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“THE SAVAGE HARMONY”.

**WALLACE STEVENS AND THE POETIC APPREHENSION OF AN
ANTHROPIC UNIVERSE**

— SUMMARY —

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Introduction: Stevens, the “Savage Harmony” and the Need for Reevaluation

Structured along five chapters enclosed by introductory and concluding remarks, this thesis aims at providing a re-examination of Wallace Stevens’s poetry and thought from a mixed perspective: epistemological, aesthetic and scientific-philosophical. The main assumption on which the core of the argumentation rests is a derivative of the poet’s own words. Thus, as suggested in one of Stevens’s most memorable poems, the extended piece “An Ordinary Evening in New Haven,” in a world marked by fragmentation and the shattering of the age-old foundations of belief, the poet (and especially, the twentieth century poet) was forced to reconsider the position championed by his predecessors and take on the no less important role of a “metaphysician.” As proved by his lifelong search for “what will suffice” in the face of the “pressure of the real,” the novel experience of the universe (indebted to the postulates of such thinkers as Nietzsche, Freud or Einstein) implied dismissing the former conception that poetry is primarily characterised by a lyrical-aesthetic dimension. Emerging both as the offspring of the dynamic context of the early twentieth century and a reaction to it, Stevens’s poetic vision is singular, yet symptomatic of the spirit of the age. On the one hand, his is a solitary stance—that of a sensibility who succeeded in avoiding the pitfalls of other Modernist poets, such as Eliot or Pound, who eventually turned to Neo-Classicism or authoritarian forms of order/government, once their quest for solutions to the chaos of the age had reached a dead-end. On the other, by propounding a “theory of poetry” as a “theory of life,” Stevens aligned his thought to the resurgent “universalist” approach, advocating the belief in the possibility of recomposing the parts into a new, harmonious whole.

Stevens’s stance, it may be argued, is doubly-polarised in all its manifestations. “The plainness of plain things is savagery,” he admits in the same poem. In consequence, the poet finds himself in a delicate position: for one thing, he feels the urge to “explicate” reality and strive toward potentiating its inert core imaginatively. However, since this reality is not a “solid,” but an elusive “shade that traverses a dust,” at almost any point of his journey he is compelled to ponder a multiplicity of perspectives on one and the same thing, leading to a paradoxical condition, with no beginning and no clear end. Thus, starting from the premise that the oxymoron “savage harmony” may be regarded as the epitome of Stevens’s aesthetic-epistemological effort, we propose an excursion into his poetry of experience and perception as exemplary of both *a mind of conflicting oppositions* and of some metaphorical *spaces of undulation*. Encompassing the extremes of joyous celebration of the virtues of mind, sensory experience and poetic expression (reliant on the creed that unmediated knowledge of the “ding-an-sich” is ultimately possible) and the recurring dissatisfaction with “the malady of the quotidian,” the Stevensian vision describes a trajectory that serves as an allegorical counterpart of the “particle-wave” dichotomy lying at the foundations of modern (quantum) physics. In this scheme, a seminal role is played by the *subjective-anthropic* element and its greatest assets—reason and imagination—both of them catalysts of fragmentation and part of the solution to it.

In light of these preliminary observations, we propose a study that unfolds in several directions. Given the complexity of Stevens’s poetry and the issues that arise from a largely dualistic perspective interspersed with occasional holistic manifestations, this thesis is not limited in method or scope to aspects exclusively of philological importance. Along most of the chapters, the instruments of the literary critic are complemented—and sometimes superseded—by interpretive

angles more closely associated with the tenets of modern science. This is felt as a prerequisite for verifying Stevens's claim that the poetic and philosophical pathways to reality simultaneously overlap and diverge, and that only in their complementarity can they prove beneficial for the comprehension of the "amassing harmony."

From a structural point of view, the research spans over five distinct parts, each focusing on different implications of the "search for the object"—in its turn a particular manifestation of the Stevensian "search for reality." Of these constitutive parts, *Chapter I* serves as an extended introduction and is the closest to the general interests of the literary scholar. In addition to introducing a number of key-concepts that will be used at later points of the investigation (e.g., the *metaphor of positioning* or the *relational nature* of Modern/Modernist thought), it also announces the central themes to be investigated more closely in subsequent chapters: "undulation"—the general pattern behind Stevens's poetic apprehension—as well as some of its peculiar expressions, such as the tensions underlying the knowledge of reality, the experience of locality, or the levelling of the undulatory pattern by the adoption of a more detached, less anthropic perspective in his final poetry.

The following four chapters represent the core of our research and, as mentioned above, are devoted to a series of specific issues derived, on the one hand, from the Modernist need for positioning / re-positioning and, on the other, from Stevens's penchant for exaggerations, his ambivalent and speculative stance, and the overly difficult task of comprehending reality in its entirety. *Chapter II* aims at providing a general survey of the characteristics of the Stevensian undulatory path, including some of its main causes (e.g., the resistance of the real, the intrusions of the subjective self, the interplay of thought, imagination, desire and language). Furthermore, it also points to a number of momentary successes in the poet's quest for harmonising opposites, thereby announcing the more extensive discussion of the problem provided in Chapter V of the thesis. Some of the observations formulated at this point are given further consideration in *Chapter III*, which addresses the function(s) of poetry, creative imagination and the role of metaphor as a possible (yet imperfect) vehicle for bridging the divide between self and reality. *Chapter IV* is devoted to examining other expressions of Stevens's tension-ridden universe, namely, his ambivalent stance regarding the experience of both local and trans-local (i.e. American vs. European) spaces. The concluding section of the chapter also introduces the topic to be investigated thereafter, by focusing on the more holistic experience and rendering of Connecticut realities in Stevens's last creative phase. If up to that point the argumentation has been centred principally on the dualistic strain underpinning the poet's vision, in *Chapter V* our investigation shifts to two complementary solutions to dichotomies—the experience of the real as an undivided whole and the suspension of conceptual thinking in a manner similar to the spiritual practices of Zen Buddhism. The *Conclusions* have a summative and explanatory function, highlighting the main characteristics of Stevens's oxymoronic "savage harmony" and, at the same time, aiming at (re-) aligning the poet's perspective with such broader conceptual frames as "dualism," "determinism," "reductionism," or "holism."

It is hoped that our choice of developing the argumentation in a "circular" manner—especially in the segment comprised between Chapter II and Chapter V—will not only ensure formal cohesiveness but also enable the reader to treat each of the major sections as simultaneously interrelated and distinct units. In each of these chapters our examination begins by laying emphasis on the Stevensian undulatory spaces and the causes for "undulation" and then proceeds to considering the levelling of this pattern in his final verse. The implicit suggestion that Stevens's disjunctive drives eventually converge toward a harmonious, less subject-centric perspective is further verified in the last two chapters of our work. In these, both the argumentation and the interpretive exercises are intended to support the assumption that the moments of repose co-exist with the experience of fragmentation and chaos along the entire body of Stevens's poetry, being

thus conducive to the inevitable dismissal of dualism in favour of a holistic perception.

In addition to the core argumentative and interpretive components, our thesis is also reliant on a series of parenthetical observations provided in the form of footnotes. Their function is double: on the one hand, they point to secondary areas which could not be given sufficient consideration within the limits and the scope of this type of research; on the other, they come to complement some seminal ideas formulated along our study, offering further explanation at those moments when their inclusion in the main corpus of the thesis was perceived as potentially disruptive for the reader.

We are aware that a thesis which builds on a combination of viewpoints and methods from seemingly disparate domains is fraught with a number of shortcomings. As Serge Fauchereau noted (1969), Stevens's poetry does not lack in scholarly interest, but rather in a dedicated and open-minded audience, fact which calls for cognisant reading and personal reevaluation. By adopting a deferential standpoint, as suggested by E.P. Ragg (2002), and by acknowledging the limits of a multidisciplinary approach, yet without ceasing to believe in its validity, we hope that at the end of our investigation we will have shed light on the complexity of Stevens's "undulatory" poetic apprehension, the issues consequent on its subjective core, as well as the fundamentally modern nature of his thought and sensibility.

Chapter I: Between "Ideas about the Thing" and "The Thing Itself"—Modernism, Positioning, and the Subject – Object Dialectic

Our excursion into the dichotomic Stevensian perspective begins by setting the poet against the artistic and ideatic background to which he is indebted. Thus, the initial part of the argumentation rests on the assumption that the twentieth century, more than any other age in culture and history, championed the *interdependence of literary and scientific approaches* to the problems of the knowable universe. The interrelatedness of formerly disjunctive methods of investigation has been remarked by a number of writers and scholars, among which we may mention Italo Calvino, who speaks in favour of a "wager" between science and literature, or Richard Croddy, who, in the context of examining modern painting, argues that the study of cultural and philosophical issues is beneficial not only for the narrower concerns of the student of fine arts, but has invaluable epistemological implications too. By extension, adopting a similar standpoint is important for understanding the complex nature of the Modernist phenomenon on a broader scale (and, in particular, of Modernist poetry, in its plethora of thematic, technical and expressive manifestations).

One area where a *pluralist-universalist approach* becomes particularly useful is the study of the subject – object dialectic and its impact on the question of knowledge through perception. At the beginning of the twentieth century, the blurring of distinctions between the "methods" of the poet and that of the scientist became a *de facto* reality. It is possible to speak of a new dialectic underpinning both aesthetic and epistemological endeavours, manifest principally in the effort to lift the veils of appearance and get to the knowledge of things in "becoming" (May Swenson). Indeed, in the first decades of the past century, most areas of human existence were affected by an emergent dialectical perception. One of its implications for Modernism has to be sought in the concern of the poets of the age for re-appreciating the relationship between present and past, which bespoke a *new sense of positioning* in relation not only to the other arts, but also to fundamentally different domains. On a deeper level, such a dialectic was expressive of another dichotomy, arising as a combination of formerly incompatible "impulses": the Enlightenment stance that had advocated unfaltering belief in the power of the mind to comprehend reality, Romantic Byronism (championing the supremacy of the subjective self) and the complementary suspicion toward the crudeness of the senses in piercing the aforementioned veils. In this scheme, the subjective element acquired a pivotal role. Thus, the Modernist search for the object may be regarded as an extension of the efforts to redefine the relationship between the aesthetic object and the contemplating mind (an example of this can be found in the involvement of the subject in determining the aesthetic

function of the object, as Sonesson explains).

In light of these, we propose that the “*metaphor of positioning*” should be used for circumscribing the Modernist preoccupations for the “object,” and as an expression of self-referentiality in arts. To draw on Kathleen Woodward’s remarks (in her turn, tributary to Stephen C. Pepper), this metaphor can be considered a “root metaphor” lying at the basis of the whole Modernist mindset. The subsequent sections of this chapter are devoted to examining some of the main implications of this metaphor for the subject – object dialectic (with a view to a number of secondary ramifications/meanings, such as the question of the perceptive self, its relationship with the realm of objects, the experience of locality or the problem of individual vs. collective existence).

For the beginning, a series of *factors conducive to the revaluation of the subject – object dialectic* are given closer attention. In this respect, it is possible to speak of two categories of such factors—*internal* and *external* ones. Among the former, some of the most notable ones are the mutations in the field of visual arts at the turn of the century. Clement Greenberg speaks in this sense of a new “awareness” of the artist as observer and mediator between perceptive self and contemplated object, which in its turn may be regarded as further indication of the tendency to increase “self-awareness” in the field of arts. On a technical level, this found expression in the abandonment of depiction in favour of “reinterpretation” or “resegmentation” (Sonesson) and was echoed in literature and other domains by a growing preoccupation for “exclusion” and “inclusion.” As Bradbury and McFarlane explain, in the long run, the search for new themes and the imposition of innovative techniques (e.g., ambiguity, ellipsis, parataxis, juxtaposition) led to a new sense of “fusion”. Consequent on this, “coalescence” and a “relational perspective” became the common denominators of the Modernist spirit.

Insofar as the latter category is concerned—that of the external factors—we may refer, among other things, to Einstein’s postulate regarding the interdependence of time and space, Ernst Mach’s arguments about the interpenetration of inner and outer realities, Werner Heisenberg’s view on the interplay of percipient and thing perceived within a single observational moment, or the “ambivalent” nature of subatomic particles, as explained by quantum physics. It is therefore appropriate to add that at the beginning of the twentieth century science was no less foreign to the issue of “repositioning,” and a dialectical-dichotomic perception soon found its way into its various sub-compartments (we may mention here the questioning of Kantian transcendentalism in the wake of Einstein’s theory, the disjunctive perspectives of quantum physics and relativity, or the tensions between materialistic-deterministic and anti-realistic perspectives on the universe).

