize and
challenge political commitments.

At the same time that Western thinking strives to
annihilate all grounds, however, a concern for "healing"
grows. Western humankind looks at the environment, at
gender relations, at family situations and at technology
and finds that Enlightenment-era notions of the mind-body
dualism and anthropocentrism have led to unprecedented
destruction and that this domination-oriented paradigm
must be replaced. People involved with "deep ecology,"
and with healing the rifts in human relations, stress human
receptivity to the profound mystery of nature and of life.

So postmodern, Western life, by turns, seems rife with
possibilities, challenges and freedom on the one hand,
and alarm and claustrophobic anxiety on the other. And
the two predominant tendencies in contemporary thinking
-- leveling and healing -- put thinking about practices
in a quandary: seeing possibilities for change everywhere,
but lacking any criteria by which to choose, we implicitly
wonder, "which will prevail, complete nihilism or the
healing power?"

But perhaps this is the wrong question. What if it
turns out that the annihilation of all ground and the
healing power both grow from the same source? This
possibility makes the contemporary Western condition more

complicated, but also more interesting. In some ways, what Merleau-Ponty, Derrida, and Stevens might call poetic thinking is also the source of the annihilation of all metaphysical ground. But, for Stevens and Merleau-Ponty, poetry provides not only the deconstruction of Western metaphysics -- especially of logical, propositional modes of thought -- it also gives the condition for the reconstruction of a meaningful relation between humanity and the mysterious process that lets certain commitments matter and others seem trivial.

In phenomenological accounts of poetry, the poet re-gestalts previous ways of speaking about and understanding the world so that speakers may speak anew, finding new relations between things and seeing new orders emerge from the ruins of the old. The poet destabilizes or deconstructs the background understanding of what it means to be, so that the poem may found a new site. On this new site, the poet offers a new interpretation of the being of everything, and this interpretation gathers manifold practices and ways of speaking into itself. This poetic process of rebuilding is what Heidegger calls "the setting-into-work of truth" (PLT 75). As he says, "the setting-into-work of truth thrusts up the unfamiliar and extraordinary and at the same time thrusts down the ordinary and what we believe to be such" (Ibid.). Once the poet has thrust down previous meanings, senses of the world and understandings of the ordinary, the poet's task becomes

one of establishing and making familiar a new sense of
life.

To the end of offering a new understanding of what
it means for anything to be, poetic thinking levels previous
understandings of reality. But, having done this leveling,
poetic thinking need not necessarily rebuild. The impulse
toward healing and toward the reconstruction of sense is
not the only impulse that presents itself to poetic
thinking. Once one has problematized previous senses of
the ordinary and of authority, one may continue to thrust
up the unfamiliar and thrust down all possible sources
of authority indefinitely. In this case, thinking takes
its directive from the poetic urge to level meaningful
differences and to remove the distinction between the near
and the far, or the important and the trivial. Postmodern
thought and practice is this "poetic urge" run riot, taken
to the extent that the compulsion toward leveling precludes
any authority at all.

Heidegger names this strange postmodern calling "the
malice of rage" against all authority, both present and
possible (LH 267). He also finds that -- through this
strange calling, which is the calling to make commitment
seem strange -- technological thinking comes into its own,
rendering everything and every one standing reserve, ready
for new uses at a moment's notice.

Both "the malice of rage" and the healing power spring
from poetic thought. The poet, if a poet of the first

order, can rid readers of old notions of meaning and show
the mysterious gathering process that gives meaning. And
if readers become aware of this process, no one
understanding of reality, be it the Enlightenment
understanding or the technological understanding, will
hold sway over them.

Usually, Heidegger is understood as a nostalgic thinker.
When Heidegger speaks of the history of being in the West,
he does indeed tend to bemoan the absence of gods and the
character of our Western "destiny," our changing but
long-term cultural identities. But there is another, lesser
known, tendency in Heidegger's thought. Toward the end
of his life, Heidegger holds two conflicting views toward
the issues of identity and difference. The "nostalgic"
Heidegger invokes a new god to hold sway over Western human
being and to give this way of being one unified style.
But the non-metaphysical Heidegger, the Heidegger of
"Building, Dwelling, Thinking," "The Thing," Gelassenheit,
"The Way to Language," and "Time and Being" appreciates
that all speaking, along with our ability to speak in terms
of Being and presence, is grounded in the deeper,
pre-metaphysical tendency in language that he calls
Ereignis. The "gathering" of Ereignis lets meaning arise
and gives human beings a maximal grip on percepts and
situations, without revealing full contexts or fully present
entities.

Stevens shows the complex and mysterious way in which

meaning arises while he too avoids speaking in terms of identity and presence. And in so doing Stevens restores a sense of the authority and mystery to this process without suggesting a content to or a definitive name for this authority.

Stevens discusses the various tasks that the poem engages. The poem "sings jubilas," and it gives expression to religious sensibilities. But, more difficult and important than either of these projects is the poem's role of showing the non-objectifiable process of the arising of meaning. The poem shows the mysterious tendency in human practices to focus and to deepen the relevance of percepts and words, in short the poem reveals the tendency to make sense from non-sense.

I: "A Seeing and Unseeing in the Eye"

"But the difficultest rigor is forthwith,
On the image of what we see, to catch from that

Irrational moment its unreasoning,
As when the sun comes rising, when the sea
Clears deeply, when the moon hangs on the wall

Of heaven-haven. These are not things transformed.
Yet we are shaken by them as if they were.
We reason about them with a later reason."

                                        (CP 398)

"Unreasoning," as it appears in the "It Must Give

Pleasure" section of Stevens' "Notes toward a Supreme

Fiction," is not non-sense. The poem, though it does not

reason by propositions, nonetheless moves, like a melody,

by a logic of its own. Since propositional logic serves

as an instrument by which readers reflect upon experience

and generally "reason about [experience] with a later

reason," the so-called logic of these lines seems unusual

enough in its earliness or its primacy to merit being called

a prereflective logic, or simply a pre-logic. Yet,

notwithstanding its pre-logical status, the momentum of

the above cited lines still obeys a limited teleo-logic.

And the telos that unfolds in these lines functions as

a synechdoche for the type of directed-ness toward

context-formation that emerges in "Notes" taken at large.

Although the pre-reflective moment that the poet aims

"to catch" will not render itself apprehensible in the

ordinary terms of a logical context, contexts that enable

minimal intelligibility do arise within and hold sway over

the poem. Further, the poem teaches its readers how to
approach the prereflective process it reveals and it hints
that this process may itself emerge under the proper kind
of scrutiny.

Given the setting in which it appears above, the
infinitive "to catch" means: to allow a previously neglected
phenomenon to come into its own. This phenomenon is also
our own: the phenomenon under consideration is not itself
an entity, but rather the process through which entities
come to arise to perception. And it is the moment that
objects arise to perception and the organizing activity
which governs this arising that Stevens tries to "catch"
and to reveal in the above lines and throughout "Notes."

The poet's sense of the verb to catch is also familiar
to at least one strain of phenomenology. Of Merleau-Ponty,
H.L. Dreyfus tells us, he sought to catch disclosure, or
"to produce an original and complex analysis of the source
and status of order in the perceptual world" (SN x). And
Merleau-Ponty's "difficultest" task was to produce an
"ontology of sense" (xiii).

Readers of Merleau-Ponty's Phenomenology of Perception
and the later works which develop his phenomenology are
brought to apprehend, or better, to sense, that all
experience -- be it perceptual or conceptual -- "is never
totally without meaning [while its] meaning is never
definitive" (ibid.). In order to give meaning, the
prereflective organizing activity of perception requires

that the field it reveals remains referential, ambiguous and incomplete. And, since perception functions as the "unreasoning" condition of reason, so objectivity and notions of final "Truth" seem ultimately to devolve upon unreason and embodied, perspectival perception.

Stevens talks about "thought/ Beating in the heart" (CP 382), and man, he tells his readers, is an "abstraction blooded" (385). This kind of thinking brings Steves close to Merleau-Ponty, for whom thinking is always already "blooded": embodied and embedded in a historical situation. And, for this reason, reason and vision, "reason's click-clack, its applied/ Enflashings" remain unable to get clear of, and clear about, facticity.

While phenomenology surrenders the "philosophical" notion of non-referential "Truth," what might be called Stevens' phenomenological poetics desists in the pursuit of "Beauty" in order to catch the pre-rational, "un-reasoning" movement that allows an image to present itself to perception. Stevens' "Notes" pursues this "[i]rrational moment" in which meaning appears in perception, and the poet of "Notes" implies that there exists no higher goal for contemporary art than to examine the process of making sense from non-sense.

Before engaging the question of language, Merleau-Ponty examines perception, and one should follow Merleau-Ponty in considering the condition of perception before moving on to look at language. Like Stevens, Merleau-Ponty

concerns himself with the way that "perception hides its activity of organization and leads us to see objects as independent entities" (SN xiii). The organizing activity of perception also remains hidden because of its pervasiveness, its familiarity and because there is nothing with which to contrast it. Both Stevens and Merleau-Ponty try to catch this perceptual activity that most often goes unnoticed. By showing the moment or movement of sense-making, Stevens and Merleau-Ponty, each in his own way, brings to light the always already dimly-grasped awareness of the contingent and referential character of perception.

To show the movement of sense-making, the process whereby the visible percept makes its appearance to the perceiver and elicites some particular comportment out of this perceiver, Stevens must speak about the background of sense that disappears so that objects may appear. Things appear to vision under aspects or, otherwise stated, in an indexical relation to the body's prior and on-going commitments in the world. The ordering activity of perception gives visible objects on the basis of the body's background, and language gives words in terms of the background. Wittgenstein calls this background a set of "agreements in our form of life" (PI 242). The background cannot be seen, but Stevens gets at it in those passages in which he gives readers a sense of perception that confuses vision and the invisible condition of visibility:

"It must be visible or invisible,
Invisible or visible or both:
A seeing and unseeing in the eye" (385).

"The vivid transparence that you bring is peace" (380).

Stevens is interested in both reaon and "unreasoning,"
seeing and "unseeing" and vividness and the transparence
in which things come to appear. This "transparence,"
Merleau-Ponty will show, is the embodied background of
one's practices, the body's innate and enculturated
perceptual activity and one's style.

Merleau-Ponty approaches perception by noting that
those who ask how consciousness can give meaning to a world
comprised of meaningless sense-data are asking the wrong
set of questions. And Stevens would agree, judging by
the poetic statement that when we reason with later reason,
"we make of what we see, what we see clearly/ And have
seen, a place dependent on ourselves" (401). Only when
perceivers deliberate about the perceived, as it were,
after the spontaneous perception, only then does the world
appear as dependent upon our rational activity. There is
no intentionality or meaning-imposition in ordinary
perception for either Stevens or Merleau-Ponty. It is
only when perception breaks down or perceivers try to
understand it critically that meaning seems "dependent
upon ourselves."

In his Phenomenology of Perception, Merleau-Ponty
challenges traditional ways of thinking about perception

by asserting and demonstrating the fact that perceivers
never primarily experience raw or uninterpreted sense-data.
In traditional accounts of perception, which culminate
in the early work of Husserl, such brute, unorganized
"hyletic" data present themselves to intentional processes
which, by way of a secondary operation, then organize the
data into meaningful patterns. This view enjoys more
prevalence now than ever. But such a view, Merleau-Ponty
argues, is fundamentally flawed because it applies objective
categories of thought to the preobjective field of
experience upon which objectivity depends.

For Merleau-Ponty, it turns out that our bodies
organize experience prior to and usually without the aid
of any cognitive processes at all. The body "takes a stand"
(PP 274) toward the world from within the world,
incorporating its skills, along with its biologically
and socially conditioned perceptual capacities, and from
this stance can, as Stevens asserts, "discover not impose"
(CP 403) meaning. Against a background of past experiences
and future projects, the body, which is neither subject
nor object, opens up a field of experience and minimally
organizes it before any reflection occurs. Merleau-Ponty
compares this preobjective background of experience to
the lighting in a room which makes directedness towards
objects possible but is not itself an object towards which
perception can be directed.

Here a metaphor might bring some clarity to the notion

of the background and the perceptual field: in order to perceive any figure whatsoever, it must appear against a background. Unless itself foregrounded, this ground cannot be noticed; it disappears so that figures may appear. What we as perceivers forget, though, is that this background is implied in the appearance of every perceptible entity. As Dreyfus comments: "the figure can be said to have meaning since...it refers beyond what is immediately given" (SN xi). Merleau-Ponty also calls this background "the atmosphere of our present." (PP 442). Against the background of past experience and future projects, the body pre-cognitively orders experience. We perceive objects because we embody our perceptual background and thus encounter entities against this background.