On a larger scale, the above two sets of factors also engendered a new type of “relational” thinking and an essentially allegorical appreciation of reality, based on the creative contributions of the mind. Due to its semiotic potential and the call for subjective meaning-making processes, the “book” became another incarnation of the metaphor of positioning. In its turn, this may be viewed as further proof of the interdependence of the scientific and literary modes. An example of this is provided by the intersections of Modernist poetry and cybernetics—namely, their shared interest for “neural networks,” reliant on the continual flow and exchange of information within and between interpretive communities (Crawford).

On the basis of the above points, we may formulate some preliminary observations. Thus, we should note that the re-appreciation of the position of the subject took place inside a doubly-articulated (and complementary) aesthetic and scientific frame. In the final analysis, this bespeaks the seminal role of the subject in (re-) discovering meanings and in re-defining itself, and is illustrative of a twofold dialectic—between the different fields of the arts, as well as between the arts and science.

To enlarge on these, in the remainder of the chapter we consider a number of implications of such mutations in relation to Modernist arts and poetry. The emphasis is laid on the connections

between the subject – object dichotomy and the question of “relocating” / “re-positioning.” We begin by providing an overview of the *common denominators in the Modernist “search for the object,”* as they arise from the more general mutations that affected the aesthetic-epistemological background of the age. Among these, we may mention the replacement of emotions with feelings and the primacy given to subjective participation, in their turn complemented by the exploration of new formal devices. Such preoccupations may explain the thematic and expressive diversity of Modernist poetry / art, but also the areas of overlap. As we shall see later, in reference to Stevens’s verse, with many Modernist poets one may speak of a desire to “mate” with the object, but also of an inevitable failure in achieving this in face of the growing sense of fragmentation. Consequent on this, the poets of the age resorted to various solutions, ranging from vivid response to experience (immersion in the realm of objects) or, by contrast, Victorian detachment (Eliot and the later Williams). Despite the sinuosities of each poetic path, we may however speak of a certain unitary “spirit,” prevalent especially in the later phase of the major Anglo-American poets (such as the primacy given to the various expressions of the “still point,” resulting from a final re-positioning of the subjective self).

In order to anticipate a series of questions concerning Stevens’s own treatment of the subject – object dichotomy, at this point we refer to *two distinct directions in which the “search for the object” progressed in the early decades of the twentieth century.* Placed at one end of the line there is W.C. Williams’s poetry, which, in accord with K. Burke’s remarks, may be called a “poetry of approach,” expressive, on the whole, of a “subjectivising” treatment of the object. Frequently relating to the body as a diseased entity, Williams’s poetry is one of “contact,” indicative of an organic communion between self and thing. The object is seen by Williams as a source of renewal, a vital force, which often makes the poet err on the side of the subject, imbuing the contemplated thing with human characteristics, and thus begetting, as Burke further argues, an overly sentimental type of verse. At the opposite end we find Stevens, whose more detached approach (that of the “snow man,” to use his own words), bespeaks the conviction that the object is essentially resilient to subjective scrutiny (J. Carroll). Due to the imperviousness of the thing, Stevens ends up relating to reality in a more ascetic way, choosing to immerse himself in a state of “clairvoyant observation” (K. Burke). Yet, the very same impenetrability of the “ding-an-sich” makes it possible for the poet to approach his objects in different manner. Thus, the Stevensian thing (according to F. Jameson, qtd. in Roşu) entails the interplay of interpretive exercises, as a result of which it frequently ceases to be a thing in itself and becomes a metaphor for the imagination (this, as shall be seen in subsequent chapters, will add to the already difficult task of comprehending reality in a “pure”, unmediated way).

Having briefly examined these distinct, ideal modes of relating to the object, we now proceed to considering *three main “extensions” of it: (i) the search for the object as a new mode of knowledge, (ii) the search for the object as an experience of locality and (iii) the search for the object as a sense of fulfilment.* The motivation behind this is twofold: firstly, it provides further insight into a series of problems connected with the context in which Stevens’s individual stance is rooted and, secondly, it anticipates the central topics analysed at length along the following four chapters of our thesis.

In the first of these subsections we return to the question of the mutations that affected the visual arts at the beginning of the twentieth century. For an appreciation of Stevens’s poetry this is especially important, since the poet himself admitted that modern poetry and painting are fundamentally indistinguishable (“The Relations between Poetry and Painting”). At the turn of the century, painting underwent a technical and perceptual revolution as a result of the shift from static to dynamic perception and the subsequent abstractisation / reification of vision. As Cézanne’s “Mont Saint Victoire” illustrates, it is possible to speak of a new birth of sight, counterpoised to dualistic vision. Among its main characteristics we may mention the blurring of “physicality” and

the increased importance given to “contour,” the replacement of the “retinal” with the “pictorial” in Post-Impressionism (C. Greenberg), the move toward abstractisation (eventually supportive of the artist’s / percipient’s belief in the self-sufficiency of art / perception) and the inevitable autonomisation of sight (R. Krauss). Such transformations were translated by poets of the age in a diversity of ways. A case in point is Williams, who resorts to “fluid signifiers” for rendering “universals” in a poem like “The Widow’s Lament in Springtime” (Salazar). His painterly technique is intended to capture the motion of an object in its environment (Paraska). Other examples of this increased concern for “visuality” can be found on a higher level too—for instance, in the innovative proposals of Vorticism, the Modernist poets’ preference for cinematic techniques, the use of montage and superposition as forms of resistance to rational intrusions (with Eliot, and Pound), or the aforementioned semiotic potentiality of the object and the impenetrability / autonomy of the “perfect thing” (in Stevens’s verse).

Apart from these internal factors that additionally exemplify the Modernist re-positioning of the subject (principally, in the realm of arts), we should refer in brief to a series of external causes on which they depended to a significant extent. In this sense, we may argue that the “visual revolution” is but another extension of the more pervasive epistemological upheavals of the early twentieth century. The above-mentioned autonomisation of subject and object is largely a response to the growing sense of fragmentation and one particular manifestation of the search for order in a chaotic universe. As modern thought evolved and the solutions to fragmentation became increasingly more difficult to find, the subject turned from seeking order in chaos to accepting chaos as the very source of order. In contrast with this rather submissive attitude, we may speak of an antithetical solution, indicative of a certain “reification” of the subject itself. An example of this, succinctly discussed at this point in reference to Stevens’s poetry (and given further consideration in Chapter II), is provided by the “*Anthropic Principle*”—the reassessment of the subjectivist worldview characteristic for former ages. A re-statement of the centrality of the human (or anthropic) element, this (pseudo-) scientific argument rests on the creed that the evolutionary course of the universe converges toward the necessary emergence of the subjective factor, as the sole measure of all things and the principle source of knowledge. Yet, as Stevens captures the essence of the problem in “On the Road Home,” the teleological strain of this principle and the reversal of causality on which it is founded are no effective solutions to the problem of fragmentation: while it posits that the human factor is indispensable to the question of knowledge, the “Anthropic Principle” overlooks the very limitations of such a component, as well as the relativistic implications of any theoretical proposal (i.e. the dependence of meanings on the meaning-making strategies of the subject). In conclusion, we may claim that this and analogous designs expose the frailty of the subjectivist perspective. In their turn, Modernist artists were subject to similar failures. Their response ranged from alienation to “reintegration on a lower level of experience” and, much more infrequently, it resulted in attaining heightened sensitivity and clearer vision (Hough). In the most extreme cases, this led to a return to Neo-Classicism and even to the dismissal of poetic ways in favour of other literary forms (e.g., Eliot’s penchant for drama in his later phase).

The second interpretation of the subject – object dialectic, as a “knowledge of locality,” is founded on the assumption that the poets’ concern for the question of place can be regarded as another ramification of their interest for experimentation (e.g., the alteration of spatial parameters and heightened importance of exotic themes or settings). Once again, it is possible to find some common denominators, despite the numerous ways in which poets of the age related to the issue, such as the search for a common ground of humanity or the effort to recuperate an underlying set of human attributes beyond the confines of the local and the poets’ attention devoted to “the margin.” Within this subsection we provide first a brief presentation of the varied panorama of the Modernist poetic treatments of locality and, as before, we proceed then to proposing a number of “case studies.” We distinguish in this sense between three modes of experiencing locality, which we

exemplify in connection with a narrow selection of texts from Stevens, Eliot and Pound.

With Stevens, the concern for this topic remains closely associated with his interest in the subject's creative powers, so that his "place" (including the literal sense of the word) becomes the "changing parlance of the imagination." As his "Notes toward a Supreme Fiction" illustrates, one of the primary functions of the imagination is to replicate natural change. In order to verify this, Stevens frequently chooses to "displace" his subject from its natural environment, violating the common conceptions of temporality / spatiality (A. Filreis). In this, he intersects with Eliot, since "place" becomes the locus for various transgressions and disruptions of real and imaginary borders (an aspect which will be examined more closely in Chapter IV). As a result of the blurring of the boundaries between the members of dichotomic pairs (subject – object, local – universal, old – new), Stevens's space is infused with additional semantic valences, and the poet often emerges as a "colonist" of meanings (Roşu). Thus, one of Stevens's most distinguished achievements consists in the creation of "fluid" or "composite" landscapes which can mimic the flux of reality.

Our next, brief reference to Eliot's "Suppressed Complexes" is intended to exemplify a different experience of locality. Here, "place" becomes primarily the realm for "dissociation" and "transgression." However, unlike with Stevens, the reasons for this are not to be sought in the poet's appraisal of creative imagination, but rather in the tormented experience of the subject. According to G. Smith, this piece can be regarded as an example of a drive opposed to the creation of "composite" images. Thus, place becomes a pretext for the poet's exploration of "discontinuity" and "dissociation" on both physical and mental levels—eventually, an expression of the dissatisfaction with the self and another metaphoric testbed for fragmentation. Eliot's case supports the idea that on numerous occasions the Modernist reaction to the experience of a diminutive self consisted in a withdrawal into the private spaces of one's own personality, as well as in setting up new "boundaries" after the dissolution of the old ones (through the use of personae and masks, which simultaneously function as agencies of freedom and as intrusive elements).

The third alternative among the Modernist ways of relating to "place" is provided by Pound's later poetry. Thus, in the "Pisan Cantos" the double seclusion of the subject (voluntary and forced), as well as physical deprivation are conducive to the need for "universal brotherhood"—hence, to a re-assertion of humanity (Woodward). The experience of confinement and the subsequently more intimate knowledge of locality additionally result in the re-emplacement of the past within the present and the rejuvenation of the self. In Pound's later verse, the closing-in of space is not felt as oppressive. Rather, the subject rediscovers its inner potential through an experience of silence, which at this point acquires an "orphic" and "sacramental" quality. Such a transition, from "loud" to "soft" silence (Sontag) may also be regarded as a rejuvenation of language (Woodward). As Teasdale further explains, the confined space becomes the gateway to self-discovery and ensures the communion with the divine or transcendental. The "timeless" quality of the cloister (or of the prison cell, by extension) facilitates the escape from the self through "stillness."

Besides being relevant to the question of locality, the above example of the subject's "re-positioning" also announces the final arguments of this chapter. Given their capacity to shed light on issues behind the levelling of "undulation" in Stevens's conclusive poetry, we find it useful to sum up a number of topical points formulated by Woodward and Valéry. Thus, according to the former, the later creative stance of the major Anglo-American Modernist poets is characterised by the emergence of a more ascetic form of knowledge. To draw on Valéry's thoughts, it is one of the finest examples of the Modernist impulse to "re-cognate, to rethink things afresh." As well as exemplifying a new mode of knowledge, the later verse of Eliot, Pound, Stevens and Williams, Woodward argues, bespeaks a new mode of "being." Exemplary of this are a series of common elements: the primacy of the "still point" / stillness, the presence of a meditative-reflective, anti-Cartesian mode, the figure of the wise old man and the poet's greater concern for the problem of creativity and tradition. In this context, the subject's relation to the encompassing objects acquires

novel connotations. The object becomes a focal point of interest, as shown by the various expressions of the “still point” in the final works of the aforementioned poets. With each of them, it performs a different function. For Pound, it represents the point of intersection between history and myth; in Williams, it symbolises art’s triumph over mortality; Stevens relates to it as to a metapoetic fiction, while in Eliot’s case it is a manifestation of the redemptive powers of knowledge (Woodward). As the author further explains, “stillness” can be regarded as a mode of aligning the self with the “age-old wisdom of humanity,” and to this end the “still point” will function as a medium through which self and the world are co-articulated—a unifying force which combines time and space and simultaneously de-creates them, a means to accede to an atemporal condition, and a point of “eternal return” and coalescence.