The organizing activity of perception opens up a field in which objects make sense. Perception also gives objects a constancy that they do not objectively show. For example, distant objects appear larger, and close objects smaller, than they would in a picture or a film. Perception also gives color and brightness constancy to objects before any thought about them occurs. Merleau-Ponty gives an example of a white patch against a background to elucidate the point that perception always gives perceivers more information than they could objectively know. Experiencing a white patch, perception organizes the experience of the whole and "runs on ahead of itself." (PP 390) Taking figure and ground into account, pre-reflective ordering casts

the patch into the foreground and arranges it into a unified whole, while giving the background as continuous. This pre-rational ordering gives the perceiver more than is objectively there in the figure-ground gestalt and makes order out of and against the always encroaching disorder that threatens sense.

The organizing activity of perception also gives much more than falls on the surface of the viewer's retina. The field seems to run on behind the white patch, though there is no evidence that it actually does, and the patch itself seems to pull itself together against this ground.

So the embodied perceptual process refers experiences to other experiences, organizes itself and the entities that show up against it and gives more than is objectively present. But, unlike the above mentioned background, our background, since it is embodied and all pervasive, can only be sensed, not represented. This background and the perceptual field that it discloses, like the body, is neither subjective nor objective -- it is neither intentional nor is it comprised of a set of facts -- but it exists prior to and contains both subjective and objective poles and makes their relation possible. Merleau-Ponty argues that this background is correlated with our bodily skill, and since our bodies themselves organize experience, and it is from within the world that we perceive, "our experience is always perspectival, i.e. incomplete" (SN xiii).

For Merleau-Ponty, both empiricist and intellectualist
traditions, following Hume and Kant respectively, fail
to take the unreasoning or prereflective character of
perception into account:

> "[b]oth take the objective world as the object of
> their analysis, when this comes first neither in time
> nor meaning; and both are incapable of expressing the
> peculiar way in which perceptual consciousness
> constitutes its object" (PP 26).

One cannot derive one's understanding of perception
from one's knowledge of how things are. We comport
ourselves in the world through a know-how, not through
a knowledge of fact. No amount of knowledge, for example,
that the moon is the same size on the horizon as it is
at the zenith can make it not appear smaller at the zenith
than it does on the horizon. Perception is predominantly
passive and corrects itself through recourse to objective
knowledge in cases of confusion.

Traditional theorizing about perception covers over
the phenomenon of the perceived world because it understands
unreason with a later reason; the tradition reads reason
in to perception prematurely. For Merleau-Ponty, "the
world as <u>perceived</u> does not show the kind of definiteness
and determinacy as the world as <u>conceived</u> of by the
judgments of common sense and science" (SN xx). Traditional
accounts of perception are misguided because they read
detached, theoretical conceptions of the world that come
from leaving out accounts of embodiment, back into finite,
embodied perception.

But, not only is ambiguity a fact about sense-making, ambiguity is in fact necessary to perception. If all being, objective and human, were given in completely self-present, definite form, perception would collapse completely, or "lock into" each percept, and, finding nothing abstractible and generalizable from its object, perception would break-down, as it does in cases of impaired brain activity, finding no similarities and hence unable to move between one percept and the next.

Here one might read Stevens' "later reason" for Merleau-Ponty's "objective world" and "unreasoning" for "perceptual activity." By "catch," for now obvious reasons, we cannot mean that Stevens re-presents perception's activity of organization. Rather, Stevens uses the infinitive "to catch" not in lexical terms of definition, but in idiomatic terms, as one says "to catch someone's meaning." Stevens' readers might also think of catching as Wittgenstein thinks of it when he says that when one catches a meaning, one catches an entire pattern, and "light dawns gradually over the whole" (OC 92).

But, light dawns slowly, if at all, over the process whereby perception organizes experience, because perception, against overwhelming odds, works to give us a world characterized by solidity and determinacy. In working so well, perception leads us to forget its structurally necessary indeterminacy.

It is to the perceptual process and its necessary

ambiguity that Stevens directs our attention. Where poets
of ages prior to our own have, very generally speaking,
subsumed analyses of the perceptual process under the desire
to limn the thing perceived, Stevens shows his readers
that to render great people and entities through mimesis,
to speak for the masses, to praise a god and/or to exalt
the human(-ist) spirit can no longer remain the goal of
art. Commencing the section entitled "It Must Give
Pleasure," and immediately prior to the lines that deal
with "unreason," the poet prescribes an alternative place
for poetry:

> "To sing jubilas at exact, accustomed times,
> To be crested and wear the mane of a multitude
> And so, as part, to exult with its great throat,
>
> To speak of joy and to sing of it, borne on
> The shoulders of joyous men, to feel the heart
> That is the common, the bravest fundament,
>
> This is a facile exercise...." (CP 398)

Certainly, other poets focus their attention on
perception, but, for Stevens the object of poetic scrutiny
serves as a means to the ends of his phenomenology. Poetry
no longer serves rhetorical or ritual ends; neither does
it imitate actions of great men nor seek out the primordial
language of nature. Poetry descends from the "shoulders
of joyous men." But, if the poem brings us no nearer to
the vulgate of experience, or to the vernacular, a la
Wordsworth, and if it brings us no nearer to the natural
world, in a similar Romantic vein, then apparently it must
lift us up in apotheosis. But the poet closes off this

alternative almost before readers have recourse to it:

"...Jerome
Begat the tubas and the fire-wind strings,
The golden fingers picking dark-blue air:

For companies of voices moving there,
To find of sound the bleakest ancestor,
To find of light a music issuing

Whereon it falls in more than sensual mode." (Ibid.)

In these three stanzas, the last line of which begins

the "difficultest rigor" stanzas, the poet alludes to St.

Jerome and his preparation of the vulgate version of the

Bible. This assumption helps explain the mock-biblical

juxtaposition of "Begat" with tubas, and it leads readers

on a geneological voyage, through choirs of voices, back

to our "bleakest ancestor." But, such a geneology, if

less facile than the poet's previous avocation, remains

fruitless; readers find themselves cut-off from any

pre-linguistic origins that the poet could translate into

the vernacular.

To further illustrate the futility of a return to

origins and the futility of what Gerald Bruns, in his Modern

Poetry and the Idea of Language, calls the "Orphic"

understanding of poetry as revelation, the poet's use of

the word "irrational" in stanza six will remind readers

of the etymology of the word "rational." The rational,

as nominative, is also the name for the Hebrew "hoshen,"

which becomes the Greek "logeion": an instrument used to

translate the message of the oracle. The rational text

and the text of the "rational" provides a "laying open"

or a "legein" of the oracle. For Stevens, poetry is

irrational, it is no longer a translation of the "logos."

"Difficulter" than any of the aforesaid artistic

enterprises, mimetic and what Hillis Miller calls "aletheic"

is the task of showing and saying the strangeness of our

everyday, taken-for-granted experience of order. What

the poet wants us to see, the object of the sentence that

begins with "But," is the "unreasoning" organizing activity

that governs our ability to perceive any image at all.

Perception occurs before reason and obeys its own laws,

and this process allows us to perceive the sun "rising"

the ocean "clearing" and the moon "hanging." Objectively

speaking, the sun does not rise the sea does not clear,

and the moon does not hang. But, perception always gives

objects as pre-interpreted, that is, already under some

aspect and colored by the background against which they

appear. If a context is binding, it gives a "Candid kind

to everything" (CP 382).

Merleau-Ponty calls the ways in which aspects of the

perceptual field relate to one another "motivation." The

appearance of interposed objects "motivates" the appearance

of other objects and the appearance of distance. Again,

what is important to notice here is the non-cognitive

element of perception. Objects just appear already

organized under aspects. Stevens points out this

unreasoning activity of the body, showing readers that

every appearance is always already metaphorical in the

sense that every appearance qua appearance points beyond itself.

Stevens makes us aware of the inherent metaphoricity of perception. As readers progress from sun to sea to moon, the images the poet uses become less and less familiar to us until "Heaven-haven" forcefully indicates that all our ways of perceiving are metaphorical, that is interpreted in light of other experiences before they can be reasoned about. We perceive first, and we re-present and talk about images afterward.

According to Merleau-Ponty, the task of any examination of perception should no longer involve offering a theory of how one gets from raw sense data to a refined consciousness of the objective world. Rather, the world is given in the sense that there is always some minimal organization among things in experience, some relationship between them, that does not depend upon the mind. It is this prereflective experience that Merleau-Ponty tries to recapture. As Merleau-Ponty says, he wants "to rediscover a commerce with the world and a presence to the world that is older than intelligence" (SN pro.).

Merleau-Ponty and Stevens both dissolve the famed subject-object relation, showing the primordial perceptual world and the way that objects appear to perception before the mind makes any judgments about them. It is not the way that the mind and world relate, but what experience is like before they separate, that interests both

Merleau-Ponty and Stevens. "Notes," in fact, abounds in

such meditations on the preobjective perceptual realm,

and even begins the poem by returning to the preobjective

moment:

> "Begin, ephebe, by perceiving the idea
> Of this invention, this invented world,
> The inconceivable idea of the sun.
>
> You must become an ignorant man again
> And see the sun again with an ignorant eye
> And see it clearly in the idea of it
>
> Never suppose an inventing mind as source
> Of this idea nor for that mind compose
> A voluminous master folded in his fire" (CP 380-81).

The poet begins by inviting the initiate to perceive

an idea. One could take this to mean, in the Platonic

tradition, that the "idea of the sun" precedes any

manifestation of the idea in physical form. On the

traditional model, conceptualization precedes execution,

the eidos, or fore-given representation given in the mind

precedes production of the object, and the truth precedes

its occurrence in signs. On this model, signs are then

interpreted or re-animated in the mind of the perceiver.

But the poet immediately renders this "relation" of

idea-manifestation problematic. What one perceives is

an idea, but this idea itself remains inconceivable. The

idea is an idea that precedes the mind. It issues from

an intentionality without a subject. And, even supposing

that the ephebe could perceive the object purely, in what

Nietzsche calls "the immaculate perception," it is not

an object that is being perceived, but the idea of an
object. We are called to perceive that which by defintion
can only appear before the higher reason of theoretical
reflection, a higher reason that deliberately leaves the
perceived world out of its considerations. Stevens lets
this aporia remind readers that perception only occurs
because ideation awaits the percept already; this means
that perceptual experience occurs and must be expressible
in terms of a particular context. And, since "blooded,"
ideation would be impossible without an embodied
perspective.

But, where deconstructive critique finds that sign
and truth become enmeshed in a textual tangle at this point,
it is important for our purposes to notice something else.
Perception involves a kind of ideation all its own. Both
phenomenology and deconstruction break down the clear
distinction between conceiving subject and perceived object,
but Merleau-Ponty and Stevens explore this preobjective
realm rather than resting content to leave the distinction
deconstructed.

This realm is what the phenomenological approach
investigates. Merleau-Ponty takes such an approach to
Cezanne, and what Merleau-Ponty looks for in the latter,
we may examine in Stevens. Like the Impressionists, Cezanne
took nature as his model, but, unlike them, he wanted to
catch the weight or the sensory impact of objects, to see
objects before one judges about them. Depicting the object

as Impressionism does affords a true impression through
the action of separate parts upon one another, but it also
submerges the object and causes it to lose its power over
the senses. Where Impressionism gives up the sensuous
surface of the object for the sake of its impression,
Cezanne wants to restore this surface.

In Cezanne's late work, perspectival distortions are
no longer visible in their own right, but rather contribute,
as they do in natural vision, to the impression of an
emerging order, of the object in the _act_ of appearing,
organizing itself before our senses. Merleau-Ponty applies
his phenomenological method to Cezanne's later work and
finds the immanence of the world-as-perceived before
transcendent thought does any interpreting. As
Merleau-Ponty says of Cezanne's portraits:

> "other minds are given to us only as incarnate, as
> belonging to faces and gestures. Countering with the
> distinctions of soul and body, thought and vision is
> of no use here, for Cezanne returns to just that
> primordial experience from which these notions are
> derived and in which they are inseparable (SN 16)."

This phenomenological method lends itself especially
well to an examination of Stevens' late work. Unlike Pound,
and unlike the Impressionists, Stevens is not concerned
with showing the object at its most objective, or in
"luminous detail." Stevens wants instead to show the birth
of perceptual order through spontaneous, prereflective
organization.

The body, Merleau-Ponty reminds us, acts like both
a subject and an object, and the perceptible world never

appears primarily to the body in purely objectified form. The division of beings into subject and object therefore derives from the body's more basic being-in-the-world. When perception runs into anomalies, then reflection or "later reason" occurs, and the world divides up into subjects and objects.

The tradition that interprets perception as subjective mistakenly takes second-order occurrences of conscious deliberation for the primary operation of perception. Western philosophy since Descartes assumes that representing subjects act on the implicit theories they entertain about the world, and that consciousness overlooks these implicit theories because they most often remain hidden.

On this account, meaning-giving subjects condition their world. For Merleau-Ponty, however, the world is just immanent in embodied comportment, and our environment, our climate, and the things in it condition us. This is why Merleau-Ponty brings up Cezanne's quote that "the landscape thinks itself in me...and I am its consciousness" (17). For Merleau-Ponty and for Stevens, art is not the expression of an inner reality; nor is it a re-presentation of external reality. Through art, the thing arises and presents itself out of a set of viscous and equivocal appearances. Art "penetrates right to the root of things beneath the imposed order of humanity" (16). Of course, art does not penetrate all the way through the phenomenal world to a noumenal thing-in-itself, but it does reach

the prereflective realm of experience.

Stevens, like Merleau-Ponty, catches and shows the arising of perception against a non-representable background and draws readers' attention to the ambiguity inherent in the disclosure of perceptible objects. Since we perceive everything from an embodied standpoint within the world, our perceptions are always referential, but also directed and meaningful. Like a soap bubble tends toward assuming a spherical shape, so too does perception tend, without implementing any intentionality, toward complete perceptions, though it never achieves a fully saturated perceptual experience. Perception completes itself in the world, and it is only upon taking an epistemic stance of theoretical reflection that one takes the world as an independent reality over against the mind. Critics of Stevens most often "come in too late," and assume that Stevens uncritically accepts, in order to put into play, the mind-world relation.

But the study of perception alone does not adequately address what is of interest in "Notes." The poem also speaks insistently about poetic language and obsesses itself with the origins, the means and the ends of poetry. Poetry must speak not only about meaning in perception, but also about meaning in language and about the relation that obtains between perception and language.

Just as there is a pre-objective but nonetheless real level on which perception makes sense of non-sense, so

too there is a level on which language shows itself more authentically than it does in everyday speech. And, as perceptual experience necessarily admits of a background, language also makes sense only in reference to a background. As linguistics has noted, phonemes carry no intrinsic significance, but signify only in relation to other phonemes, just as perceived objects never appear free of relations.

Like the light that cannot itself be seen, this background renders the world intelligible. But, since it gives rise to perception and language, it remains unperceived and unnamable. It is not an "it," but if the modern work of art finds itself prevented from asking what is this background, it may nonetheless ask, what is it like? What metaphor, for example, what trope tropes itself as that which in its own hiding lets us encounter and name things?

What applies to the phenomenological account of the ambiguous, referential character of perception, resonates with the postmodern commentary on the enigmatic, irreducible otherness of language. Language, or "Langue," as a differential structure, allows speakers to signify in speech and in scriptive acts, or "parole," while hiding, i.e. without ordinarily revealing the (de) structuring movement at the heart of language. Existential, or better, en-worlded phenomenology, remarks the referential structure of perception and notes the ways in which "perception hides

its activity of organization and leads us to see objects
as independent entities" (SN xii).

In both cases of language and perception, some
background, itself detached and self-less, while embodied
in each perceiver and speaker, withdraws while revealing
entities, eliciting our response to others and calling
speech to speak after it. So, when Kenner says of Eliot,
for example, "[h]e has withdrawn in favor of language,"
Kenner implies that Eliot, at least stylistically, has
put himself in touch with this background.

Merleau-Ponty's notion of the background of unreason
-- the notion that reason presupposes an "un[-]reasoning,"
pre-reason that gives a "perceptual faith in the independent
solidity of objects," -- seems to share a great deal with
Stevens' notion of the "first idea." This "idea" is not
itself an idea, but it is primordially idea-like and primary
in the sense that it makes all ideation possible. Since
it is no concept, this idea can never be experienced
directly. (It) cannot be experienced directly not because
it is some ineffable presence, but because (it) must ab-sent
itself in order to pre-sent a perceptible world. As such
an absence, Stevens may only trace the shadow or the distant
echo of this idea. So the poet, rather than naming this
background, calls our attention to its strange power to
hide and to disclose, to shift and to unify.· And, in
drawing our attention to this background, the poet makes
us aware that our faith in the stability of names and the

solidity of objects is indeed a _faith_.

The poet of "Notes" gives readers a fine example of such poetic, tentative naming in the initial stanzas of the poem:

> "Phoebus is dead, ephebe. But Phoebus was
> The name for something that never could be named.
> There was a project for the sun and is.
>
> There is a project for the sun. The sun
> Must bear no name, gold flourisher, but be
> In the difficulty of what it is to be" (CP 381).

As noted, the background of perception is like the light in a room, or the light from the sun. It lets us perceive objects while it remains hidden. As the horizon of intelligibility, the sun should remind readers of Heraclitus' notion of "The One" which "is willing and is not willing to be called by the name of Zeus (of Life)" (B 32). Heraclitus understood that to name this background is to do violence to it, as naming reduces it to the status of the objects that it reveals. This mention of the sun should also remind readers, as it reminds Patricia Parker (WSJ 84), of Plato.

Plato took over from Heraclitus the sense of that which makes naming and perception possible, but, in naming it "eidos," Plato missed what is commonly called the "ontological difference" between the background that lets beings appear and the beings that appear, and so reduced this background to the status of an entity. Since this background could not be said to belong to the sensory world, philosophy and poetry have, generally speaking, over the

centuries since Platonic thought, located the source of intelligibility in the supersensory: the ideas, a god, "Man's" "transcendental unity of apperception" and an animistic conception of "Nature" to name a few candidates for the subjects of history.

But Stevens returns readers' attention to the issue of "the inconceivable idea of the sun." Phoebus, a name for "The One" and for the super-sensory, ideal sun, can no longer appear; nor can any other extra-worldly "onto-theological" source of intelligibilty, be it reason, the Christian god, or the mind, hold sway over our comportment. "Phoebus is dead." Despite the death of Phoebus, though, the poet will still trace the background that gives names and perceptual objects. The poet, and readers of the poem, still want a name, if tentative rather than metaphysical, for that which makes naming possible: the "name for something that never could be named." This will be the "project for the sun": to show its process of shining without showing itself or letting this shining become a noun.

But every time that the poet seeks out a name for this verb which "[m]ust bear no name," the poet must alight upon a physical thing or ordinary name, such as "gold flourisher." Realizing this, the poet also sees that this is "the difficulty of what it is to be." To be means to dwell between chaos and order, between the stable, rational world of words and things and the irrational, wholly other

world that lets these come to light.

On the traditional account of language, thought exists
fully present to the speaking subject in the form of mental
representations, or, in the case of epistemologically
oriented psychology, these representations remain veiled
but still exist pre-linguistically. To convey a thought,
then, is to put these representations into the words that
one finds available in the algorithm of language that exists
as a system of symbols and set of rules independent of
the mind. After the representation has been communicated
in speech or writing, the receiver hears acoustic blasts
or sees lines scrawled on paper, and interprets these
linguistic data, much as the perceiver is thought to
interpret sense data, into meaningful representations.

In response to the traditional notions of language,
however, Merleau-Ponty offers an alternative consideration.
For Merleau-Ponty, thought does not exist prior to its
expression, but rather thought comes about in the expressive
act. According to Merleau-Ponty, "self-possession and
coincidence with the self do not serve to define thought,
which is, on the contrary, an outcome of expression" (PP
389). In response to the tradition, Merleau-Ponty notices
that "the expression...moulds and animates the
reader...putting into the hidden mouth of his mind the
message of a certain object or a certain feeling." (Ibid.)
Presupposing the notion of the speaking subject in order
to do away with it, Merleau-Ponty continues: "In the

speaking subject, utterance does not illustrate ready-made thought, but makes that thought its own" (390). One speaks, and then one knows what one thinks.

Because the referential totality that forms the background of language involves a surplus of signifieds over signifiers, one cannot help but find more possible meaning in one's words than occurred to one upon speaking. Perception and language only work by outstripping themselves, promising to speakers more than is there to give. Perception organizes sense data, and expression organizes linguistic data. Both perception and expression may then give to consciousness the illusion that it constitutes experience and expression.

As the idea of the perceiving subject disappeared in the investigation of the immanence of the world to thought, so the idea of the fully self-present speaking subject falls before the fact that once uttered, the speaker's words may change meaning and the speaker's intentions necessarily outstrip and modify themselves in speech: "As for the speaking subject, he too must be enabled to outrun what he thought before, and to find in his own words more than he thought he was putting into them" (PP 394). Since the speaking subject always outruns itself, and linguistic arbitrariness leads thought in new directions, there can be no sense to the idea of the separation of speaker and world. The speaker cannot control the meanings of words any more than intentionality can control perception.

Just as there are no interpretation-free sense data, there are no interpretation-free linguistic data. Perception gives us solid objects by veiling its own organizing activity, as language gives significance to words by hiding its own referential structure. Objects appear to perception pre-interpreted, while ready-made expression, also essentially metaphorical in its referentiality, awaits thought which is always dim and unformulated, so that the latter may complete itself in a gesture of reaching out to the expression that stands ready for it.

Merleau-Ponty gives the example of expression as this gesture that primordially gives thought and world to each other by thinking about someone walking around in a dimly lit room. The person cannot see, touches something, and cannot sense what the object is by feel or sight. Suddenly, this person says the word "brush" and the thought falls into place. In this case, as is generally the case in ordinary language, expression gives thought a perceptual "grip" on the world that thought pervades.

But, despite their similarities, language seems more flexible than body-perception. Cultural perception changes, as does individual perceptual habit by what Merleau-Ponty calls a series of small "deflections," but the tendency to see the moon as larger on the horizon than at the zenith, for example, seems more "sedimented" than do history and psychology. In everyday speech, or what Merleau-Ponty

calls "constituted" language, words give the impression
of relative fixity: "words gradually accumulate a
significance" which, though necessarily impossible to
establish absolutely, seems nonetheless shared.

But there is another kind of language. Though
Merleau-Ponty is careful to avoid hierarchies and to refrain
from drawing too fine a distinction between them, he does
find that constituted language both rests upon and
contributes to what he calls poetic language.

The relation of these two types of language seems
somewhat circular: poetic language involves the process
of a new thought struggling to establish itself by "bending
the resources of constituted language to some fresh usage"
(PP 396). But this fresh usage in turn gives expressions
that will become part of constituted language: "it is
because it has been used in various contexts that the word
gradually accumulates a significance" (388). In this
circle, distinctions between subject and object, thought
and expression and fresh and used fall away, as they did
in the examination of perception, so that this examination
might return "to just that primordial experience from which
these notions are derived and in which they are inseparable"

Merleau-Ponty calls this poetic or pre-prosaic level
of language "le langage parlant," as opposed to the everyday
level of language, which he calls "le Langage parle"
(PW 145). And, as Stevens fleshes out the pre-objective
level of perception, he also shows that it is the job of

poetry to self-consciously disclose this poetic level of
language. As Stevens remarks in "An Ordinary Evening in
New Haven," "the theory of poetry is the life of poetry"
(CP 486). "Notes" also strives to show that constituted
or prosaic language depends upon this deeper level of
language which, while itself ambiguous, also tends toward
relatively complete contexts. Disclosing the creation
of new sense from old is another way that Stevens catches
the emergence of sense and order in the world.

In the examination of linguistic meaning, readers of
"Notes" find yet another sense in which Stevens' use of
the verb to catch comes into play. As Merleau-Ponty puts
it, the poem "catches" like a fire. As he says, the poem
relies upon, and then "melts" ordinary language: "I start
to read idly...and suddenly, a few words move me, the fire
catches, my thoughts are ablaze, there is no word I can
overlook....I am giving and receiving in the same gesture"
(PW 11). Merleau-Ponty continues: "The author has come
to dwell in my world. Then, imperceptibly, he varies the
ordinary meaning of the signs, and like a whirlwind they
sweep me along toward the other meaning with which I am
going to connect" (12). Stevens' "Notes" catches this
catching, this whirlwind of language, as it caught the
arising of perception. Images of golden things, turning
things, maculate things and flying things, for example,
recur throughout the poem, and yet each time one of these
images appears, its nuances of difference from seemingly

similar images gives it an increased conceptual thickness.