In the wake of these observations, we conclude this chapter devoted to the question of “positioning” / “re-positioning” and the implications of the Modernist “search for the object” by arguing that the poets and thinkers of the age generally related to objects as events or forces which were meant to mediate between the inner and the outer realms. The Modernist approach to the subject – object dichotomy also points to the necessity of establishing connections and a dialogue with the past, as well as with other fields of human activity and comes to support the fundamentally “relational” spirit of the age. While re-stating the role of the subject in making meanings of the world, the constant re-positioning of the former was also conducive to various fusions (such as the merging of time and space in the later works of these poets, as Matei Călinescu aptly noted). Beyond the experience of dialectic relationships, the “final elegance” of the later Modernist poetic stance consists in relating to the world as a source of direct experience, rather than of abstract speculations. Thus, poetry becomes the expression of both the “voluntaria” and the “necessaria” of the human condition (apud Valéry), potentiating the individual’s sense of belonging to something greater than the self.

Chapter II: Stevens between “Spaces of Undulation” and “Spaces of Repose”

As stated in the Introduction, the second chapter of our thesis is intended to provide *an overview of the main poles / characteristics of Stevens’s “undulatory” poetic apprehension of the real*. We begin our investigation by referring to the poet’s words in another emblematic piece, “Of Modern Poetry.” In a genuinely Modern / Modernist fashion, with Stevens the search for “what will suffice” became synonymous to a quest for identification and reintegration in a world of fragments. However, this was a tremendously difficult task, as it involved active engagement with the flux of things and relinquishing the more comfortable confines of an “ivory tower,” despite the relentless “pressure of the real.” On many occasions, this endeavour resulted in failure, due not only to external causes, but also to the poet’s own disposition. Thus, we may argue that for a large part of his poetry, Stevens’s vision is *polarised between determinism and dualism* (the belief in the power of the mind to comprehend the Kantian “ding-an-sich”) and the opposite drive, *the appraisal of solipsism and idealism* whenever the object, like the poem itself, defeats “intelligence almost successfully.” In what follows, we devote our attention to circumscribing the highs and the lows of Stevens’s own “search for the object,” his effort to recuperate a lost sense of harmony, his moments of “composure” and the complementary impulse to preserve “undulation.” By way of a chapter thesis, we posit that Stevens’s poetry is indicative of *the presence of two dialectical spaces*, emergent from a lower-level conflict between subject and object and a more subtle dichotomy between reductionism / dualism and holism.

In order to provide an initial illustration of Stevens’s disjunctive drives, we propose a brief interpretive exercise based on the juxtaposition of two poems belonging to different periods of his oeuvre—the late piece “As You Leave the Room” and the early *Harmonium* poem “Tea at the Palaz of Hoon.” The tone of the former is markedly despondent and the verses are permeated with an apparent sense of renunciation. By contrast, the latter emerges as one of the most eloquent

Stevensian appraisals of the solipsistic stance. However, even in the former piece, the poet's position is to a certain degree ambivalent, since in the concluding lines he ponders the value of any aspect of the individual's existence, including the validity of one's (speculative) assumptions. Furthermore, the glorification of the self in the latter text carries a typical Stevensian caveat. Indeed, as J. Hillis Miller remarked, Stevens's verse is fundamentally the expression of a "solitary consciousness." To support this argument, we look at another early piece, "The Place of the Solitaires," in which the poet recognises the inevitability of isolation and severance in face of an ever-changing reality and as a consequence of the required effort to keep "the motion of thought" in perfect synchrony with natural undulation.

By employing the last of the above texts as further support of our initial proposal to interpret Stevens's poetry as *a space for the unfolding of undulation and dichotomies*, we proceed to summing up *the main co-ordinates of this solitary Stevensian search* for the "amassing harmony": (i) the rendezvous of reality and imagination within the premises of the mind, (ii) postulating "ideas of order" about "parts of a world," (iii) the effort to validate poetry as a supreme fiction and (iv) the ultimate quest, for "the thing itself," rather than "ideas about it." At this point, we also cast a critical eye on Helen Vendler's remark that Stevens should be considered principally a poet of the "midworld," torn between opposing poles, but most comfortable with the space between. As our own argumentation will try to prove (both in the sections of this chapter and in the subsequent parts of the thesis), more often than not Stevens is restive in this "midworld," and the wished-for reposed condition is attained only in his later verse, after fully renouncing to dualistic-deterministic thinking.

With a view to verifying the claim that uneasy "undulation," rather than complacent occupancy of such a "midworld," is the characteristic Stevensian stance, we resort to further interpretive exercises. At a first stage, we examine other early texts exemplary of the poet's trust in the apparent virtues of subjectivism / solipsism (e.g., "Infanta Marina," "Hibiscus on the Sleeping Shore," "Another Weeping Woman"). Although these pieces speak in favour of the co-participation of mind and matter in creating reality, they already represent pointers to the shortcomings of a subject-centric perspective, since they are founded on the belief that "distinctions" (e.g., subject vs. object; mind vs. matter; imagination vs. reason) are either inherent characteristics of the structure of the real or a-priori modes of perception. By contrast, among these poems, it is possible to find examples of *a more balanced approach to the world of objects*. Three such poems, bespeaking different but partially overlapping "solutions" to "undulation" / fragmentation, are given close consideration. Reference to them is considered pivotal for the general argument of our thesis, as they can validate the assumption that the attainment of harmony is part of an ongoing, albeit laborious process, and that in their totality such moments announce the flattening of the wave-like motion of dualistic Stevensian thought.

In the first of these, "The Snow Man," the poet acknowledges the interdependence and equality of opposites, providing at the same time an oblique critique of subjectivism. Besides the more immediate importance for the issue of identifying the peculiarities of Stevens's vision, an analysis of this piece appears important for highlighting more general aspects related to the twentieth-century epistemological efforts. In consequence, we deem it necessary to return to the earlier-mentioned "Anthropic Principle Design Argument" and attempt at a closer examination of its weaknesses. Thus, after a succinct summary of its main tenets, we re-align this scientific proposal with Stevens's poem, drawing attention both to an "anthropic warning" and the limited applicability of teleological-subjectivist thought. As "The Snow Man" illustrates, there is an inherent, yet inevitable paradox in any subject-centric design. If we are to agree with Heisenberg's claim that observing implies disturbing the universe, both Stevens's poem and the scientific argument may be read in part as "morality tales": one may indeed relate to the perceptive mind as the measure of all things, but only insofar as human knowledge would be rendered impossible beyond its boundaries.

Such a realisation is a major feat of Stevens's early thought, as it is conducive to a sense of "heightened awareness." Furthermore, by advocating the necessity of striking a balance between subject and object, inner and outer reality, mind and matter, the "mind of winter" stance of "The Snow Man" is an incipient version of the "habitation of the whole" described in the much later "The Rock."

Despite the fact that this "heightened awareness" proved too difficult to maintain at this early stage of Stevens's poetic development and entailed the emergence of further dialectical pairs (e.g., hope vs. dismay), "The Snow Man" is a piece which opened up the path to later points of equilibrium. The key to achieving this has to be sought in the poet's acceptance of human limitations as a form of self-renewal. To verify this, we return to another text mentioned in the previous chapter, "On the Road Home" (belonging to the middle-segment of Stevens's poetry). Conceived as a dialogue of opposites, this piece addresses the question of the relativity of truth and individual perspectives. In contrast to the more philosophical tone of "The Snow Man," here the poet's response to discovering the radical fictionality of assertions is to turn outward and get actively engaged in the flux of natural undulation—this time, as in a state of "heightened perception." Stevens's achievement and more refined expression transpire also in the construction of the poem: synaesthesia, alliteration, enumeration and hyperbole function as poetic means to reveal "non-separability." In our opinion, this is analogous to the superposition of non-interacting complex systems in modern physics, conducive to a state of "quantum entanglement," which in this case takes place in the mind of the raconteur.

After these initial attempts to draw further parallels between Stevens's perspective and some of the tenets of modern physics (both to verify the poet's statement about the intertwining of poetic and scientific-philosophical ways and to enlarge upon our own earlier points on the relational nature of Modernism), we proceed to considering other examples evocative of the transitory nature of such revelations. Among these, we may mention "Cuisine Bourgeois"—one of Stevens's most powerful invectives against science, religion and reason—which appears to validate Hillis Miller's remark that the poet's perceptive course can most appropriately be described as "a series of states of consciousness with neither start nor finish."

The third poem examined in this segment of our argumentation is the anthological "The Rock." At this point though, we provide merely an overview of a series of topical points, as this piece will serve as material for further discussion in Chapter IV. The serene stance of "The Rock" (including the entire eponymous cycle of which it is part) indicates the levelling of undulation by renouncing to any form of rational or imaginative "appropriation" of the objects. The Stevens that emerges in these lines is a mind who has accepted the illusoriness of existence as well as the inexorability of the natural flux lying at the basis of a world which has proved impervious to human designs. We thus argue that the poet's late alternative to the "grossness" of the physical universe is no less consequent on a re-appreciation of his own "materia poetica." Now the poem is no longer a reply to the world or a replica of it; rather, it is seen as integral part of the whole as well as an expression of it. As an "icon" of the world, the image of the poem in "The Rock" verifies the view that Stevens's late verse is a reflection of a single, compounded realm (Hillis Miller), in which "seeming" is equal to "being" and "seeing" leads to "re-birth."

Having investigated such revelations of equanimity that run parallel with the uninterrupted flow of dichotomic elements, we now proceed to inspecting what we consider to be one of the major causes of Stevens's "failure" in striking and maintaining a balance of opposites. In particular, the next section of this chapter is devoted to *the question of desire and its effects* on the perceptive subject, and is intended to serve as additional critique of the anthropic-solipsistic standpoint. Our argument draws on a number of critical viewpoints: Helen Vendler's remark on Stevens's assigning the making of art / poetry to the subject's "foreignness to the word" and "our desire for a compensatory word made by poetry," complemented by Randal Jarrell's note on the pervasive sense

of lack in the poet's entire oeuvre. With a view to verifying these, we also refer to the poet's own words on alienation, as formulated in "Notes toward a Supreme Fiction," suggesting in this sense that the severance from the real inevitably leads to an estrangement from the self.

Within Stevens's epistemological frame, *sight*, *apperception* and *mind* are intimately connected; in addition, they are also dependent on the intrusions of desire. The "*desire for the object*" frequently acts as a means to anticipate the object, causing alterations of the structure of reality and widening the divide between the inner and outer realms. Stevens appears to be aware of this, which explains in part why he often chooses to avoid speaking about desire openly and prefers instead to use a range of fictional personae and masks. Especially in his earlier poetry he ridicules desire and feeling, or at best relates to them in a semi-detached, ironic manner (among examples of the kind, discussed in more detail at this point, we may mention "Le Monocle de Mon Oncle," "The Apostrophe to Vincentine" and "Cy Est Pourtraicte, Madame..."). In this context, it is possible to speak of a *twofold conflict*—between anticipation and desire, as well as between perception and rational analysis. Thus, in Stevens's case, both perception of the object and rational comprehension are frequently warped through the presence of the anticipated image (in its turn, another expression of the subject's desire for the object). In consequence, the poet is forced to contemplate various (imperfect) solutions to the problem, ranging from averting the object from sight ("O Florida, Venereal Soil") to what Vendler describes as a "scholarly interest" in pain, accompanied by a "refusal to feel." A case in point can be found in "Farewell to Florida," where the poet admits that distancing oneself from the once-loved land does not lead to composure, since memory eventually comes to compensate for physical absence. We may regard these as further examples of dualism translated into the psychological realm and manifesting itself as the subject's undulation between future and past (anticipation vs. memory, or the expectation of repose vs. the longing for an object that has already eluded perception).