Poetry draws attention to the way that it challenges ordinary language. It makes use of standard significations, not to reinforce them, but to refigure them. As we saw with Cezanne, "the painter rearranges the prosaic world and, so to speak, makes a holocaust of objects" (PW 63). Merleau-Ponty shows that the painter undoes our geometrical conceptions of the world, "just as poetry melts ordinary language" (ibid.). In poetry, the order that poetry reveales is not a propositional order. In ordinary terms, in fact, the poem is disorder, or a disordering of our everyday use of language. But, just as for Stevens "a violent disorder is an order" (CP 215), for Merleau-Ponty, "poetic disorder is always another order. It is a new system of equivalences which demands this upheaval and not just any one, and it is in the name of a truer relation among things that their ordinary ties are broken" (PW 64). When we reason about poetry with a reasoning that is itself no longer poetic, it seems as though metaphor has transformed things by breaking their ordinary ties.

What does poetic language have to be like in order that it might capture prereflective perceptual experience and re-gestalt constituted language in the above mentioned ways? "It must be abstract": there is an inaccessible and referential character to experience and to "speaking" language. That words and experiences may be abstracted from any single context against a background that withdraws

is the condition of their life. "It must change": not
objects and significations themselves, but the contexts
in which they appear must remain ambiguous enough that
they may change; if contexts and percepts were absolutely
fixed, one could have no experiences at all. "It must
give pleasure": one might assume that mere aesthetic
pleasure results when one's judgments about objects and
the meanings of one's words are confirmed. But this is
not the type of poetically genuine pleasure that comes
from the experience of encountering prereflective perception
and finding a new, "truer" relation among things after
poetry has melted ordinary language.

One point remains. It may have become evident that
the phenomenological account of meaning in perception and
language shares much with post-phenomenological,
specifically, deconstructive accounts of meaning. Both
philosophies point up the unrepresentability of a background
(differance) that gives sense while hiding, both show the
necessary ambiguity of meaning, the decisive undecidability
that enables meaning, and the fact that the success of
meaningful experience is always already predicated upon
its liability to failure. But Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology
differs decisively in two ways from deconstruction. And
it is these differences that will prove pivotal in the
further examination of "Notes" and the question of semantic
teleology.

The first of these two differences, hinted at earlier,

is not as important as the second. Phenomenology takes
its scrutiny beyond the point at which structural
distinctions like those of mind and world, truth and
fiction, and thought and expression dissolve. Merleau-Ponty
does not so much insist on the aporia that de-positions
distinctions of subject and object, for example, as he
investigates the experience of what it is like to be both,
and neither, subject and object.

The second of the two differences between deconstruction
and phenomenology concerns the point of teleology. When
Merleau-Ponty gives his account of meaning and the
background, he tends to speak of a referential structure.
When Derrida talks about this background, however, he
prefers to mention it as a differential structure. This
is not a mere difference in choice of words. For
Merleau-Ponty there is a point at which referentiality
stops and a close approximation to definitive meaning
arises. Neither the intentionality of the subject nor
an objective state of affairs in the world limits meaning,
but language just tends toward elliptical, temporary and
tentative contexts that disclose and vouchsafe
significations. As Merleau-Ponty states, "what gives its
meaning to each word is the sentence" (PP 388). And the
objects in the perceptual field just tend to "motivate"
themselves into the approximation of a meaningful gestalt.
Since perception and the body are given, primary phenomena
for Merleau-Ponty, that is since reason and judgment arise

from embodied perception, the play of meaning is, in the
last analysis, stabilized by the body.

One might argue that insofar as their methodologies
and domains differ so much, any comparison between
phenomenology and deconstruction remains unwarranted.
But, since both take up the question of the indeterminacy
of meaning and of a true or spurious teleology that limits
meaning, both must answer the charges of the other.
According to Merleau-Ponty, "it is easy to strip language
and action of all meaning and to make them seem
absurd....But that other miracle, the fact that in an absurd
world language and behavior do have meaning for those who
speak and act, remains to be understood" (SN xvi). What
Merleau-Ponty says of politics applies equally to what
he thinks about our capacity to take over and make sense
of spontaneity and indeterminacy: We find ourselves "thrown
with other men into a drama which will not necessarily
end well but which at all events is moving toward some
end" (SN xix). The poem does obey a teleo-logic; perception
and language still move toward some end. Just because
meanings are never founded on metaphysical ground, there
is no reason to assume that no interpretations hold sway
over us.

So, while Merleau-Ponty would upbraid anyone who asked
what the "Supreme Fiction" is or means, he would also
discourage findings that reveal "Notes" to be merely a
commentary on the undecidable moment of meaning and the

endless refiguration of the metaphorical-literal relation. Merleau-Ponty, presumably, would ask about the function of the supreme fiction and how it is experienced. And it seems that this fiction works much like intentionality works, although there is no intending subject behind it. Perceptual and linguistic experience, notes, move toward fulfillment of a telos or final, supreme fiction, though in order for them to work they must remain forever prevented from attaining it. This does not prevent limited contexts from emerging, however. This fiction, this telos, is supreme in the sense that it is the condition of the possibility of all poetic and fictive styles of rediscovery of the world.

II: The "Fluent Mundo"

>"There is a project for the sun. The sun
>Must bear no name, gold flourisher, but be
>In the difficulty of what it is to be"
>   (CP 380).

All perception and all language can be called inherently figurative in the sense that perceptual experiences, concepts and words carry no intrinsic meaning, but find what sense they have by pointing beyond themselves. Deconstructive as well as Existential-phenomenological philosophies, although their differences remain significant, concur on the issue of the referentiality of meaning. Critics of Stevens' "Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction," like Patricia Parker, Joseph Riddel and Joseph Kronick, remain attuned to this referential understanding of meaning (WSJ). These critics find that "the difficulty of what it is to be" equals the difficulty of striving, always in vain, for self-present identity: for full clarity of independent objects in perception, for unequivocal meaning in language, and for non-referential, a-temporal selfhood in consciousness.

"Notes," seeks no such saturated identity. Critics who think of Stevens as a poet in search of "reality" or the "self" fail to notice that he quite noticeably never finds either. Stevens presupposes no essences, and in this critical stance he adumbrates the postmodern emphasis

on plurality and play. But despite his celebration of
referentiality -- his exploration of the being of ambiguity
and of the ambiguity of being -- Stevens maintains what
could be called a sense of seriousness. "Notes"
self-consciously strives to reach a singular "myth before
the myth began,/ Venerable and articulate and complete"
(383).

The poem moves toward a singular, "supreme fiction,"
despite the poet's understanding that this quest must fail.
Any fiction, understood as narrative, myth, or context,
if it tends to reveal all experience in just one singular
or supreme way, cannot articulate all the variegated styles
that it would subsume, and dissolves into a variety of
notes. But Stevens still finds in language a tendency
toward gathering and articulation that he will not ignore.
This tension between unity and separation leads the poet
to note that "[W]e move between these points:/ From that
ever-early candor to its late plural" (380). This
"movement" remarks the circular interdependence of
figuration (characterized by plurality and play) and
propriety (characterized by singularity and seriousness)
in forming modes of revealing that give meaning to
experience and language.

In the poem, as in our everyday comportment, we
perceivers and agents tend to encounter words, things and
others as intelligible and identifiable, while at other
times we find our previous understandings of things and

others to be in a state of transformation. So it seems
proper to ask what conditions Stevens puts on the
determinacy of meaning, or better, whether Stevens thinks
identity or difference conditions intelligibility. In
short, it makes sense to ask: does the poem prioritize
"uncertain light" or "certain truth" (380)?

The poem prioritizes neither, though, choosing instead
to inspect the miraculous and mysterious process that makes
temporarily abiding sense from non-sense, that tends toward
identity as it admits its indebtedness to difference and
that gives stable meanings to phenomena that appear in
a world that is "equal in living changingness to the light"
(380). "Notes" functions primarily as a meditation on
the way that sense, identity and meaning "happen," while
this poetic meditation also makes its readers cognizant
of the role of poetry in unveiling the meaning-giving
process. The poem not only forges new relations, but
comments on this relating, saying that "life's nonsense
pierces us with strange relation" (383).

Heidegger's word for the process whereby meaning arises
is _Ereignis_. Stated briefly, this process is the tendency
of experiences, practices, styles, words and myths to gather
together into relatively stable modes of revealing. This
"gentle law" behind language and perception leaves an
element of indeterminacy to language, events and percepts,
while it gives them depth, texture and clarity. _Ereignis_
is variously translated as "event," "happening,"

"Appropriation" and "en-owning." But this last term seems
the most useful translation, because en-owning bespeaks
the process by which an experience "comes into its own"
when revealed in a way suited to it. This process of
Ereignis drives language and gives identities of every
sort.

When something comes into its own, however, it does
not finally reach what could be called a natural kind or
true essence; it merely resonates most deeply within the
style that reveals it. "Notes" subtly reveals new
connections between things while showing that these new
connections tend to deepen themselves:

> "The lion roars at the enraging desert,
> Reddens the sand with his red-colored noise
> Defies red emptiness to evolve his match
>
> Master by foot and jaws and by the mane,
> Most supple challenger. The elephant
> Breaches the darkness of Ceylon with blares,
>
> The glitter-goes on surfaces of tanks,
> Shattering velvetest far-away. The bear,
> The ponderous cinnamon, snarls in his mountain
>
> At summer thunder and sleeps through winter snow"
> (384).

Here, Stevens implies that lion and desert, elephant
and darkness, bear and weather remain apart from each other
until a primitive form of speaking occurs. It makes no
sense to speak of the desert, of nighttime and of the
seasons, or to see these under any aspect at all, until
they receive characterization in relation to speech. Of
course, the lion, elephant and bear are not speaking, but
nevertheless it seems that they do offer a kind of primal

poem: through the lion's reddening roar, the elephant's breaching blare and the bear's snarl, the lion comes into its own as defiant, the desert comes into its own as "red" and "enraging," a sense of near and far emerges, and the seasons take on richer meaning in relation to the cinnamon snarl.

Examples of Stevens' implied understanding that new images tend to mutually inform each other and give sense abound in "Notes." The poem also tells readers about the moment,

> "When the sun comes rising, when the sea
> Clears deeply, when the moon hangs on the wall
> of heaven haven. These are not things transformed."
> (399).

When Stevens tells readers that "the sun comes rising,...the sea clears deeply,...the moon hangs on the wall of heaven-haven" and that the lion, elephant and bear color their surroundings, he implies that sun, sea, moon, desert, darkness and weather have no pure own-ness, or proper essence outside of language, and yet at the same time he implies that they tend to give sense to each other and to come into their own more than they tend to transform their sense for transformation's sake. That is, since Stevens' language in the above cases remains notably figurative and referential, and tends to call for the "freshness of transformation" (397) of previous understandings, readers cannot possibly think of a roar, for example, as somehow essentially red. But Stevens also reminds us that "these are not things transformed." These

images do not change gratuitously, but in accordance with the process by which they come to resonate with each other in new ways.

In encountering these images, we leave our familiar "signifying soil" (PW 87), but this movement does not leave us alienated. Rather, as Stevens introduces us to what Merleau-Ponty calls a "new style of thinking" (S 91), this style dawns upon readers and fills meaning into the above objects. Stevens sweeps readers toward "the other meaning with which they are going to connect" (PW 12) and lets readers perceive things acquiring new depth. This new depth gives "a truer relation among things" (64). When language lets us perceive previously unthought connections between things, this inspires wonder. But more relevant to Stevens' and Merleau-Ponty's purposes of revealing sense-making, is that we sense a new and self-perpetuating resonance among things once new connections announce themselves. Merleau-Ponty would read Stevens' challenging images, like he reads all exemplary expressions in general, as a "recentering," and not a de-centering, of "the expressive apparatus" (S 91).

And Heidegger's account of Ereignis meshes with Merleau-Ponty's. As Heidegger says, "what determines... beings in their own, that is, in their belonging together, we shall call Ereignis" (TB 19). This "belonging together" of course changes over time. According to one Heidegger critic, Ereignis depends upon difference and

referentiality: "[Ereignis] allows for the revealing of things in such a way that it is understood that they show up differently, under different aspects, in various modes of revealing" (HR 287). But this process also gives identity: "Ereignis is the tendency of revealing to reveal particular things in the mode best suited to the kind of thing they are" (ibid.). Although logically these two understandings seem like antinomies, ultimately they do not conflict with, but complement each other.

"Notes" brings this en-owning process into its own and reveals the complex process of revealing. One method by which Stevens brings en-owning into its own is through his use of catachresis. When the poet speaks about the "uncertain light of single, certain truth," about "a moment in the central of our being" and about "the vivid transparence" (prologue), he speaks of certainty, of a center and of visibility in the terms of changing perspective, of fleeting moments, and of invisibility, respectively. This sense of the interdependence of the visible and the invisible will resonate later with the poet's discussion of "unseeing":

> "It must be visible or invisible,
> Invisible or visible or both:
> A seeing and unseeing in the eye" (385).

There is always something left invisible in every event of en-owning. For anything to emerge into visibility, not only must the openness in which it emerges remain invisible, but it must be understood that different aspects

under which it has been and may be revealed suggest
themselves. "Unseeing" is this tendency to see beyond
the presently revealed properties of objects and to see
past the "casual" (397), i.e. accepted relations that obtain
between them to their potential for transformation.

An "unseeing in the eye" is a logically inconsistent
image. Literally, catachresis means "false form (or
usage)." But Stevens' false forms have a purpose; they
get at the way things relate to, and deepen their meanings
in reference to, other things. Stevens' catachretic style
suggests that "Notes" taken as a whole mirrors the lines
within it that address "false flick, false form, but
falseness close to kin" (385). Stevens' "falseness" allows
a kinship to emerge and hold sway over new images.

Both Stevens' and Heidegger's styles violate the law
of non-contradiction. But ultimately this is irrelevant
because they share an impulse to show the pre-logical force
that deepens meaning and lets things become increasingly
determinate. As Richard McClearly remarks, Merleau-Ponty,
too, stresses that things appear in "relatively but never
fully constituted horizons, linked together in a
pre-objective order of their own by a constituting [non-
representational] consciousness" (S 13). Experiences become
meaningful, they come into their own, not despite, but
owing to their ability to appear differently under different
aspects, to resonate with other experiences over time and
to shine most vividly when they can appear in manifold,

"invisible" (non-thematized) styles of comportment.

Clearly, Stevens' process of "bright-dark... chiaroscuro" based en-lightening, like Heidegger's process of variety-based en-owning, and Merleau-Ponty's process of pre-objective ordering are fundamental as well as complex examinations of the complicated process of making sense from non-sense.

One might object that Stevens is not the only poet who uses novel metaphorical images and interesting instances of catachresis. And this is right. However, Stevens does not use tropes to re-figure and re-imagine things, but to examine the process by which things may be imagined at all. Stevens scrutinizes traditional, metaphysical notions of the self and language, and the fact that he problematizes the traditional notion of an in-itself "reality," along with the notion of the subject-object relation, and the roles of metaphor and context, while he questions the invisible source of the visible, brings Stevens to the deep level of investigation on which Heidegger's examination of _Ereignis_ moves. Of course other poets before and since Stevens have examined all of the above issues, but later Stevens seems almost singular in his obsession with the uncertain light that enables perception and the metaphorical nature of everyday statements.

Merleau-Ponty's and Heidegger's accounts resonate with each other and apply to Stevens' phenomenological poetics

on a deep level. For Heidegger, human being, "the being
whose being is an issue for it," and whose way of being
is "there," in the world of its commitments, stands out
or "ek-sists" within an open field of possibilities that
it finds primordially given with its background. One finds
oneself always already beholden to and beheld by the world.
This world is for the most part familiar, that is, one
dwells in it: one never finds things equally near and
equally far within one's everyday, committed involvement,
but things matter to, even condition, one. Equiprimordial
with this mattering, or with the general mood that colors
certain commitments as important and others as trivial,
is understanding, or the ability to reflect on what is
always already pre-given.

Ereignis means the process by which practices tend
to gather themselves into "regions" of intelligibility
or modes of disclosing things as meaning-ful. And these
regions hold sway over the human way of being while human
beings hold on to them. Ereignis, as the gathering tendency
behind language, lets human beings speak after it: "we
listen...to hear the inner sense of our words in the way
they articulate the practices in which we are engaged"
(HR 288). This is how "Ereignis grants to mortals their
abode within their nature, so that they may be capable
of being those who speak" (WL 128).

"Being-in-the-world," in Heidegger as in Merleau-Ponty,
is prereflective, that is, it precedes subjective

consciousness. For Heidegger, one presses into
possibilities given to one by the public, tacit
understanding of what it means to be human. What one does,
one does for-the-sake-of enacting oneself as a particular
instance of this or that type of human being. People with
the predisposition to be students, for example, use pens,
books, word processors and theses, among other things,
for the sake of being a student. Thus, the context of
studious practices gathers together with other practices
(driving to buy pens, biking to class, and eating cheap
food quickly, for example) to reveal equipment, practices
and people in the way most appropriate to this student
style. This for-the-sake-of, which reveals things in the
most resonant way, is Ereignis.

Of course, not everything appears in its own-most if
everything resonates within just one style. Students also
use pens to belatedly balance checkbooks, they use bikes
in the park and they eat well-prepared family meals. And
they have different styles in which they encounter (reveal)
equipment, events and others under different aspects.
Ereignis depends upon the existence of a plurality of styles
in order to deepen meaning across styles.

An obsessive person, on the individual level, and
Western metaphysics, on the cultural level, afford examples
of the way that Ereignis gets stifled. Most people
encounter others differently under different aspects: the
other can be revealed as friend, authority figure,

competitor, co-worker and many other ways at other times. But for someone with an inferiority complex, for example, never is the other encountered as anything but inferior or superior. In the case of the obsessive, the singularity of en-owning causes it to disappear: the depth of interpersonal relations is leveled-over, and the world appears in a monochrome, "single, certain light" that never changes.

Similarly, our entire culture loses sight of en-owning when it takes up with things solely as technological resources: friends become "networking" resources, we encounter houses as units for shelter, food shows up as instant nourishment and, as Heidegger says, "the earth becomes a huge filling-station" (QCT 16). The above cases seek to show that Ereignis, to be brought into its own, requires that identity and difference play off of and mutually enable each other.

"Notes" looks at the process of revealing anything as determinate and problematizes the issue of the meaning of sounds, words, metaphors, contexts, the poem itself, perception, selves and language. The poem draws readers' attention to these issues and asks what degree of determinacy is required to give them sense.

And the poem comments on its own ability to provide modes of revealing that place new sets of phonemes into meaningful relations:

> "We say: At night an Arabian in my room,
> With his damned hoobla-hoobla-hoobla-how

Inscribes a primitive astronomy

Across the unscrawled fores the future casts
And throws his stars around the floor. By day
The wood-dove used to chant his hoobla-hoo

And still the grossest iridescence of ocean
Howls hoo and rises and howls hoo and falls.
Life's nonsense pierces us with strange relation"
                                        (CP 383).

In this passage, the "hooblas," "hoos" and "hows" come
to take on a meaning in relation not only to each other,
but in relation to other "h" sounds like "howl" and to
the cycles of day and night, speaking and chanting, rising
and falling and past ("used to"), present ("inscribes")
and future. These sounds do not have a literal meaning,
and in fact they have no figurative meaning either. They
cannot even be called onomotopoetic since they refer to
a plurality of events. Nevertheless, these sounds resonate
with each other and even bind each canto's different style
to the others'. The poem notes both the plurality of
aspects under which these sounds appear and their tendency
toward increasing resonance over time. Most importantly,
the poem itself comments upon its own obsession with the
ambiguity necessary for identity. The poem reveals its
subject-matter, and tells what it has just been showing,
saying that "life's nonsense pierces us with strange
relation."

Stevens, like Merleau-Ponty, finds in language the
two characteristics that Heidegger attributes to the
meaning-giving process of Ereignis: the tendency of words
and things to appear under different aspects and the

tendency of words and things to appear in such a way that they resonate with each other.

Language and perception ultimately refer to themselves, rather than to a final, ontologically prior reality or to an ineffable experience. Therefore, no meaning is ever "proper" to -- or positioned in the proximity of -- an essence outside of figuration. As Stevens reminds his readers in allusion to Shelley, "the west wind" makes its music out of "iris frettings on the blank" (397). Nature, for Stevens, offers no primal words in which it might be described. Rather, all perception is a palimpsestic inscription laid over previous interpretations of this elemental "blank." The natural world offers no experience that does not show up in terms of other experiences. And language gives no signifier that is "anchored" in a signified or grounded in an extra-linguistic "reality."

But if all meaningful action and speech are irreducibly figurative, whence do speakers and agents draw the inferred opposite: "proper," or literal, meaning? A deconstructive critic would suggest, as Patricia Parker does (WSJ 84), that the idea of the literal serves the implied indexical function or the "fiction" of pointing to a time preceding figuration, when words and things co-appeared openly, in "that ever-early candor" (CP 382), that is, with no residue of uncertainty. As Stevens says, "The poem, through candor, brings back a power again/ That gives a candid kind to everything" (ibid.). But this "power" serves an

interpretive function, it is not a natural kind.

In Western languages, languages that strive for clarity, non-contradiction and closure, the syntactic structure of the sentence, a subject with its predicate, mirrors the metaphysical understanding of reality as comprised of substances with their properties. And this metaphysically-oriented understanding of language furthers itself by giving evidence of an essence, origin and singular referent that remains outside the world of changing existents. The idea of this essence "satisfies/ Belief in an immaculate beginning// And sends us.../ To an immaculate end" (CP 383). But at the same time, if there were such a source and there were access to this source, language and history would stop. Western language requires the illusion of a center, which, if realized, would destroy language. The role of the proper, on the deconstructive account, is to act as a pseudo-ground, seeming to limit the play of significations that generates language.

A deconstructive investigation into the figurative/ proper distinction reveals that the proper sense is always derivative of the figurative sense. As Derrida points out, Western thought must appreciate "the metaphorical nature of concepts, and most notably of the concept which seems to support literal, proper meaning" (MP 214). The proper makes sense only as a metaphor, and figuration is all-pervasive.

Merleau-Ponty and Derrida draw different conclusions

from the fact that language and experience are inherently figurative. Traditionally, metaphor appears as either a decoration laid on top of a statement or as an heuristic through the use of which readers and speakers attain access to reality. The notion of metaphor as an access route to reality also presupposes a necessarily extra-linguistic essence that one might, despite its ineffability, talk about in other words. For Derrida, as the signifier necessarily floats away from any one signified, so the vehicle always outstrips the tenor. The metaphor, far from finding the truth behind the tenor, transforms the tenor itself, bringing it back into endlessly differential play with each new instance of metaphorization.

For Merleau-Ponty, metaphor brings its components into their own, not in the sense of showing what they really are, but by giving them a new meaning in a new context:

> "meaning [in a literary work] is given, in the first instance, not so much by [the work's] ideas as by a systematic and unexpected variation of the modes of language, of narrative, or of existing literary forms. This accent, this particular modulation of speech -- if the expression is successful -- is assimilated little by little by the reader..." (UT 6).

Metaphor, as "variation," neither decorates an idea nor finds reality. But neither does metaphor re-figure meaning arbitrarily and gratuitously. Metaphor makes things meaningful by revealing them in a way that is most resonant with the poem's new context and the style that the reader is assimilating.

Stevens does not talk <u>about</u> metaphor so much as he

uses metaphors, along with other tropes and syntactical and rhetorical machinery, in order to meditate on the way that meaning in language and experience works. Ultimately, Stevens' questioning of language in metaphor, image rhyme, sound juxtaposition and often confusing syntax leads him to a reading of language and perception that attempts to question anew the phenomenon of meaning.

Though "Notes" addresses the role of indeterminacy in the generation of meaning, one can also say that the poem reads as a study of what is required for the impression of a determinate meaning to emerge. Riddel is only partially correct, then, when he says that "the problematic of 'Notes' rests on [Stevens' as well as criticism's] incapacity to decode or resolve the epistemological relativism of subject and object" (WSJ 67). This "incapacity" results from Stevens' ontological inquiry into the source of notions such as subject and object. In response to Riddel, an alternative, "enworlded," phenomenological reading suggests that the problematic of "Notes" actually rests on the capacity that contexts have, including the contexts that give subjects and objects, to give sense and yet at the same time to maintain their flexibility. "Notes" becomes the field in which the poet plays out the strife between the "ever-early candor" and "its late plural," between context construction and context deconstruction.

Considering these readings of language and experience,

one might respond, firstly, that contexts can and do exist,
and that they limit meaning, if not decisively then at
least efficiently enough to significantly reduce the number
of possible readings of linguistic and sensory experience.
Secondly, one might say that Stevens certainly entertains
no such radical view of the metaphoricity of everything.

Critics that espouse the idea of ground-level
figurality, however, also challenge the notion of the
stability of contexts. And Stevens' response to the
traditional notion and function of the context is even
more problematic than is his stance toward figuration.
If the poet of "Notes" remains unhappy with meaning as
fundamentally figural, it is equally unlikely that he treats
the trope simply as a source of knowledge about the mind
and the world. When mind and world, conceived as two
independent entities, do appear in "Notes," their appearance
is haunted by the many different perspectives that the
poem takes upon them.