As a consequence of this, in Stevens's poetry "barrenness" and "dilapidation" acquire special significances. By drawing on this remark and on Vendler's commentary on the poet's dual instincts (for "heaven", respectively, for "earth") we propose a further distinction, between "presence" and "absence" (as well as a clarification of the valences of the latter—as "non-presence" and "void"). At this stage, our argument is directed toward proving, by way of examining examples from the poet's more mature work, that on numerous occasions Stevens regards "severance" as the prerequisite for untainted contemplation of the object, but also as a possible mode of curtailing desire. However, in a typical Stevensian manner, this too proves an illusory proposal, compelling him to admit that "negation was eccentric"—yet another means to relate to the object and to experience the temporary solace of paradoxical linguistic constructions. The long-term implication of this realisation is that the poet turns to contemplating desire as a subject in itself, relating to the poem as a mere "mode of revealing desire." Since this is conducive to an endless loop, whereby desire leaves room for desire and creates a repetition of the pattern, the poet frequently chooses to return to solipsism as the only form of satisfaction, despite having already testified to its shortcomings.

The next subsection of this chapter is conceived both as a segment that announces the main topic of Chapter III and as additional examination of the interplay of desire and perception. As the poet himself declares, "Poetry is a Violent Force," or "a violence from within" that matches the violence without ("The Necessary Angel"). Thus, we consider it appropriate to look more closely at *another failure in the effort to attain harmony—the inability of words to adhere to the structure of reality*. In what may be regarded as a brief "Lacanian reprise," we suggest that the problems inherent in "descriptions" of the world should be regarded as another manifestation of the subject – object dialectic. If we look at the poet's own treatment of the topic, we notice a similarly ambivalent stance as that which characterises his treatment of reality on a larger scale. Stevens oscillates between "description" as "revelation" and "description" as a text which "exists in its own seeming" ("Description without Place"). "Description" is "an expectation, a desire" and thus "a little different

from reality.” Hence, the space between what we may call “the-text-of-words” and “the-text-of-the-world” becomes the locus of subjectivity, while “description” converges toward being a “rescription” of the structure of reality (similar to rational analysis). We explain this by recourse to Lacan, who argues that the “loss of being” is a consequence of the representation of the self through language, or a split in the subject occasioned by the accession to language. In addition, this points to the inadequacy of verbal constructions, consequent on the primary metaphoricity of language which substitutes the signifier of a signified for another signifier (Lacan), thereby making the “self in writing” a mere occupant of the space between the discourse of words and the discourse of things (J. Fineman). Stevens’s typical response to this imperfect condition is, on the one hand, the use of personae (intended to efface the self from the subject’s discourse) and, on the other, the primacy of metaphor. Yet, while the latter can indeed represent an adequate means to replicate natural metamorphosis (fulfilling in part the poet’s epistemological needs), it has its inherent limitations for bridging the divide between subject and object. Since metaphor is intimately linked with desire, reflecting the “nostalgia” for a lost signifier / structure (Lacan; Fineman), in Stevens’s verse it often becomes both an utterance of desire and a receptacle for it (leading to the reification of metaphor in a manner similar to the reification of desire itself). In the face of such shortcomings, the poet is compelled to accept the illusoriness of his own “song” as another step ahead toward the attainment of repose.

With this observation, we arrive at the concluding section of the chapter and propose *a summary of the main characteristics of the late Stevensian stance*. Among these, we refer to the renunciation to “Romantic Byronism,” the acceptance of the poem as an icon of reality (rather than a vehicle for imaginative scourings), and the emergence of an “ekphrastic form of knowledge,” which testifies to the image having become part of the thing (Hillis Miller) (also suggestive of further possible analogies with the previously-mentioned scenario of “quantum entanglement”). To announce the lines of investigation of later chapters, we argue at this point that the primary mood of Stevens’s old-age poetry is “equanimity.” Once he has acknowledged the limits of the dualistic approach, Stevens becomes more engaged with producing a type of “everyday poetry,” rooted in repetitiousness and habitual manifestations (Phillips). Through this, he accepts the possibility of the endless return of life and the beginning of a new cycle. His final poetry is also marked by a change of attitude toward the question of “truth” (or the “ultimate” knowledge of reality). The former “steadfast truths” are replaced now with “qualified assertions” (Vendler)—fact exemplified by the prevalence of verbal constructions of the “as if” type. As a result, the fictionalising act becomes the gateway to a return to reality (Critchley). This transformation, Hillis Miller explains, is proof that Stevens’s late “poetry of being” bespeaks an experience of reality that is truly “beyond metaphysics.”

That the conclusive Stevensian mode is indeed reflective of a radical change of perception is also verified by the manner in which the poet relates to the question of “undulation.” As the earlier relentless “motion of thought” is slowed down, natural “undulation” ceases to be an obstacle in the path of knowledge. Now the subject’s vantage point is incorporated in the structure of the thing itself, in its turn part of a reality of constantly “approaching” forms (“The World As Meditation”). Stevens’s final universe, we argue, is less dependent on subjective “representations.” Rather, it is a world that continually “re-presents” itself to humans.

In light of the above and by way of a summary of this initial excursion into Stevens’s dialectical universe, in the concluding part of the chapter we propose *an additional parallel between the “poet’s search” and the “philosopher’s” quest*, suggesting that “undulation” should be added to the gallery of allegorical expressions of the Modern(ist) mindset, together with the earlier-mentioned “book” or “neural network.” The course of Stevens’s epistemological journey, marked by a movement from dualism to holism, from dichotomic pairs to the equivalence of complementary elements, can be regarded as the poetic expression of the worldview championed by quantum

physics, testifying to the equal importance of chaos and order and advocating imperfect knowledge of the object, obtained primarily on the basis of its impact on its environment. Stevens's final acceptance of the inadequacy of a quest for the Kantian "ding-an-sich" and the consequent levelling of the "motion of thought" exemplifies, on a metaphorical level, the transition from existence as "wave" to that as a "particle."

Chapter III: "The Maker's Rage to Order Words of the Sea"—Stevens and the Avatars of the "Supreme Fiction"

Chapter III of our thesis is conceived, in part, as an extension of the previous one, being devoted to *the examination of another "undulatory" movement*, consequent on Stevens's peculiar view on the role of the poet, poetry and metaphor in gaining knowledge of reality. We begin our investigation by focusing on Stevens's statement that the poet must constantly work toward aligning his "particular speech" so as to make it capable of expressing "the peculiar potency of the general." The assumption that we attempt to verify along this segment of our study is that the failure to attain harmony is consequent, on one hand, on the inability of the Stevensian "supreme fiction" to cope with the pressure of reality and, on the other, on a certain inflexible and ambivalent attitude of the poet toward his poetic material.

To this end, in the introductory section of the chapter, we look at a number of aspects connected to *Stevens's understanding of poetry as a "supreme fiction."* One of the reasons for its failure, we argue, should be sought in the poet's own remark on the role of the creative self in an age that appears to be more reliant on Darwin's materialism than on Plato's idealist worldview. Drawing on B. Giamo's observations, we point to the difficult position of the twentieth-century poet, compelled to confront the uncertainties created by the disappearance of God, yet free to release the power of the imagination and to counterpoise it to the relics of the past as well as to the regulatory forces of the present. Starting from this, in what follows, we attempt at explicating Stevens's description of the "supreme fiction" as a source of harmony and belief, an abstract and metamorphic entity capable of offering satisfaction, by looking in some detail at *the principal functions of (poetic) fictions*. Among these, we mention: (i) the "recuperatory-liberating" function, which attests to the possibility to escape dualism (Giamo), a condition which is not inherent to human nature (Falck)—achieved, as the poet himself claims, through the imagination's "victory over the incredible"; (ii) the "ontological-epistemological" function, which in Stevens's case can be equated to the capacity of poetry to unite "origins" and "ends," as through the creation of a "concord-fiction" (Kermode)—a "mundo" of imagination and reality, acting as a binding force and alleviating the individual's condition in any transitional age; (iii) the "revelatory" function, intended to potentiate the "noumenal" through ordinary experience (Falck)—or, in Stevens's own words, capable of offering a "disclosure of reality or of truth"; (iv) the "emotional-aesthetic" function, whereby poetry intends "to give pleasure" not by contemplating majestic forms, but rather by relying on "the beauty of innuendoes," through which it can "re-assert the human existential meaning" (Falck).

In Stevens's own translation, combining all these functions is tantamount to equating "the theory of poetry" with "the theory of life." In our opinion, there is an inherent danger in such an assertion, as it may make the poet inflexible at times and biased toward either side of the equation. Thus, it may be argued that the likely cause of Stevens's frequent dissatisfaction with the "supreme fiction" arises from the impossibility to harmonise two possible roles of the poet—that of a "more severe [...] more harassing master" concerned primarily with theorising the nature, qualities and functions of poetry, and of a "Peter Quince at the Clavier"—a musician interested primarily in giving artistic expression to his knowledge of the world. Furthermore, the task is complicated by the necessity of the poet to address, to the greatest extent possible, all of the aforementioned functions, in order to validate his theoretical claims regarding the "supreme fiction."

To illustrate this complementary "undulation" consequent on the above problems, we propose a

circumscription of the main characteristics of Stevens's poetry. In this sense, we start by examining Richard Gray's remark on the signs of "kinship" between Stevens and other poetic modes. Thus, based on his belief in the prime importance of the imagination, his appreciation of reality as a metamorphic entity, the relentless pursuit of harmony and order, as well as the view that the poet should strive to be a myth-maker, hero and "singer" at once, it is possible to identify a certain Romantic strain in Stevens's attitude. Despite the difficulty of attaching a single descriptive label to his poetry, we may relate to Stevens—as Gray himself does—as to a "Romantic in disguise." Indeed, contrary to his own remarks on the obsolescence of the Romantic mode, on many occasions, the Stevens-poet emerges as a "musician," or as "the voice of angry fear" and "besieging pain." However, this underlying strain is obscured in Stevens, due to the fact that the poem—as he himself defined it—is "the cry of its occasion." Rather than being conceived exclusively in the mind of the poet, the poem is "endlessly elaborating itself." Such a perspective may provide additional insight into Stevens's preference for "masks" and his general tendency to efface his presence from the poem. Consequent on this, the poem emerges as an expression of a universal mind, with a will of its own—no less a self-sufficient entity (a subject in its own right) than material for theoretical explorations (i.e. an "objective" thing). In this scheme, the role of the poet is not to explicate, but rather to "share the confusions of intelligence," allowing the poem to be a "voice" that speaks for itself.

In light of these preliminary observations regarding the manner in which Stevens relates to poetry and to the role of the poet, we proceed to a closer analysis of a segment of his oeuvre in which he gives vent to such ideas either directly or obliquely. We propose in this sense *a distinction between two categories of poems*, which we call "reflexive" and "reflective"—poems that elaborate on the problem in a theoretical way, respectively, texts that illustrate these claims through allegorical representations of the workings of the creative imagination and metaphor. Such a classification is analogous to a distinction proposed by Richard Gray. According to the critic, Stevens's poetry is a combination of "closed" and "open" structures, or pieces that reflect two different manifestations of the creative self: a Poe-like, "centripetal" force, conducive to the creation of texts which are largely impervious to external gaze, respectively, a Dickinson-like, "centrifugal" expression, lending the poetic text to a multiplicity of semantic nuances and calling for continual reevaluation.

Within the first category of texts, Stevens's markedly theoretical elaborations on the nature and characteristics of the creative act, poetry transpires mainly as a "unifying" force—the ultimate form of artistic expression. It is a purveyor of faith, a means to resist rational thinking, or a living organism. Yet, despite the fact that many of the pieces quoted in this section ("The Man with the Blue Guitar," "Variations on a Summer Day," "Man Carrying Thing," "The Creations of Sound") seem to verify the poet's insistence that the imagination should adhere to the structure of the real (thus endowing poetry primarily with a revelatory function), Stevens is often inclined to overlook the danger inherent in his claim that "poetry and materia poetica are one" ("Opus Posthumous"). At times, in his expositions on the nature of the poetic act, the poem becomes identical with its subject matter and they are both subsumed to the abstract notion of "poetry." Therefore, a single poem may become a perfect expression of "the poem" ("A Primitive like an Orb"), while the gesture of giving vent to one's individual creative potential shows an ambition almost equal to uttering the divine logos, or "the peculiar potency of the general" ("Notes toward a Supreme Fiction"). Consequent on this, the imagination which has begot the poem is regarded as a possible substitute for reality itself.