Merleau-Ponty surrenders the Western notion of subjects
and objects as well as showing the referentiality of
experience. This is why Merleau-Ponty, like Derrida, is
not nostalgic for a golden age of full presence. And
Merleau-Ponty and Derrida seem to share a common notion
of meaning: Merleau-Ponty's background seems to exhibit
the same structural features as Derrida's <u>differance</u>.
But there is a difference. <u>Differance</u> structures itself
as graphematic, or operates through the differential play

of signification that gives the illusion of identity, and
therefore this background is writing-like, i.e. structured
by its ability to function in the non-presence of any one,
limiting intention. Since, according to Derrida, they
constantly point beyond their present, signification and
experience can never acquire depth.

For deconstruction, the natural world offers no
experience that does not show up and transform itself in
terms of other experiences. Attunement to this
transformation restores a sense of wonder to the world-text.
For Merleau-Ponty, however, the natural world offers no
experience that does not show up and tend to deepen itself
in terms of other experiences. This deepening gives density
and dimensionality to the world-text. Stevens takes no
metaphysical concepts for granted, and he too moves between
the poles of Romanticism and postmodernism, investigating
the status of both analogy and anomaly.

"Notes" traces the character of the resonant deepening
of contexts and the character of the transformation of
contexts. Stevens implicitly targets for his investigation
the question of the singularity of the context: He wonders
how singular a context need be in order to give seriousness.
Stevens never lets one context dominate the poem, or become
overbearing, but neither is he light-hearted or playful.
He treats both deepening and changability in their own
rights, and at no point does he suggest an Aufhebung to
resolve this strife between plurality and singularity.

Stevens' "Notes" focuses on the "amassing harmony" (403) that deepens contexts and gives increasing amounts of resonance to words and images. Words, images and tropes articulate the poetic context in which they appear. Stevens' interest in language's tendency to gather and articulate itself into a deepening context in which words, in turn, gather meaning is reflected in his examination of the poem's tendency toward epiphany. This epiphany-directed gathering process is similar to Heidegger's conception of the "law" of language:

> "If we understand 'law' as the gathering that lays down that which causes all beings to be present in their own, in what is appropriate for them, then Ereignis is the plainest and most gentle of all laws"(WL 128).

Heidegger's elaboration of the law that deepens contexts and in so doing assigns words, things and speakers to their own most resonant way of being seems much like Stevens' experiments with epiphanies and his attempts to find the right words for reality. But it would be wrong to say that the poem strives for the complete clarity and closure that an epiphany claims for the context in which it appears. Rather, "Notes" breaks off its several quests for epiphanies as the increasing resonance within contexts threatens the plurality necessary for meaningful experience. In "Ordinary Evening in New Haven," the poem does find the right words for reality, and these words are "and yet, and yet..." (CP 465). Implied in the notion of en-owning is the need for a plurality of contexts and different styles of

revealing. Just as Stevens shifts the tone of the poem when it gets too close to an epiphany, Heidegger remains very careful to "distinguish Ereignis from frantic, neurotic attempts at metaphysical closure" (HR 289).

What is called en-owning or "Appropriation" (Ereignis) is not an occurrent entity, but the primordial process that gives ("Es gibt") time and Being. But en-owning is not simply the tendency of practices to gather together into meaningful modes of revealing, or the tendency of contexts to arise and to deepen themselves, although this constitutes its positive function. Implied in every event of appropriation is a simultaneous expropriation that indicates a structurally necessary, playful plurality that prevents one context from appropriating all others. Without this dis-owning, one would never experience the fundamental phenomena of Ereignis at all.

Owing to the complexity of Stevens' not uncritical stance on the questions of subject and object, and mind and world, Parker seems unjustified in saying that "the apocalyptic impulse...has its counterparts in the ongoing attempts to purge language of its error and deviance, to regain a purity if not of transcendent truth then of the object or objective world, a project shared by Stevens himself" (WSJ 79). Since Stevens meditates on the issue of contexts, including contexts that give the appearance of transcendent subjects in an objective world, and since "Notes" remains aware of the metaphorical nature of the

concepts of self and other, Stevens cannot simply be accused
of sharing in the Western projects of moving toward
objectivity and of language-cleansing.

Since _Ereignis_ or "that-which-[gives]-regions,"
(DT 66) is a primordial given, as is the body for
Merleau-Ponty, there is no sense in even speaking about
a "one" here, as though to say one private, personal self,
except insofar as anyone belongs firstly within the public
world. For Merleau-Ponty, too, one has no right to
presuppose the primacy of private life. One is, before
all subjective reflection, being-in-the-world. One just
takes over and embodies variations on a publicly available,
prereflective style, in terms of which certain commitments
make sense and others do not. When problems occur, or
the lived world becomes obtrusive, the embodied perceiver
reflects and becomes this particular self. Identity emerges
only at this breakdown stage.

For Merleau-Ponty we are not creatures with constantly
shifting identities who only belatedly make sense of our
lives, as we are for Derrida, but neither are we
self-present, full identities. Rather, our bodies are
committed to a style that tends to get a grip on
possibilities, to make them its own by bringing them to
resonate with this style.

This discussion of _Ereignis_ does not mean to limit
this phenomenon to the realm of the individual. The Western
style of being, for example, currently tends toward a

repressive resonance in terms of which anything and anyone
is meaningful only insofar as it or they can be considered
a resource for ever more efficient productivity. And,
in literary analysis, the poem tends toward a unified voice
or context in which its constituent elements may show up
in the most resonant, although still highly polysemic way.

Merleau-Ponty and Heidegger both stress the primordial
role of the body and its commitments in giving meaning
to experience. For Merleau-Ponty and Heidegger meaning
arises within what Heidegger calls "modes of disclosing,"
and "regions," and within what Merleau-Ponty calls "styles"
and contexts. Experiences are not allocated to regions
by intentional consciousness, since this kind of
consciousness presupposes "regioning." For Merleau-Ponty,
while language and experience refer beyond their own
presence, it is finally the lived body -- as a manifestation
of its thrown-ness against a historically given background,
in conjunction with its lived commitment to the future
in a projective running-ahead-of-itself -- that collects
sub-styles of comportment into larger styles and gives
depth to experience and language. Where Derrida's
background is endlessly differential and graphematic,
Merleau-Ponty's is ultimately referential, gestural and
somatic. This stance renders Merleau-Ponty neither
nostalgic nor postmodern.

For Merleau-Ponty, one gets a "maximal grip" (PP 374)
on an experience because one's embodied, background style

situates it in a context of similar experience. This process happens before, and enables, reflective, subjective consciousness. The body and practical use just tend to disclose experience in the most meaningful way. And, to qualify this concept of en-owning or experiential "gripping," Merleau-Ponty and Heidegger also respect that ambiguity and referentiality are structurally necessary to en-owning. Contrasting modes of revealing, and other styles of comporting oneself, must offer themselves to experience if experience is to make sense.

Stevens shows en-owning particularly well because, besides simply problematizing the issue of epiphany-directed contexts, he also keeps readers mindful that the process of en-owning owes its life to plurality. Stevens shows this point by juxtaposing, mixing and dis-owning contexts: every possible apocalypse to an extent becomes a eucalypse, every revealing, deepening and enclosing, depends upon a concomitant concealing, play and opening.

One example of this movement between the points of context-qua-deepening and context understood as based upon transformation strikes readers in canto seven of the "It Must Be Abstract" section of Notes:

> "It feels good as it is without the giant,
> A thinker of the first idea. Perhaps
> The truth depends upon a walk around a lake,
>
> A composing as the body tires, a stop
> To see hepatica, a stop to watch
> A definition growing certain and
>
> A wait within that certainty, a rest
> In the swags of pine-trees bordering the lake.

> Perhaps there are times of inherent excellence,
>
> As when the cock crows on the left and all
> Is well, incalculable balances,
> At which a kind of Swiss perfection comes
>
> And a familiar music of the machine
> Sets up its Schwarmerei,...
>
> (CP 386).

In this passage, readers become aware that we are no longer in the realm of "the giant." We take a rest from the sober assembly of our serious "structures" (ibid.), and step outside the monolithic edifices that our quest to delimit the pluralistic "first idea" leads us to build. No longer concerned with the pursuit of one final "Truth," the truth now depends on, or is derivative of, the changing perspectives one gets from walking around a lake, an earthly symbol of temporary repose, not an "Ozymandian" repose set in stone for eternity.

As we watch the hepatica grow, we sense that it is natural to see definition growing certain, but we also sense that it is the process of growing certain, not certainty itself, that the canto emphasizes. A sense of this passage deepens and grows clearer, just as the hepatica blooms, effortlessly. We rest, in a limited certainty, in a growing-certain, in the process of gathering and clearing that takes place within in a setting colored by the plurality of of other flora, the pine-trees. Even as we begin to consider the dangerously singular or metaphysical idea that there are times of inherent excellence, we still take our bearings from the natural

world and from our senses: we see the trees, we hear the
cock crowing and we locate ourselves within this space.
(Oliver Sacks suggests that we call our sense of locating
ourselves, our "sixth sense," "proprio[-] ception.") The
scene is still rich in variety, and its gathering into
a coherent context does not yet diminish this richness.

But, by the time we experience the expression,
"incalculable balances," a rift enters thinking.
"Incalculable" could refer to the priceless beauty of the
surrounding natural scene, but the verb "to calculate,"
suggests instrumental thinking and calculation applied
to nature. This menacing sense of calculation indeed
resonates with the terms "Swiss perfection" "music of the
machine" and "Schwarmerei," and bespeaks a certainty grown
too certain. As elsewhere in Stevens "a quick answer
modifies a question" (CP 470), so the word "machine"
occasions an analepsis that casts backwards a new, in this
case negative, connotation to the word "familiar." The
sense of familiarity, at first a familiarity given by a
scene that is at once wondrous in its complexity and
meaningful in its resonance, now seems to indicate tedium:
the all-too-familiar plot in which "...a man and a woman
meet and love forthwith" (CP 386).

So, a retreat from metaphysical notions of truth and
certainty gives a sense of the diverse things of nature,
only loosely connected by the body's "walking" and
"composing." As the body waits, it watches, and gradually

a sense of subjectivity begins to emerge. However, it is not until the watcher reflects on "inherent [i.e. self-present] excellence" that this subjective consciousness separates from its surroundings. As the subjective autonomy of the viewer takes shape, balances become too mechanistic and the plurality of the environs is subsumed.

As the stop on the walk begins to level-over the plurality of perceptions that vie for the viewer's attention within the natural setting, the poem shifts this scene, with the phrase "Swiss perfection," into the ironic key that in Stevens so typically follows a setting grown too singular, a definition grown too certain. Irony and self-parody suggest plurality and difference by undermining the over-seriousness of one situation through an implied reference to another, competing, context which the parodied party has overlooked. And Stevens' hyper-resonant moments are often broken off by irony. For Stevens, irony is never a device for gratuitous play, but, through irony, Stevens examines the competition between tendencies toward identity and tendencies toward difference: every movement toward a statement about reality, every attempt at seriousness that becomes too controlling begs for a different context that will relativize, not undermine it.

Bevis too finds Stevens' irony to serve a deep purpose, and he takes a similar stance toward this passage, focusing on the oppressive regularity that arises once a definition has grown too certain. But Bevis takes from this reading

the conclusion that throughout this canto "nuances of tone
and modulations of key take over and create the real
subject: how the mind changes" (MW 257). What is missing
from this account is that "mind," at least in this canto,
is a derivative, not an originary phenomenon. Mind only
separates from "world" as the context of the viewer becomes
saturated. The issue of this canto is that meanings just
tend to fill words and experiences and suggest themselves
to the perceiver in every intelligible situation. It is
only within and against the milieu of an overly determinate
world that the mind of the Western subject arises.

The Western notion of the mind, considered as that
which reflects upon and re-presents its body and its
environment, is a wholly conventional notion that took
a long time in the making. The idea of mind, in fact,
presupposes centuries of metaphysical thinking. It is
not until "reality" can come to be considered as a whole,
from a distance, that the meaning-giving subject becomes
possible. When the metaphysical thinker names the sensory
world, this world, in all its complexity, appears as a
single, albeit complex, manifestation of one mode of Being.
That which lets beings appear cannot itself partake in
that which appears. So metaphysics, in keeping consistent
with itself, attributes to Being super-sensory, eternal
and fully present properties.

In the West, the history of the essence of intelligible
beings begins when everthing is considered a corrupted

reflection of the Platonic <u>Eidos</u>. Everything in being
is then taken as <u>Ergon</u>, Aristotle's notion of the created
work. Later, the being of "Man" and the being of the world
appear as God-made substance; then "Man" becomes the
interpreter of God's text. In the next epoch, ours, "Man"
attains the position of a meaning-giving subject over
against a world of objects. The "mental" activity of the
"mind" is the name for the process by which the subject
reflects upon its body and posits a world of objects.