Such a clear-cut stance on the virtues of poetic imagination is nevertheless contradicted in many pieces belonging to the second set. Partially overlapping in discursive strategies with the first category (i.e., including occasional theoretical expositions), these pieces provide a more diversified image of Stevens's direct experience of poetry. Some of them may be interpreted as allegories of the act of reading, speaking of the "entrapment" of the audience by means of figuration ("The Plot

against the Giant”) or addressing the manner in which the subject’s perception of reality is altered through contact with the reality represented in the poem (“Domination of Black”). Other texts disclose a contradictory view on the role of metaphor / imagination, either as a binding force (“Metaphors of a Magnifico”) or as a destructive potential and vehicle for change (“A High-Toned Old Christian Woman”). In other cases, we are confronted with a Stevensian “golden middle way,” as in “The Man on the Dump”—in which the symbolic space of the dump simultaneously represents the rejection of worn-out images and the discovery of things afresh, revealed through metaphoric processes—or in “The Idea of Order at Key West,” where the text created by a poetic-metaphoric activity emerges as an ordered structure, a particular representation in verbal patterns of the grand edifice of the real.

Despite the fact that such pieces reveal, to a significant extent, a highly sophisticated view on poetry and provide us with an image of the creative self that relates to his material with mastery, discernment and, on the whole, with confidence, they do not appear to be sufficient for serving as an alternative to epistemological problems. The movement between opposing poles remains an attribute not only of Stevens’s subject-centric worldview, but of his poetic creed too. Thus, even if the fictionalising act may be gratifying at times, Stevens admits that there remains the imagination that will ask for more, as the objects keep pressuring the mind over and over again. When this happens, the poem can no longer keep pace, and becomes an imperfect reproduction, “a substitute” or a “fake” (e.g., “Arrival at the Waldorf”). The poet is frequently reminded that reality cannot wholly be contained in the poem and that metamorphosis is not always sufficient to expose the essence of the contemplated thing, especially when the physical realm proves too much for the senses or when desire is hard to contain. In such cases, Stevens returns to the other aspect of poetry, the “absence in reality” that spans between the thing and its mental representation, and the poem is reduced to the less impressive gesture of “patching” reality (“The Man with the Blue Guitar”). Revealing reality without instantaneously altering it proves to be an almost impossible undertaking; hence, the power of imagination to transform occasionally becomes a drawback, representing the primary source of Stevens’s disbelief in the efficacy of poetry and metaphor. In consequence, the dissatisfaction and ambivalence arising from the inability to bridge the divide between subject and object are transferred onto his view on poetry.

In our opinion, the reasons for this can be associated with *Stevens’s appreciation of metaphor as “metamorphosis.”* Since in his case “poetry” and “metaphor” / “metamorphosis” are loosely interchangeable terms, we find it necessary to consider in more detail the definition provided in his prose writings (“The Necessary Angel”). We begin this section of our investigation by referring to Wimsatt’s remark on the interdependence of the two—that the poem is “a structure of verbal meaning which keeps the metaphor alive,” and we proceed then by providing a brief critique of the poet’s own thoughts on the problem. Thus, by claiming that the imagination should follow the structure of the real, Stevens unwittingly acknowledges the secondariness of poetic imagination in relation to reality. In addition, his view that metaphor is “the imagination of life” may explain the failure of metaphor as a poetic device (as well as Stevens’s occasional suspicion toward the overall adequacy of poetry as a “supreme fiction”). As we have seen in the previous chapter, imagination is often intrusive, rather than revelatory, and it fails to produce a compensatory dimension by re-creating life itself. This is due to a variety of reasons: the limits of subjective perception, the absence of a level of resemblance in imagination (which may make it prone to “defeating” reality through excessive metaphoric transformations), but also to Stevens’s view of poetry as a “desire for resemblance” (which makes it vulnerable in the same degree as knowledge of reality is vulnerable in face of the intrusions of desire). Of no less importance is the poet’s limited control over the process of harmonising all characteristics of imagination, reason, metaphor and resemblance.

To illustrate these, we look at this point at a series of texts in which Stevens attempts at providing *definitions of metaphor* in a manner similar to the previously-examined definitions of

poetry. Once again, we find the suggestions contradictory. Metaphor is described as a source for an “obscure world,” or a second-degree reality (“The Motive for Metaphor”); it may have a revelatory function, turning “the invisible visible,” or it may conceal, making “the visible a little hard to see” (“The Creations of Sound”). In such cases, reality becomes of lesser importance than the process of metaphorisation, preventing the percipient from communing with the thing perceived. Stevens insists on the necessity to synchronise imagination with the senses (“Poem Written at Morning”), but he is unable to do so whenever sensorial perception becomes excessive. When this happens (e.g., “Bouquet of Roses in Sunlight”), metaphor becomes superfluous. Such examples remind us of the interconnectedness of perception and representation: when metaphor is no longer aligned with the senses, it is forced to draw its material from the filtered image of reality which the mind has retained. Due to this distancing from reality, metaphor may turn into an “evasive presence” (“Add This to Rhetoric”) and thus become subject of Stevens’s ridicule, as in “An Ordinary Evening in New Haven,” where the poet contemplates his own imaginative exaggerations, “the gold easings” and “beetling of belts and lights” with a later reason. According to A. Hollingworth, such instances should be regarded as Stevens’s response to his failure to find a proper image which could capture the thing in accordance with his own standards. However, on other occasions this has the contrary effect of encouraging imaginative exaggerations—excessive “chromatisms” (Vendler), as in “Anything Is Beautiful If you Say It Is,” where metaphor succumbs to cacophony and onomatopoeia. The secondary effect of such extreme manifestations is that the object becomes even more resistant to perception, offering only partial disclosures to be used as material for metaphor (“The Pure Good of Theory”). As Benedict Giomo notes, the value of metaphor and of “supreme fictions” resides in their being a response to a world in undulation and flux. However, as the world changes, the subject’s perception changes too, and thus words may become inadequate, rendering metaphor “oppressive” in its turn. Along such moments of faltering, the Stevensian metaphor ceases to be metamorphosis, and is transferred from a poetic device that should ideally support the larger metaphorical edifice of the poem to being the very motive of analysis. As W. Y. Tindall notes, metaphor frequently takes its toll on the poet, and fails to embody the feeling that he intends to attain, putting it off repeatedly. For Stevens this serves as a reminder that the world reflected in and by metaphor is often no more than a mental construct or a purely theoretical proposal (Woodward), and that excessive reliance on the “supreme fiction” and its poetic carrier is in its turn imbued with dualism and contradiction. Indeed, although metaphor may appear as the best medium through which the imagination can capture reality, it does not only “seize” reality, but often ends up “manipulating” it (Giomo).

In the wake of these additional examples which contribute to verifying our general thesis that Stevens is a “mind of conflicting oppositions,” in the concluding section of the chapter we focus our attention on *the manner in which the issues regarding metaphor and the “supreme fiction” are resolved in the poet’s last creative phase*. Due to the fact that metaphor is directly connected with the concept of “change” (given the connection between the former and metamorphosis), we propose an examination of the process at the end of which Stevens detaches himself from the power of metaphor to induce change and turns outward so as to accept natural transformation. In this sense, we provide an overview of the mutations affecting *one of the central Stevensian metaphors*, the metaphor of the *sun*. Our choice rests on the assumption that this image has a double significance in the poet’s work: on one hand, it is a symbol of the creative strength of poetry (“Prologues to What is Possible”; “The Necessary Angel”) and a constant reminder of the force of reality—the external agency which can compensate for the vagaries of the imagination. Stevens’s treatment of the image of the sun is varied. Only on some rare occasions (e.g., “Description without Place”) is it contemplated as a symbol for appearances; more often than not (and especially in his later texts) it ceases to be a source for representations or imaginative transformations, being approached as the required ligament between part and whole, past and future (e.g., “An Ordinary Evening in New Haven”). Therefore, along Stevens’s creative trajectory, it is possible to speak of a *transition from*

“the-sun-as-an-example” to *“the-sun-as-illumination”*—replicating the movement from solipsistic-subjectivism to holism, consequent on the less-anthropocentric character of the poet’s conclusive stance. Furthermore, Stevens’s sun may also be considered a poetic counterpoint to “absence,” “void” or “gap,” being one of the constant presences which, in various incarnations, will surface all throughout his poetry. As he acknowledges in “The Sense of the Sleigh-of-Hand Man,” “The wheel survives the myths / The fire eye in the clouds survives the gods”: the sun is beyond analysis and definitions, and succeeds in defeating intelligence. Even along those creative intervals in which it represents a “dormant” presence or a source for personification (“The Brave Man,” “Anatomy of Monotony”), Stevens already senses its potential for embodying reality in its “nakedness” (“Sunday Morning”). Upon closer analysis, we can see that Stevens’s treatment of this poetic image converges toward stripping it bare of metaphorical valences—a transformation which, in effect, is characteristic for his entire poetry. Thus, the sun progresses from being a symbol for the divide between appearance and essence (“The Man with the Blue Guitar”) to representing “the naked alpha,” or utmost objective core of reality (“An Ordinary Evening in New Haven”), beyond the former “projects” proposed for it (“Notes toward a Supreme Fiction”). Eventually, in the poems of *The Rock* cycle, it is rid of any symbolic load and regains its natural independence. Emblematic in this sense is “Not Ideas about the Thing but the Thing Itself,” where the sun, [n]o longer a battered panache above snow” is “coming from the outside,” suggesting the triumph of reality over imagination.

In the conclusive part of the chapter, we attempt at explaining this very shift of perspective. To this end, we resort to William Bevis’s suggestions regarding the *emergence of a new, meditative mode* in Stevens’s final poetry. Once ordinary reality (i.e. the reality of conceptual thinking) is rejected, the subject is able to experience the void, which in its turn gives rise to meditative intuition. Since the self becomes of lesser importance, the former barriers between mind and object disappear, and the subject is capable of immersing himself in reality as it is. Consequent on this, we can speak of a certain “desolation of meaning” in Stevens’s last phase (Hollingworth) or of the absence of a “will to create metaphor” (Vendler). At this point, reality becomes a “reminder” for the poet that imaginative metamorphoses pale in front of natural undulation. Thus, the poet’s language becomes more closely aligned with the “scrawny cry” that announces a new cycle of life, and speech is recuperated in its “original earliness.” Stevens admits that the force of poetry, words and metaphor consists in being vehicles for fictions which “remind us of reality” (Litz). An added benefit of this transformation is the revival of imagination: having stepped off the anthropic rostrum, Stevens is able to place his objects in an “ignorant space” (Giomo), allowing them to regenerate of their own accord and thereby offer themselves up for potentially new poetic explorations. In the end, this makes it possible for “undulation” to begin anew and strengthens the position of the subject as a rightful inhabitant of the realm of objects.

Chapter IV: Mythologies That Reflect Their Creator—Stevens and the Dialectic of Local and Trans-Local

In the wake of the observations we have formulated up to this point, our intention in the present chapter is to examine other examples of the Stevensian “undulatory” movement, by way of focusing on *the poet’s ambivalent relationship with his local soil, as well as with European “spaces.”* The assumption that we start from is that Stevens’s late poetry advocates the communion between the self and the earth, as exemplified in “A Mythology Reflects Its Region”—a text emblematic for the late Stevensian holistic stance. In this poem not only is the local soil imbued with the spirit of its inhabitant, but acts as an “extension” of the latter, as the intimate connection between the self and the landscape makes it possible for the subject to accede to the status of a genuine creator (Doreski). The suspension of physical boundaries advocated here by Stevens is paralleled by the de-creation of time, consequent on the poet’s acknowledging that remembrances may be equal to the more

immediate experience of the present. Taking this into consideration, we therefore argue that Stevens's experience of "locality" / "place"—as another space of "undulation" and ambivalence—has implications for secondary, yet no less important questions, such as "rooting," "tradition," "severance" or "inheritance." Additionally, this new dialectic, inseparable from the poet's "search for the object" or for the "supreme fiction," is levelled in his final phase in a manner similar to the resolution of the latter two conflicting movements.

Before looking in detail at a relevant section of Stevens's poetry, we consider it necessary to announce a number of key-terms by offering *an overview of some seminal problems related to the contemporary understanding and experience of "space."* By doing so, we also intend to re-connect the topic of the chapter with a series of previously-formulated points on the relational nature of Modernism / Modernity, as well as on the pertinence of the "metaphor of positioning." Thus, we refer to M. Foucault's perspective on modern "space" as a "conglomerate of sites," a relational entity formed of "series," "trees" or "grids." Given the fact that in the field of literary / cultural theory such revaluations of the concept appeared at a relatively late point, we find it appropriate to sum up a number of its earlier scientific and philosophical expressions. As noted by B. Russell, at the beginning of the twentieth century, the concept suffered major mutations, forcing not only science but common logic to reconsider its previous position. Among these, we may mention Einstein's point on the absence of an "intrinsic" geometry of space (D. Hofstadter) and its implications for Kantian a-priorism, E. Cassirer's view on space as "ideal principle of order," or the revival of a "geometrising" tendency intended to counterbalance the depletion of "space" of conceptual meaning (e.g., Eddington's notion of "world geometry," or the understanding of "space" as a purely mathematical construct, independent of the observer). Juxtaposing these ideas serves us to formulate some preliminary conclusions, based on which we shall examine Stevens's own experience of place in the following sections. Thus, we argue that *the modern view on space is doubly-articulated*—as (i) a subjective concept (dependent on the percipient's position) and (ii) an abstraction (a mathematical, philosophical, abstract or fictional construct). The sum-total of these disjunctive perspectives bring further evidence in support of the claim that the present day understanding of the concept of "space" is fundamentally relational—as is the modern mindset, in general. We can find numerous examples of the kind: Foucault's notion of "heterotopia" (i.e., "spaces" that are simultaneously concrete and abstract, defined only in relation to other "spaces"), the "renormalisation" of particles which occupy different locations of subatomic space (Hofstadter), the Buddhist allegory of space as "Indra's Net" (wherein any point of intersection of time and space becomes a reflection of all other such points of intersection), or the concept of "augmented transitional networks" in cybernetics. Lastly, we refer to the sociologist's view on space as a "network-structure" (M. Mingus), in its turn tributary to ideas formulated by quantum physicists—namely, D. Bohm's insistence on *the importance of "dotted lines"* for defining the dialectic of the present-day experience of place.

We find this perspective on space (and its suggestion that "boundaries" should be approached as "distinctions," rather than separation lines) of primary importance. It may be particularly useful for studies of Modernism, and its penchant for "blurring" frontiers (both on a concrete and metaphorical level). Although it is impossible to subsume all Modernist representations of spatiality to a common denominator, we cannot overlook the fact that "positioning" and "re-positioning" (or "re-adjustment, re-alignment and revaluation"—as Bradbury and McFarlane suggest) lie at the very basis of its aesthetic and philosophical foundations. As an extension of the concept of "dotted-lines," we refer at this point to *the question of "Americanness,"* arguing, in line with R. Shepherd's remark, that it is an unrealistic critical exercise, given the aforementioned diversity of the Modernist poetic / literary spectrum. Indeed, it is extremely difficult to pinpoint the essence of "Americanism," as it implies an interplay of "rooting" and "transcendence" and a dialectic of "nativism" and "internationalism." An example of this is provided by the Chicago and New York

“Schools” (Homburger), which related to such problems in radically different ways (the former advocating a type of naïve “nativism,” while the latter challenged the validity of local values by measuring them against universal ones). Furthermore, the voluntary or imposed exile of many writers of the age (Bradbury) comes to compensate for the admittedly “nativist” impulse of Modernist poets (as is the case, in part, of W.C. Williams).

However, this “internationalist” drive entailed in its turn a new dialectic, conducive to the revaluation of local material. As A. Dore notes, the American artists of the early decades of the twentieth century were particularly concerned with what they perceived to be a threat to the “down-to-earthness” of American poetry. Stevens appears to be no exception to this, if we consider only his claim to be “a native of the place” who “think[s] in it as a native thinks” (“The Man with the Blue Guitar”). His position is nonetheless more delicate, and in line with the ambivalence characteristic for many poets of the age, insofar as the issue of nativeness is concerned (Dore). This is evident if we juxtapose the above assertion to an earlier journal entry by Stevens, in which he decries the “sensational” and “amateurish” way in which “vigor, life and originality” were understood by his fellow Americans. Stevens’s position in this context is further complicated by the fact that he was one of the few “non-exiles.” According to Shepherd, this made it easier for him to “articulate Americanness in a less rhetorical manner.” Yet, in his treatment of such issues as “family” and “tradition” he appears to be notoriously anti-American. One may even speak of a certain “anti-Emersonian” strain in Stevens, arising from his dissatisfaction with local realities (corroborated, for instance, by his growing interest in “imaginative nobility” starting with the 1930’s, which, J. Quinn suggests, is indicative of a markedly European consciousness). With Stevens, “ancestry” becomes important primarily as a vehicle for addressing the experience of “absence,” “gaps” or “severance.” To support this claim, we may refer to poems like “Dutch Graves in Bucks County,” evocative of “the breakdown in the transmission of civilization and culture” (Quinn) or “Two at Norfolk,” a powerful Stevensian invective against the divide between the subject and his soil. To rephrase one of his memorable sayings on the basis of such examples, we may argue that Stevens’s dissatisfaction with reality is the consequence of the fact that life is often perceived as being “neither an affair of place, nor of people.” In light of this, we consider that the poet’s search for a place favourable for “rooting” becomes a counterpoint to the search for the object and the effort to make poetry equal to the “supreme fiction,” having aesthetic and ontological implications.

In the next section of this chapter we set out to verify the above claim, adding first that in Stevens’s case the subject is doubly-estranged from his soil—one the one hand, due to the imaginative paucity of local realities and, on the other, as a result of the forced fictive responses required to compensate for this lack. For the beginning, we propose a series of short interpretive exercises on Stevens’s “*Florida poems*.” At face value, many of these early texts provide us with an image of harmonious co-habitation between self and earth. This, however, is deceptive. Harmonising with the land is done either through distancing (“In the Carolinas”), by contemplating unity in nature without actually participating in it (“In the Clear Season of the Grapes”), by using it as a source for later imaginative transformations (“Fabliau of Florida”) or by attempting to “colonise” the land and tame the wilderness (“Ploughing on Sunday,” “Anecdote of the Jar”). The “wilderness solitude” (Eddins) carries the potential for subjective-metaphorical explorations, but such a characteristic of the early *Harmonium* geography soon discloses its weaknesses. Due to the increased entropy of the local scenery (“Banal Sojourn”), Stevens’s subject feels compelled to distance himself from the land (“O Florida, Venereal Soil,” “Stars at Tallapoosa”). As Eddins aptly notes, the violent local landscape—the fundamentally untameable character of Florida—becomes a burden for the imagination, leading to the subject’s alienation from his soil.

Stevens’s parting from Florida announces a different segment in his relationship with American realities. In the “*post-Florida*” poems, the local soil is very rarely named directly. Rather, it becomes a place for imaginative scourings, being invested with personal meanings, or functioning

as a background for interrogating fictions (Quinn). The more arid Connecticut / Pennsylvania climate represents a springboard for the Stevensian “*mundo*” to unfold. In it, cold stands for a “regulatory force” that serves for keeping fictive edifices in shape and acts as a vehicle for perpetuating barrenness. At this point, late winter thawing is Stevens’s prime symbol of the potential of imagination to transform reality and to create a nature as impressive as the structure of the real. In addition, the less obtrusive local geography makes it possible for the poet to devote himself to the question of “being” (or “essence,” “substratum”) and to invest his “central man”—a symbolic hermit of the imagination—with the role of main occupant of his “*mundo*.” Even so, as his “undulatory” journey progresses, Stevens is faced at times with various natural reminders and finds himself, in consequence, repeatedly contemplating the flux of nature. In the long run, such instances come to expose the frailty of his own fictive designs and the inadequacy of what we may call the “landscape of metaphor” for growing roots. Thus, the poet admits to the impossibility of separating himself from the physical realm (e.g., “An Ordinary Evening in New Haven”) and recognises in the local landscape a pointer to man-made gaps. As a result of this illumination, in the poems that precede *The Rock*, the land re-emerges in its full natural barrenness and, as the imagination becomes more depleted of fecund material, Stevens distances himself from the “*mundo*.” A new Stevensian mode sets in: the poet adopts the persona of a “countryman,” who broods upon the barrenness of the landscape and rediscovers the “necessary angel of earth.”

On the basis of the above, we may argue that both “South” and “North” are largely incompatible with the poet’s search for “what will suffice” and that the uneasiness characteristic for his relationship with local realities corroborates the assumption that in much of his verse “place” is experienced as a motive for transgressions. Stevens’s subject will become an inhabitant of the land only in his final years, once a less subject-centric geography takes over.

Before considering the characteristics of this conclusive phase, we find it necessary to discuss *other examples of transgression of boundaries*, in the body of his poetry dedicated to *fictional explorations of Europe*. We begin by referring to D. Watson’s remark on one of the signs of “displacement” in Stevens—the sense of “lack” pervading his descriptions of America. In the face of the growing “pressure of the real,” exploring far-off territories appeared to be a valid alternative. In this respect, what sets Stevens apart from other Modernists is the uniqueness of his position. According to Watson, the poet typically substituted shopping, postcards and letters for travel and tourism. In addition, “partaking” in other people’s experiences, many of which friends in Europe, represented another way to make contact with the real (Rehder). As was the case of the barren Connecticut, in theory, the lack of direct contact with Europe made it possible for the poet to invest the Old Continent with his private meanings. However, upon closer examination, such an assumption is validated only in part, and another contradictory picture is conveyed: while in his correspondence the poet indeed appeared to be generally appreciative of Europe, in his verse he typically relates to it with a much more critical eye. Thus, through such common symbols as the “lake,” the “cathedral” or the “museum,” Stevens’s Old Continent emerges mainly as a land of imaginative rigidity. The themes addressed in these poems are varied: the stolidness of European thought (“The Doctor of Geneva”), the re-emplacment of traditional values by way of cultural colonisation (“The Comedian as the Letter C”), the obsolescence of the past (“Lions in Sweden”), the lack of thematic unity in the contemplated landscape (“Botanist on Alp No.1”), the necessity to return to the ordinary (“The Man with the Blue Guitar”), the inadequacy of former artistic modes (“Prelude to Objects,” “The Man on the Dump”), or the divide between European and American spaces (“Of Hartford in Purple Light”). Rarely does Europe serve the poet for more than a cursory glance, as material for a simple symbol or a metaphor for the dichotomy imagination-reason. One such case is “Esthétique du Mal,” where the continental background becomes a pretext for an extensive allegory on almost everything defining Stevensian—subject, object, imagination, desire, nature. Nonetheless, even here the poet’s eye is highly critical, which transpires in his approach to

the major themes of the poem: the question of severance induced by reason or anthropic representations, the tendency to subjectivise nature and the consequent creation of a landscape of pure thought, or the role of the mind as “genius of evil.” By and large, “Esthétique du Mal” represents one of the most categorical rebuttals of antiquated Continental thought, epitomised in the depiction of revolutionists as rational “lunatics.”

By way of conclusive remarks on Stevens’s treatment of Europe, we should thus note that, in spite of the generally depreciative stance, the Old Continent has a well defined role within the matrix of his poetic thought. To return to our earlier remarks on the transformations of the concept of “space” as a compound of concrete and abstract significances, we may find in Stevens’s European “experience” an example of the Foucauldian “crisis heterotopia. On one hand, it represents a space where imagination can be released in response to the occasional imaginative lack of the local realities. As Watson argues, Stevens’s Europe also represents a means to expose the “illusoriness of America” (thereby being a form of resistance to provinciality), while the exploration of the internationalist scene serves to counteract the ideological pressures of the age. On the other hand, of no less importance for the heterotopian European dimension is the creation of further relational spaces in which Stevens usually displaces people or objects, and thus violates the common notions of territorial separation (illustrating, once again, the view that boundaries are best understood as “dotted-lines”).

After this necessary critical and interpretive detour, in the remaining section of the chapter we *return to the question of Stevens’s relationship with the native soil.* We think that such an effort is both justified and required, given that in his final poetic phase Stevens’s interest in Europe fades and a new sense of locality arises (Quinn; Rehder). Peculiar to this conclusive stage is the replacement of the rather rigid notion of “land” by the more integrative experience of “landscape”, which has the benefit of being evocative of the co-habitation of the human and the natural elements (Pollock-Ellwand) and attests to the equivalence of terms that have previously been seen as mutually exclusive—“person,” “space,” “mind,” “spirit” or “world” (Helgeson). Inside a more fluid geography, such formerly disjunctive items emerge as interdependent. In the poems of *The Rock* (and a number of posthumous texts) tradition too acquires a new meaning, and we argue in this sense that life is now felt as an “affair of *both* people and places.” Stevens’s late poetry of place suggests that in his final phase the poet has fully acknowledged the impact of one’s native soil on the subject, having accepted the limits it inevitably imposes on personal freedom (Eddins). Stevens develops a personal tradition through repetition and routine (Parrish Dice Henry), and at the same time works toward the integration of the individual into the universal realm, by attempting to reach down to the entrails of “earth itself” (Eddins). Among the virtues of the rediscovered local landscape we insist on the absence of gestation and the more orderly expansion of nature, consequent on which it is possible to speak of a new “birth of sight”—proof of the conviction that one should relate to the local soil primarily as a vital physical space.