The distinction between subject and object compells
Western Man to picture the world from outside and to order
it. In the process of world-ordering, "Man" only encounters
beings in reference to his projects. He thinks of time
only as various modes of the present and he takes as real
only the kind of presence that he can re-present in
pre-established terms of productivity.

In response to this mind/body, mind/world split, Michael
E. Zimmerman remarks that there is a way out. Zimmerman
finds that, according to both Heidegger and Mahayana
Buddhism, "humans can learn to 'let beings be' only by
gaining insight into the nothingness that pervades all
things. Such insight...spontaneously leads to the
overcoming of anthropocentrism and dualism" (CC 240).

Since the birth of metaphysical thought that considers
being exclusively in terms of presence, this "nothingness"
has withdrawn itself. But, it is of that which is no-thing
that Stevens, Merleau-Ponty and Heidegger make us aware.

These three reawaken the sense of mystery that surrounds

the appearance of words and things. The nothing is

Heidegger's "clearing" and Merleau-Ponty's background,

as well as Stevens' "the nothing that is" (CP 9). The

nothingness is the disclosive space or "region" within

which beings appear.

Zimmerman remarks further that this nothingness is

Meister Eckhart's "Divine," and "The Divine cannot be

regarded as a super entity existing somewhere else, but

instead constitutes the unconditioned openness or emptiness

in which all things appear" (CC 241). What co-appears

with every appearance, that which "traces" itself in

Derrida's language, is the phenomenon of a background that

escapes representation. So Bevis' Buddhist methodology

itself, along with the methodology that Heidegger and

Merleau-Ponty practice, require that readers not take the

issue of mind for granted in Stevens.

Another non-cognitive passage from Stevens confirms

the non-primordiality of mind. In section two, canto five,

the poem takes us to the island in "sky-wide water." Here,

we are told:

"...A few limes remained,

Where his house had fallen, three scraggy trees weighted
With garbled green. These were the planter's turquoise
And his orange blotches, these were his zero green,

A green baked greener in the greenest sun"
                                        (CP 393).

Although the poet mentions a viewing subject, the

planter is now long dead, and the poem gives a sense that

the growing greening of everything, the increasing
pervasiveness of green, from "garbled" to all-pervasive,
almost takes place without any human doing or seeing at
all. The subjectivity in this passage appears as an absence
only. In this passage, and throughout "An Ordinary Evening
in New Haven," we readers find ourselves involved in a
pattern: we are led to think that without the mediation
of a subjective interpretation, we will be able to return
to a view of the thing in itself, "without trope or
deviation" (CP 471). And this seems to be the case at
first. Later, however, we find that nothing, not even
the primal moment, appears without figuration, trope and
deviation.

Stevens brings us to the point of the supposed genesis
of figuration when he shows us Adam and Eve. Setting the
scene, the poem indicates that "in the earth itself they
found a green..." (383). This, we assume to be a moment
without precedent, a place where words exhaust the essence
of the things of which they speak. No sooner do we find
ourselves with the inhabitants of Eden, though, then we
are told they are "the inhabitants of a very varnished
green." (ibid.). Adam, even if he acts not as the founder
of subjectivity, anticipates the founder of subjectivity:
Descartes. There is no subjectivity prior to Adam, "the
father of Descartes," and yet everything Adam encounters
appears to him already interpreted, as it were, self-lessly,
or, better, prerefelectively: prior to the emergence of

a self.

On the desert isle, the symbol for seclusion, the only inhabitant mentioned is dead, and we see the island only from a narrative perspective. But, no sooner do we appreciate the unmediated character of the scene than the scene changes. Not just objects in the scene change, but the entire setting of the scene literally (in so far as that term applies) "takes on a whole new light."

But it would be wrong to take from this passage only the fact that even when we supposedly come across the unmediated thing, it continues to refigure itself. Rather, what is of note here is the fact that experience orders itself into ever-deepening contexts without any consideration of the subject. It is only when the subject tries to "impose" itself, to continually gather and to enforce already over-resonant contexts, that the flexibility of these contexts withdraws.

Stevens discloses Ereignis in giving instances where words, meanings, figures of speech and events show up in new modes that are proper to them. Yet he also shows growing contextual resonance that dissolves itself before becoming singular, and this keeps readers mindful that things must be able to appear as relativized, or under different aspects, to have meaning. The poem also portrays subjectivity emerging, dominating and then dissolving so that embodied, pre-subjectivity holds sway over meaning-formation. And the poem provides instances of futile

attempts to strip away all perceptual uncertainty and accidents to return to the substance of reality.

Before moving on to see the other ways in which Stevens discloses disclosing, we might take one more example of the way that Stevens addresses resonance, subjectivity and referentiality. The "Canon Aspirin section of "Notes" provides such an address:

> "When at long midnight the Canon came to sleep
> And normal things had yawned themselves away,
> The nothingness was a nakedness, a point,
>
> Beyond which fact could not progress as fact.
> Thereon the learning of the man conceived
> Once more night's pale illuminations, gold
>
> Beneath, far underneath, the surface of
> His eye and audible in the mountain of
> His ear, the very material of his mind.
>
> So that he was the ascending wings he saw
> And moved on them in orbits' outer stars
> Descending to the children's bed, on which
>
> They lay. Forth then with huge pathetic force
> Straight to the crown of night he flew.
> The nothingness was a nakedness, a point
>
> Beyond which thought could not progress as thought.
> He had to choose. But it was not a choice
> Between excluding things. It was not a choice
>
> Between but of. He chose to include the things
> That in each other are included, the whole,
> The complicate, the amassing harmony" (CP 403).

One of the first things that might come to mind reading this section is Heidegger's restatement of the fundamental question of metaphysics: "why is there something rather than nothing?" (IM 4). What this question implies is that there is no way to explain everything as though from without, because to do so involves an unavoidable

scale-problem. To explain everything in existence, one must always have recourse to something that already exists within the everything one seeks to explain. Metaphysics moves into the realm of nothingness that lies outside of everything that is, and, here "fact cannot progress as fact" and "thought cannot progress as thought." The irony of ironies is that once one has the view from nowhere, or in other words, once one has full clarity and presence to oneself, one has no terms in which to explain it.

The Canon Aspirin aspires toward full harmony, toward seeing everything from without: "the things/ That in each other are included" are all things. Every thing makes sense only in reference to everything else. From a point outside this co-inclusivity there exists no thing else to be included. From his standpoint, as the master of being, the Canon appreciates no sense of scale. He sees children and stars together, indiscernible from each other, and his mind conceives stars from above. From this point the complicated, difficult and variegated nature of things is leveled-over, named solely "the whole,/ The complicate."

But it appears that the Canon is successful in his project of reaching non-referential perception and complete identity. Or so it appears. In the next canto, we see this aspiration of the Canon's come crashing down on itself, and we realize that the dream of an all-amassing harmony threatens perception, selfhood and the notion of harmony, or resonance, itself:

"He imposes orders as he thinks of them,
As the fox and snake do....

...But to impose is not
To discover. To discover an order as of
A season, to discover summer and know it,

To discover winter and know it well, to find,
Not to impose, not to have reasoned at all,
Out of nothing to have come upon major weather,

It is possible, possible, possible. It must
Be possible. It must be that in time
The real will from its crude compoundings come,

Seeming at first a beast disgorged, unlike,
Warmed by a desperate milk. To find the real,
To be stripped of every fiction except one,

The fiction of an absolute -- Angel,
Be silent in your luminous cloud and hear
The luminous melody of proper sound" (CP 404).

The quest for pure subjectivity is a fool's self-defeating errand. But, to act as object and avoid one's commitment to the world is likewise impossible. By the point at which the poet suggests that to discover is "not to have reasoned at all" (ibid.), readers are clued in that the passive waiting for an apocalyptic revelation and the emergence of the real from its "crude compoundings" is likewise futile, as it relegates the watcher to the position of someone who only lives in the temporal dimension of the possible.

The Canon stands outside of the world and outside the harmony and perceives it all at once. He hears the joining of every being into one thing and this amounts to not hearing at all. He is not himself joined to this joining process. The perception of harmony depends upon one's being joined with it over time. As Merleau-Ponty notices

in a statement about language that could apply with equal
power to all forms of sensory perception, "It is far less
a table of statements which satisfy well-formed thoughts
than a swarm of gestures all occupied with differentiating
themselves from one another and blending again" (PW 115).
The Canon cannot perceive differentiation, but only
blending, since he perceives everything as belonging to
only one amassing harmony. The Canon's abs-traction
trivializes the complex and concrete process of joining
and sundering, reifying it as merely "the complicate,"
and picturing it from afar. The desire for "The fiction
of an absolute," if that fiction involves finding "the
real" as a whole and from outside, prompts the poet to
descend back into the mysterious, differentiated world
of the everyday and to witness proper sound as comprised
of various melodies that escape the confines of one single,
amassing harmony.

Whether it is the Canon Aspirin, the Angel, or the
reader who has moved to the position of the extraworldly,
is not important. In canto seven, the extra-worldly subject
"imposes orders as he thinks of them." Thinking and being
collapse into an identity for the pure, disembodied subject.
From this position, as canto eight tells its readers, one
is godlike in one's ability to "serenely gaze at the violent
abyss." But, from this position one appreciates no
otherness or mystery:

> "These external regions, what do we fill them with
> Except reflections, the escapades of death,

Cinderella fulfilling herself beneath the roof?"
(CP 405)

The angel, having descended and then been conflated
with the poet's imagination, now sees the world from a
position within it and speaks of a "we" that joins the
poet's voice to the voices of others. But, though located
within the world, the poet's being retains its angelic
detachment and the solipsistic poet sees the world not
in its own terms but as "reflections." The fact that life
is vapid for the detached subject is driven home by the
lonely, even onanistic image of "Cinderella fulfilling
herself."

At the point in which the subject comes to actuality
and finds no glory in dominating the world, this context
breaks off. Several lines later, a new context arises
in which the implied character becomes an object, alive
only in its awaiting the future. But, between the points
of subjectivity and objectivity, between the points of
actuality and potentiality, the poem does find the kind
of resonance that gives abiding relevance. As both
actuality and potential, subject and object, one "discovers
an order" and "knows it well." One is familiar in a world
where one neither imposes nor awaits reality, but allows
interpretations to emerge. Neither the fully subjective,
nor the fully objective contexts allow for the open-
endedness required for general sense-making, and each
dissolves.

In the dissolution of these contexts is revealed the

referentiality of experience. Stevens shows the role of
the poem as a commentary on the way that the poem, in fact
sense itself, works. He takes nothing for granted, but
takes from philosophy the issues of the self, of in-itself
reality, and the referential play of figuration that
comprises reality and questions them as though for the
first time. In this questioning, he asks what is required
for the illusion of a final reality, a self and
non-referential presence, and he finds the process that
governs the process of sense-making in life and in the
poem.

But if, as has been suggested, all poetic language
moves by the gathering giving of Ereignis, how could Stevens
be unique in showing this gathering? Stevens not only
shows this force at work and the way that its working
implies a simultaneous unworking, he also explicitly
discusses the nature of poetry and implicitly ties poeisis
to Ereignis. The poem lets those who experience it "share,/
For a moment, the first idea." And this "idea" proves
itself structured by en-owning. Although the first idea
opens up the poem and makes sense of each of its thirty
cantos by bringing them to co-appear as various forms of
inquiry into the way ideation works, this first idea is
characterized by its ambiguous ontological status, and
it seems to serve a unifying function while it lets each
canto appear in a different light.

Stevens' use of metaphor, or generally speaking,

figurative language, bolsters the false but necessary
conviction that the poem can finally gain access to
reality. In the traditional sense, metaphor seems to be
a fall from propriety, while it simultaneously serves an
eschatological function, promising the return to a divine
realm where there is no more metaphor, to a language beyond
figuration. Traditional discussions of metaphor usually
play themselves out in accordance within the logic of the
sensible/intelligible and the natural/historical
oppositions. This tradition tells us that the sensible
world is obscured by the use of metaphor which, while
rendering experience more intelligible, also removes its
immediacy.

Literary and philosophical traditions find that
metaphors are embedded in a network of historical
interpretations, and this fact leads to speculation that
the substance of language and experience gets covered over
by accidental associations. On the traditional account,
if we could get over metaphor, we could get beyond history
and embodied experience to speak again the pure language
of nature.