The compass-points of Stevens’s old-age Connecticut are “rivers” and “rocks”—“centres” toward which the poet’s gaze is directed (Hollingworth), but, we believe, also symbols of roots that grow out of earth of their own accord. Thus, the local scenery performs a double-function: on the one hand, it is a place that replenishes the imagination (similar to the role performed by the sun, as we have argued in the previous chapter) and, on the other, it stands for an extended icon of the compound of habitat and human factor. For an illustration, we propose in this sense a distinction between *two sets of poems.* Thus, in texts such as “The Rock,” “The Hermitage to the Centre” or “On the Way to the Bus” Stevens provides us with poetic images of a place that serves primarily as a “habitation of the whole. They are indicative of the subject’s rejuvenation through the return to nature (reality), as well as of the interdependence of mind and matter. Within this set, the anthropic element is indistinguishable from the environment and rarely affects the shape of reality: the movement is from nature to humans, rather than the other way round. An exception would be “To

an Old Philosopher in Rome,” which, although not thematically focused on the Connecticut landscape, deserves special mention here, as it provides us with the last (and one of the few) examples of an appreciative treatment of Europe. Additionally, it is a testimony to the survival of the anthropic element through its suggestions regarding the pensive dissolution of borders between interior and exterior spaces (as such, probably one of the best examples of what K. Woodward calls “the ecology of the mind”). This first set of poems is also illustrative of the typical strategy employed by Stevens for making his subject an inhabitant of the place: the poetic images succeed one another along a three-step process, characterised at a first moment by what we prefer to call the “controlled separation” of self and earth, followed by the creation of “sterile spaces” which can be reinvested with fresh meanings, and concluding by the uncovering of the commonalities between the subject and the local place.

It is in the second set of poems, however, that Stevens’s Connecticut arises in full splendour. Peculiar to these is the pervasive sense of flux and the self-sufficiency of the local landscape in relation to other spaces. In pieces such as “Reality Is an Activity of the Most August Imagination,” “St. Armorer’s Church from the Outside” or “The River of Rivers in Connecticut” not only does the poet show confidence in the strength of his native soil (as indicated by naming the places under scrutiny), but he also insists on their potential to reveal hidden essences. Thus, in the first of these, the relentless dispersion of natural elements suggests a picture analogous to a holographic image—ether and substance at once, and fundamentally different from the inert, fragile and eventually lifeless representations of Europe. In the second text, the marginal and neglected particle becomes the icon of the whole and another symbol of an upward growing root, part of a landscape in which humans perform the primary role of “fertilisers” of the land (rejuvenating it, and thereby renewing themselves too).

Such texts suggest that in Stevens’s final cycle the “ecology of the mind” is eventually superseded by an “ecology of being.” To support this idea, we conclude this chapter by examining “The River of Rivers in Connecticut,” a poem that echoes the more impersonal suggestions of “A Mythology Reflects Its Region.” In this text, which we consider the most illustrative of Stevens’s new-found bond with the Connecticut geography, the local element simultaneously acquires a timeless dimension (obsoleting ancient myths, as that of Stygia) and becomes a symbol of place as a universal hermitage, transcending concreteness of form and replicating itself in any component particle of the landscape.

Chapter V: “The Last Largeness, Bold to See”—Holism, Zen, and the Subdual of the Anthropic Element in Stevens’s Poetry

The last chapter dedicated to discussing Stevens’s poetry as a compound of various “places of undulation” has the primary role of complementing the observations we have made up to this point. We now set out to exemplify and verify our earlier claim that Stevens’s poetic trajectory is characterised by the combination of two dialectical spaces—between the members of dichotomic pairs, as well as between two contradictory but complementary impulses (viz. dualistic-reductionism and holism). *By devoting our attention to the latter of the two we intend to look at a number of poetic examples which could support the assumption that Stevens’s search for the “complicated, the amassing harmony” moves in a circular way.* For the beginning, we juxtapose two late Stevensian texts, “An Old Man Asleep” and “The Plain Sense of Things,” which come to support the view that the anthropic element is at the same time indispensable for Stevens’s “poetic apprehension” of the world and a source of fragmentation, complicating the flux-like nature of reality by the relentless “motion of thought.” We also regard these two poems as illustrative of *two major modes in which the problem of dichotomies is addressed in the poet’s oeuvre*: (i) the balance of the anthropic and non-anthropic components (or the acknowledgement of the inseparability of mind and matter, imagination and reality, inner and outer realms) and (ii) the almost complete

effacement of subjectivity and conceptual thinking, consequent on exposing the illusoriness of existence and the adoption of a meditative stance. Based on this distinction, we shall attempt at reading a relevant section of Stevens's poetry through the conceptual lenses of *holism*, respectively, *Buddhist / Zen spirituality*.

Given the theoretical complexity of such interpretive frames, we find it appropriate to circumscribe both of them more precisely. Thus, we refer first to a series of "signs" indicative of the presence of a holistic strain in modern consciousness, pointing out, at the same time, the benefits of the holistic perspective. Among these, we mention: (i) the primacy of "convergence," "reconciliation" and "fusion," or the importance of the centre as a point of unity and superintegration in Modernism (McFarlane), (ii) the complementarity of the Postmodernist and holistic perspectives, as well as the differences and similarities between them (especially their shared interest in what McKinney describes as the "non-hierarchical interplay of opposites"), (iii) holism as a means to achieve coherence, or an imaginative mode of thought which transgresses boundaries (Rorty), and (iv) holism as an alternative to rationalist absolutism and extreme secularism / intellectualism (W. Bloom). Besides these examples from the field of culture / philosophy, we point to its principal manifestations in science: the uncertainty principle as indication of the unity and interrelatedness of parts, F. Capra's proposal of a shift toward a universal "ecology," or the holistic kernel of relativity theory and quantum physics and their insistence on appearances relative to observers and the act of observation (G. Zukav).

After this, we proceed to examining some of the tensions inherent in holism, consequent on two distinct views on the "whole"—as "inexpressible oneness" and as a "unity of opposites". We reproduce, in general lines, McKinney's arguments, which point to the paradoxical nature of holism. Thus, by being inherently opposed to reductionism, holism may eventually become "anti-holistic"; furthermore, the holistic argument is conducive to the creation of an endlessly recursive argumentative loop, given that any solution to the aforementioned opposition necessitates the integration of both holism and reductionism into a larger "whole" (in its turn likely to be included in an even larger structure, along a process that would go on *ad infinitum*). To resolve such logical shortcomings, the solution is to reconcile opposites by relating to them as to sides of the same coin—for instance, to approach "order" and "chaos" as forms of the same reality (we are reminded here of Stevens's "Connoisseur of Chaos," a text we have mentioned in passing at the end of Chapter II). This, however, is conducive to another paradox, that of simultaneously having to affirm and deny the members of the dichotomic pairs (again, similar to the problems raised by Stevens in "The Snow Man"). Among other problematic areas of holism, we may mention (i) the overlap between its principles and those of related scientific-philosophical approaches (such as monistic idealism and noetic monism—which advocate the view that reality is merely a function of thought, respectively, speak in favour of the co-participation of mind and matter in creating reality), as well as (ii) the multiplicity of connotations of holism (as a methodological thesis or a metaphysical one—the latter of the two being classified into ontological, property and nomological holism) (Healey).

Given these problems inherent in the principles and definitions of holism, we consider it necessary to adhere to a well-defined line of holistic thought that may prove useful for evaluating Stevens's own view of the "whole." To this end, in what follows, we provide *an overview of the main characteristics of David Bohm's gnosis*, the physicist-philosopher who advocates a type of ontological holism which, in our view, can most closely be associated with the poet's conception. Bohm's declared intention is to construct a theory that combines noetic monism and monistic idealism, aiming at reconciling holism with the materialistic creed. We find Bohm's views on the sources of "fragmentation" especially useful for discussing the tensions underpinning Stevens's poetry (and the Modern / Modernist mind too). In Bohm's view, rigid thinking and reproduction of knowledge through mechanical learning are conducive to the perpetuation of dualism. In addition, the Western conception of "measure" as a means to reveal the essence of reality is another source of

confusion and fragmentation, given that ultimate reality (in a manner that echoes the Oriental perspective on the problem) should be viewed fundamentally as “immeasurable.” These points enable us to use hindsight and formulate a number of preliminary remarks on the similarities and differences between Stevens and Bohm: their mutual emphasis on the fluidity of thought and the necessity of creative, active engagement with knowledge (i.e. the importance of “creative perception” as a way to reveal the “immeasurable”), but also their disjunctive views on the practical usefulness of “absolute thought” or the possibility to create an “ultimate poem” (or “supreme fiction”).

We continue by inspecting other characteristics of the Bohmian holistic matrix, and we draw attention to the scientist’s interpretation of mind and matter as “abstractions” from a “universal flux.” A concept that we find essential for analysing Stevens’s poetry is the view that reality is a flow of things in becoming. Thus, Bohm’s formula for inseparability is “Undivided Wholeness in Flowing Movement” (or “holomovement”), a perspective that attests to the primacy of “flow” over “thing” and offers a solution to the otherwise rigid standpoints of relativity and quantum physics (both of which are overly narrow in their appreciation of such notions as “time,” “space,” “order” or “matter”). What makes Bohm’s gnosis unique in relation to other holistic approaches is the distinction he proposes between the “implicate” (“enfolded”) and “explicate” (“unfolded”) orders. The world exposed to ordinary perception is that of the “explicate” order—a liminal manifestation of the sum total of deeper, imperceptible “implicate” orders, each of which contains, “enfolded,” all other “implicate” orders” as potential waiting to become manifest. That we do not perceive these “implicate” forms of order is explainable, on one hand, by the intensity of our experience of the “explicate” order and, on the other, on account of the limits of memory (dependent on the knowledge of time and space—concepts that make sense only in the “explicate” order). Our inevitable exposure to the “explicate order” makes us regard it as the sole form of “order,” thereby aggravating causality and fragmentation.

This overview of Bohm’s tenets serves as an occasion for summing up other points of intersection between Stevens and holism, on the basis of the interpretive-argumentative sections offered the previous chapters. Among these, we may mention the fluid nature of Connecticut realities in the poet’s late verse (a landscape in which the sum of the parts is frequently larger than the individual elements but also indistinguishable from them), the presence of nested structures and “inchoate” forms (whereby, as in “The Rock,” the “mind-as-part-of-reality” and “reality-as-part-of-the-mind” may be regarded analogous to Bohm’s concept of “enfolding”), or the images of emerging “roots” which become manifest and shed influence, as in a process of “unfolding” (“St. Armorer’s Church from the Outside” or “The River of Rivers in Connecticut”).

By using the concepts enumerated above (i.e. “Undivided Wholeness in Flowing Movement,” “explicate / unfolded” and “implicate / enfolded” order) we proceed to verifying our earlier statement regarding the “circularity” of Stevens’s poetic-epistemological trajectory. We begin by calling attention to *another necessary distinction—between “perception” and “experience” of the “whole.”* We consider this of seminal importance, since the belief in the harmonious “whole” prevails in almost any segment of the poet’s oeuvre, yet it does not necessarily attest to a genuinely holistic perspective. For a long time, Stevens contemplates unity and harmony from a distance and the closest he gets to a holistic matrix of the Bohmian sort is in his emphasis on the complementarity of opposites. To explain this, we propose a short critique of Dana Wilde’s arguments in connection with “Description without Place,” a poem which may be read by recourse to the conceptual frame of quantum physics. According to Wilde, the points on which the quantum view and Stevens’s appreciation converge are: the view that reality is a result of the interaction between percipient and thing perceived, the contextual nature of truth, the role of the imagination as a form-giving force, and the inefficiency of language to establish and maintain order. However, we argue that this poem is merely a partial illustration of Bohmian holism. Thus, although he intersects

with the scientist, especially in section III of the poem (e.g., in his emphasis on the existence of some “universal intellect” or the image of a seed that contains encoded the concrete pattern toward which reality as a force evolves), Stevens dismisses “intellectual arrangements” as foreign to the structure of reality (while Bohm considers the process of knowledge integral to the “explicate” order—as an abstraction similar to matter). In addition, contrary to his own thesis on this very problem, in the conclusive section of the poem, his insistence on the primacy of the “theory of description” leads to reifying thought and comes to illustrate one of the major sources of dissatisfaction along the poet’s search—the preoccupation for validating abstract notions, conducive to his distancing from concrete experience.