For Derrida, the oppositions that prioritize proper
language are themselves metaphorical and historically
situated. Traditional, that is metaphysical, philosophy
seeks a position outside of the ever-turning "theatre of
trope," and thus hopes to achieve mastery over language.
But even philosophy's own notion that it "tropes" toward

the truth and closes precisely with its meaning brings
the language of philosophy back into the ceaseless play
of figuration that it would escape. It can be said that,
for the Western tradition, the "good" metaphor provides
a "vehicle" that gives a context in which the sense of
its "tenor" is discovered. But "good" metaphors actually
change the context in which the tenor appears. For
postmodern critique, then, language is irreducibly
metaphorical and metaphors change the reality they seem
to discover.

For Merleau-Ponty, similarly, there is no experience
or meaning outside of embodied, historical being-in-the-
world. Although a person might be said to have what
Merleau-Ponty calls a "style," there is no literal,
substantive, meaning-giving "self" to which metaphors might
lead back, nor from which they are generated, because the
term "mind" itself belongs to the realm of the figurative
or the interpretive. As Merleau-Ponty points out, the
notion of self-present consciousness ignores the essentially
evasive or self-fleeing character of consciousness. In
Merleau-Ponty's terms, figuration itself would be a figure
for the process that the prereflective background performs.
It is only in terms of this background that similarities
suggest themselves and that other connections remain
unannounced. This background re-figures itself in new
metaphors, and, thus re-figured, the background foregrounds
previously unthought connections. The background, like

the process of figuration, gives the self, objects and
linguistic acts as identical with themselves on the basis
of difference from themselves.

According to Joseph Kronick, "The first idea always
takes us back to the weather, a residue of figuration that
cannot be erased" (WSJ 96). So the weather is a metaphor
for the uncertainty that haunts meaning. Every time we
think we have a clear view of a landscape, or every time
an image appears in the clouds, it turns out that the
weather changes, giving a new image to the cloud, or a
new color to the landscape. The sun, too, Kronick points
out, is never seen in itself, but always seen in its
colorations of objects.

To this account, Merleau-Ponty and Heidegger would
respond, presumably, by commenting that it is correct,
but incomplete. It is precisely by virtue of the fact
that houses change color in different light and that Phoebus
once appeared as the "gold flourisher" and again as
slumbering "in autumn umber" that the sun and the things
we experience in a changing light come to acquire such
richness and dimension.

Merleau-Ponty and Derrida agree, there is no "true,"
that is, unchanging, color to anything in experience.
As Merleau-Ponty points out, when we see a red object,
it makes no sense, or at most it makes a vapid kind of
sense, to describe it scientifically as "red number
seventeen." We always see colors under their aspects;

we see the "wooly red of the carpet" or the sharp metallic red of the fire engine. The fact that we can never have an unmediated experience of the thing makes it possible, rather than disingenuous, to claim we have a grip on it. Heidegger and Merleau-Ponty would say that metaphor does transform the thing, but this transformation, in most cases, leads to another instance of resonance.

And, speaking of the weather, again we see in the poem that the weather does constantly transform itself and that which it lets appear under its own aspect, but what is important is that, throughout the poem, in the various accounts of its transformation, the weather acquires an ever-greater, though never full, significance. As Stevens says, "the first idea becomes/ The hermit in a poet's metaphors" (381). Metaphor always renames experience, and it never gets at an extra-metaphorical reality. But, in renaming experience, metaphor gives it a new and richer sense. There are cases where new metaphors change the entire background in which they initially made sense, anomalies that change the paradigm, but deconstruction takes these cases as the rule, not as the gestalt- and paradigm-shifting exception.

To say, "love is a rose" is just plain boring. To say "love is a beachball" is new, but still presupposes that there is a real, natural category called "love." This presupposition flourishes against a Christian and Platonic background, replete with social practices for

being in love. But, there is nothing in Heidegger or
Merleau-Ponty, or Stevens for that matter, that assumes
there is such a natural kind. The poem gives kinship
between and a "kindred kind" to things. There is a chance
that our background, presented by enough challenges from
within, might completely change and render completely
unfamiliar the phenomenon of love, and its metaphors, as
we know them. Such changes, however, though necessary,
and though it is necessary that they always be possible,
seem a component of, not a challenge to, the process of
Ereignis. To Heidegger and Merleau-Ponty, metaphor is
not the space of constant transformation, but the hermitage
of poetic en-owning.

Shifts in sense give greater resonance to contexts
and can change them altogether. But deconstruction tells
us that this statement takes the notion of a context for
granted. Derrida challenges the notion of a self-sufficient
context, as do Merleau-Ponty, Heidegger and Stevens. But
for this latter group, just as contexts color the words
that appear within them, and dissolve when everything within
has become the same color, so words spoken in a play, a
poem, or in different contexts over time, bring the context
into its own, never bringing it to self-sufficiency.

Changes of context and anomalies within contexts remain
important for Heidegger, Merleau-Ponty and Stevens, but
this gives us insufficient reason to emphasize
transformation and the anomalous as such. Heideggerians

concede to Derrida that no context is complete and that no word belongs solely to one context. Both value the flexibility of the meaning of words and the flexibility of contexts. But for Derrida, this flexibility seems important in itself, where for Heidegger this flexibility leads to the increased resonance of words. As Charles Spinosa comments, "when we speak, we use [unfamiliar] terms as we have heard others use them in various contexts with the hope, each time, of coming to a better understanding of the phenomenon the words pick out and why it is an important one" (HR 287). Spinosa remarks that Ereignis lets us "develop a richer understanding of a practice we are already involved in" (ibid.). In terms Merleau-Ponty would use, we may read "getting a better grip on the phenomenon" for "coming to a better understanding" and for Stevens we may read, "life's nonsense pierces us with strange relation."

When he writes about context, Derrida's "writerly" approach to meaning involves his elaboration of that force which structures writing and Differance: "Iterability." In _Signature_ _event_ _context_, Derrida indicates that we never experience a stable, "fully saturated" context. According to Derrida, no context can ever give one enough to determine meaning completely. This is why Derrida asks, rhetorically:

> "Are the pre-requisites of a context ever absolutely
> determinable? Fundamentally, this is the most general
> question I would like to attempt to elaborate. Is
> there a rigorous and scientific concept of the _context_?"

He will answer this question at length by saying that
if there could be such a thing as a pure context and a
word could be limited to only several meanings, then
language could not work at all (MP 310). Throughout part
one of SEC, Derrida demonstrates, "why a context is never
absolutely determinable, or rather in what way its
determination is never certain or saturated" (ibid.).

Language depends for its very life upon the structural
insufficiency of contexts. Derrida shows that the driving
force in language, iterability, makes communication possible
and a pure or complete context impossible. It is not just
an inconvenient fact about contexts that they can never
be homogenous. Rather, for any word, experience or thing
to make sense and appear as identifiable, it must remain
intercontextual, or capable of moving between one context
and another. Words and experiences must have something
ab-sent or abstractible about them that lets one recognize
them again, elsewhere and outside the present moment.
The signifier "floats," untethered to any particular
signified or situation. The fact that the same word can
appear in limitless contexts gives it meaning and
intelligibility.

And contexts themselves could not give meaning at all
if they contained no "residue" of other contexts. What's
more, not only do contexts depend for their intelligibility
upon other contexts, but they necessarily remain liable
to destabilization from within. Neither one context nor

a speaker's intention can control what words will mean within that context. A speaker's words can change the speaker's intention as well as the context in which it appeared. This is how not only the written sign, but every sign gets "proffered in the absence of the addressee" (315), and in the absence of its sender or producer as well. I might make a comment within one context and, by uttering it, change that context. A speaker's words, once spoken, must be able to mean something radically other than either the speaker's previous context or what they wanted to say "dictated."

In a word, words must be iterable, and contexts always shifting, for any meaning to be communicated at all. Derrida follows the etymology of the "iter" to the Sanskrit "itara," which simply means "other." Words must be able to mean something other than the intention which precedes them and they depend for their sense upon other words. And the signifier must be other than the signified. Iterability means that a word must be able to function in a non-identical context to mean anything. Similarly, a context can never fully determine meaning because it is itself, of necessity, always incomplete, always referring to other contexts and itself changing. Since "a written sign carries with it a force of breaking with its context, that is, the set of presences which organize the moment of its production" (317), and this factor marks writing, writing gives the possibility of speech.

Certain of Stevens' stanzas seem to bear out this understanding of language as based upon indeterminacy and transformation:

> "...The casual is not
> Enough. The freshness of transformation is
> The freshness of a world. It is our own,
> It is ourselves, the freshness of ourselves"
> (398).

But even here, in the midst of his praise of transformation, Stevens notices that transformation is our own and is the condition of our self-hood. The poem and transformations of the everyday sense of things refresh our understandings of who we are, and even change who we are. But these changes do not always sunder us from ourselves. Most often, transformation brings us into a new, abiding mode of revealing that discloses and unites many aspects of our style of daily life.

And Stevens answers the praise of transformation himself:

> "The partaker partakes of that which changes him.
> The child that touches takes character from the thing,
> The body, it touches. The captain and his men
>
> Are one and the sailor and the sea are one" (392).

The intertextuality of partaker and that of which he partakes does not necessarily take him out of his style of life, but that which changes him becomes part of his way of disclosing the world. In like manner, the child is not a "character," in the sense of a written sign that keeps escaping the contexts that would hold it, but the child incorporates a character or style from the things

and bodies that it relates to in the world.

By now it should seem clearer that, although iterability is a force necessary to language, it is by no means a force sufficient to that which is needed to drive language. We have seen Heidegger's deepest non- or pre-metaphysical term _Ereignis_, working on the personal and the poetic levels. this focusing tendency underwrites language, or makes all linguistic and perceptual acts possible. As has been shown, en-owning means the tendency of practices to gather together into modes of revealing things and other people. This is how things, practices and contexts "come into their own" and we ourselves "own up" to who we are without necessarily achieving a fully integrated identity.

When Stevens tells us "there was a myth before the myth began," (383) he seems to mean that there is a tendency in linguistic gathering that facilitates myth-making. This "muddy source" is unclear and yet "articulate." In light of all the previous joining-together that Stevens has shown, though never demanding full clarity, it seems at least possible that here the meaning of "articulate" is that of something joined together. Considering the fact that practices tend to join together in order to reveal things and people in en-owning, one might say that this articulation is the language-like source of myth. If one wanted a religious equivalent for Stevens' expression, one could call "Notes" polytheistic: The poem entertains

a series of different takes on "final" reality without

offering one final story, and each approach holds sway

and gives sense in a limited capacity.

The gathering, articulating power of en-owning gives

language. But Ereignis does not ground or precede language,

because it is itself articulating, language-giving and

not extra-linguistic in form. Speech and writing, myth

and poem are our co-responding to this process. For

Derrida, the gathering together of all styles into a single

style of course involves the repression of iterability.

But it also stultifies Ereignis. If all styles were leveled

into one homogenous style, no genuine resonance could take

place at all. Ereignis necessarily occurs across styles.

For Merleau-Ponty and Heidegger, embodied human

experience and practices, and not the play of signifiers,

is the final court of appeals in every meaningful

experience. The body as the only given, gives sense.

In this sense, the body with its gestures and its voice,

is the phone semantike, the significant voice, or the voice

that gives signification. So, although liable to charges

of "phonocentrism," or somato-centrism, Merleau-Ponty,

Heidegger and Stevens never move into logocentrism. Lived

experience grounds and contextualizes, while opening up,

the play of figuration.

What does "Notes" do? Before addressing and

problematizing issues of self and other, before meditating

on consciousness, before showing "displacements" and the

differential play of significations, before fragmenting

and before addressing itself to Romanticism, Stevens' poem

discloses en-owning as the moving force in experience and

language. To disclose the condition of disclosure, to

disclose disclosing, forecloses the possibility of any

identity, be it personal, cultural, experiential, or

linguistic, without discounting meaningful events in

language and experience. Sounds, words, tropes, contexts,

poems, tales, fictions, myths, people, styles and perception

all move according to the law of the "plainest and most

gentle" force behind language: en-owning. The poem ends,

> "...flicked by feeling, in a gildered street,
> I call you by name, my green, my fluent mundo.
> You will have stopped revolving except in crystal"
> (CP 407).

Here the poem puts an end to the difficult pattern

of being what it is not, and of not being what it is.

What the poet calls by name, what may now bear a name,

is the world; though the world is fluent, always in flux,

and fluent in different languages. Does this naming not

define, fix and stop the world? The world seems to have

stopped revolving, but now, as a crystal ballroom ball,

it casts even more "new light." At this point in the poem,

readers have a richer, more resonant sense of fluency,

of revolving and of the poem than ever before.

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