For examples of actual experience of the whole, we turn to Stevens’s early poetry. Through a number of interpretive exercises, we aim at proving that in this initial phase of poetic development, wholeness is sensed and accepted as *a truth of nature*. In our opinion, the reason for this has to be sought in the poet’s lesser concern for poetic imagination, which ensures fewer intrusions of the subject in the process of knowledge. Stevens’s holistic poems of this period are remarkably unitary in themes and compositional strategies. The prevailing picture at this point is of a world in unstoppable flux—a characteristic of reality conveyed both through imagery and poetic devices. As in “The Load of Sugar Cane,” Stevens often resorts to simile and repetition, which we believe to have an advantage over metaphor, as they point to interdependence and continuity, rather than perceived similarity (as is the case of the metaphoric experience, reliant on the perception of resemblance). These poems announce the pervasively holistic stance of *The Rock*, and, in a way, even succeed in conveying the holistic view more convincingly. Thus, in many of these texts the anthropic element remains central, and is not yet severed from the world it is part of (as will be the case, for instance, of a large segment of the post-*Harmonium* universe). The equal importance of the anthropic and non-anthropic components (or their “marriage,” in “Life Is Motion”) is thus more evocative of a type of holism of the Bohmian sort, insofar as it advocates the co-participation of mind and matter in creating reality. The characteristic juxtaposition of the inner and outer realms (“Of the Surface of Things,” “The Curtains in the House of the Metaphysician”) not only suggests the poet’s yet unshaken belief that knowledge is a living process, but also points in the direction of the “immeasurable.” On other occasions (e.g., “Tattoo”) the interdependence of all things is conveyed by a double motion—from exterior to interior and back again—corroborating the view that reality has a liminal quality (similar to a spider’s web) and that once it succeeds in overcoming perceptive barriers, its knowledge contributes to the birth of a new form of sight.

Nevertheless, among the poems of this period, there are already signs indicative of a tendency to contemplate wholeness. Thus, in “Indian River,” a divide is created between the world as a “whole” and the subject’s perception of it, as the poetic self finds it necessary to verify the perceived unity against the body of previously accumulated knowledge and experience. In a similar fashion, in “Anecdote of Men by the Thousand” or “Theory” the knowledge of the “whole” is only partial, due to the temporal dead-zone between experience and its conveyance, respectively, as a result of the encroachments of theoretical-conceptual thought and memory. In such pieces there is also a greater sense of fragmentation and a less dynamic reproduction of natural flux. In fact, these poems point to the contemplated wholeness of the later creative phases. “Anatomy of Monotony” (a text included in the 1931 reprint of *Harmonium*) is already suggestive of this tendency, through its emphasis on the detrimental influence of desire (which sends us back to our earlier remarks in Chapter II and III). Starting with *Ideas of Order*, characteristic for Stevens’s understanding of the “whole” is the inability to match the undulation of thought with the flux of the real. There are occasional moments when the poet contemplates the possibility of union within the human realm, only to discover its inadequacy in comparison with natural wholeness (“Yellow Afternoon”). Yet, the most convincing argument to support the idea that “severance” and “distancing” are now the main attributes of Stevens’s perception is provided in the very piece in which he appears to be closest to Bohm (at

least in linguistic formula), “Two Versions of the Same Poem,” where the perception of “undivided whole” (described as “an ocean of watery images”) eventually succumbs to rational analysis and intellectual speculation.

Given the fact that along the previous chapters we have already discussed in some detail the main co-ordinates of Stevens’s “undulatory” movement as well as the ways in which the wave-like curve is flattened in his final phase, we do not consider it necessary to provide further examples of the later holistic stance. We conclude this section of the chapter by remarking the merits of the poet’s occasional later reflections on unity: the interdependence between “apartness” and the now “distant” whole for the knowledge of the “amassing harmony,” as well as the tacit acknowledgement of the possibility to reunite the subject with the unbroken world.

Indeed, in the poems that precede *The Rock*, Stevens intuits the ingredient required for this reunion—a “solitude of the self,” as he calls it in “Things of August”. With this remark, we begin our survey of *the second Stevensian approach to harmony*: the subdual of the anthropic or mind-centric element—an effort through which the poet appears to concur with a number of concepts of Oriental origin. As with the previous section, we find it important to provide a brief theoretical introduction to the topic. Thus, we consider first a series of possible connections between (quantum) holism and Oriental thought: (i) the view that the world is made up of “two-body” entities (Kohl), (ii) the allegory of “Indra’s Net” as an example of “internettedness” (Shrobe), (iii) the centrality of “complementarity” and the fundamentally elusive character of reality in quantum physics (Kohl), or (iv) the “emptiness of the phenomenal world” (regarded by R. Aitken as a pervasive suggestion in Stevens’s “The Snow Man”). In the light of these, we argue that recourse to several concepts of Oriental lineage may complement our previous remarks on Stevens and holism.

While at this point, we also refer to a number of connections between the East and the West on a literary plane (following K. Flanagan summary): (i) the growing interest of Modernist poets in Oriental artistic techniques, consequent on the perceived “blurring” of poetic expression at the turn of the century and the distrust of overly abstract language, (ii) the primary importance of natural imagery for potentiating emotion, (iii) the more extensive use of images and colour accompanied by the depiction of the “spirit of the thing,” (iv) the greater adequacy of Chinese and Japanese poetry to suggest “harmony” and “order,” or (v) the capacity of the ideogram to carry a root meaning and to serve as a pathway to dissolving boundaries between diverse artistic modes. Among other areas of overlap, we may refer back to the Post-Impressionist visual revolution that gave precedence to the pure instantaneity of the present (Krauss), similar to the concept of “suchness” championed by Buddhist / Zen thought.

Despite the possibility to connect Stevens’s Modernist perspective with Eastern art and spirituality on several levels, we consider it important to draw attention, once again, to certain issues arising from the poet’s delicate relationship with “the Orient.” As has been pointed out by scholars (Qian; Aitken), Stevens’s own references regarding the relevance of the Eastern element for his art and thinking are scarce and unreliable. In most of his remarks on the topic, recorded in his written correspondence, he appears to show meagre interest in the Orient. Thus, while he occasionally admits to admiring Japanese poetry and Buddhist art (“Letters”; Aitken), at times his position appears to be categorically dismissive (as in his oft-quoted and misinterpreted “I hate orientalism,” which Qian reads as indicative of Stevens’s rebuttal of a certain sentimental treatment of the Orient). We therefore deem it necessary to explain our intention in connecting Stevens and Zen Buddhism. While we agree with W. Bevis’s remark that certain aspects of the poet’s thought can be better understood by recourse to Eastern concepts (such as his meditative mode) we believe that any attempt to prove that Stevens can be considered in part Oriental (to draw on Bevis again) is fraught with the same danger of critical “framing” as the one we referred to in connection with the problem of “Americanness” in the context of the previous chapter. In consequence, our effort is restricted to highlighting further ways in which Stevens attains composure, as through certain points

of “intersection” between his sensibility and the Zen / Buddhist way.

Our analysis of such connections begins by reevaluating the importance of “stillness” and “still point” for Stevens (in line with our remarks in Chapter I). We argue in this sense that they may be considered examples of “quiescence,” which in Oriental thought, as in Stevens indicate the self-sufficiency of the world before the appearance of conceptual thinking. To enlarge upon this, we provide an overview of other seminal Eastern concepts, such as that of the “dust” of appearances and its sources—sensorial perception (Shrobe), genetic inheritance, cultural background and the demands of the self (Csikszentmihályi). The Buddhist / Zen answer to the impossible task of lifting the veils of illusion (the process of “carving away” reality) is to renounce to the “ongoing commentary on the world” (Shrobe). Stevens shows a similar intuition early in his poetry in a memorable line of “The Emperor of Ice-Cream”: “let be be the finale of seem.” This first connection enables us to focus on the Zen emphasis on the necessity to let go of concepts and expectations, the primacy of the “world of just now, just as it is” (Shrobe), and the importance of accepting the “instantaneousness” of experience in attaining enlightenment.

In what follows, we propose an interpretive exercise based on the juxtaposition of Mu Chi’s painting “Six Persimmons” and two of Stevens’s early poems, “Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird” and “Six Significant Landscapes.” By using Peter Chou’s reading of Mu Chi’s piece as critical support, we proceed to pinpointing some of the commonalities between the Chinese artist’s vision and Stevens’s poems: the persimmons as images of the pure thing that resists intelligence and Stevens’s emphasis on the semiotic potential of objects, or the underlying suggestions regarding the intrusion of will as well as the need to efface the self for obtaining clear knowledge. We also return briefly to “The Snow Man,” the Stevensian text that advocates meditation and compassionate engagement as primary modes of relinquishing the self and of discovering “voidness.”

Having summed up Chou’s reading of “Six Persimmons” as an allegory of the stages of enlightenment, we propose an interpretation of Stevens’s recurring blackbird of “Thirteen Ways...” as a representation of the “first idea,” but also as a doubly-articulated symbol of the physical thing and life force, simultaneously suggestive of change and immutability. We then turn to “Six Significant Landscapes” and align our interpretation with Qian, with a view to highlighting other commonalities between Stevens and Oriental art and thought: the transgression of boundaries through the use of an ekphrastic technique, the presence of imagery common to Chinese landscape painting, the focus on a single object and the pervading feeling of joy. In our opinion, this poem is also an indirect critique of conceptual thinking, a plea for the complementarity of part and whole, and an extended metaphor of the belief in “unity in diversity.” As is the case of the Buddhist notion of “suchness,” Stevens seems to suggest that enlightenment arises through the sudden perception of the thing (Qian), accompanied, inevitably, by fluid perception—a standpoint that echoes the Zen belief in the validity of a “don’t hold anything” attitude (Shrobe).

Except for such more pervasive connections, in other early pieces Stevens only partially intersects with Oriental concepts. Thus, in “The Wind Shifts” he resorts to a strategy similar to the one employed in the above two texts—the use of a single image which he tests in various hypostases; additionally, this poem reinforces the emergent dissatisfaction with the anthropic element in its oblique plea for selfless meditation. A more imperfect overlap is provided by “Valley Candle,” where the poet addresses the question of the veil of appearances, but in the end tips the scales in favour of man-made objects that survive perception and develop a substantive life of their own (as is the case also in “Anecdote of the Jar”). As his poetic vision progresses, the connections with Eastern concepts become rather rare. We may in fact argue that the “Oriental element” performs a course which is analogous to the circular movement of his holistic stance. At the close of *Harmonium*, he decries the looming presence of the self in “The Cuban Doctor,” but in the subsequent volumes his interest in the topic appears to fade—which we explain on account of the increased fragmentation of the world as well as the poet’s growing concern for order (including the

search for harmony through poetry / creative imagination and the required effort to focus on the self). Beginning with *Transport to Summer*, the possible points of intersection become more numerous, especially in the form of critiques of subjectivity. The texts which speak of the resurgence of a selfless stance indicate that the “no-mind” condition is at this point contemplated, or willed, rather than experienced. Thus, in “Gigantomachia” renunciation to the individual self still leads to the emergence of a greater, collective self behind the veils of appearance, while in “The House Was Quiet and the World Was Calm,” the arresting of conceptual thought (in a manner reminding of the Buddhist “void”) is forced into existence by the activity of the pensive reader. Once Stevens realises that the experience of the self eventually leads to alienation—hence to a “skeletal” existence (“Less and Less Human, O Savage Spirit”)—we are witnesses, again, to a growing sympathy for the real and the ordinary. Texts like “Credences of Summer” or “The Prejudice against the Past” point to the prerequisite for a return to ordinariness and the rediscovery of “suchness”—relinquishment of the past and of former intellectual and emotional fakes.

It is in his final phase, we believe, that Stevens’s vision gets closest to such Zen / Buddhist concepts as “no mind” or “no self”. According to Tompkins, this is the result of a gradual process, involving a number of partial successes (in “The Auroras of Autumn,” “The Rock” or “The World as Meditation”), but in the end it is conducive to a new “experience of the self.” In this context, our own argumentation lays emphasis on the prevalence of “sleep” in the poems of *The Rock*—a further means to transgress boundaries between ordinary and meditative consciousness and ultimately an extension and renewal of life. “Substance” and “emptiness” are interdependent at this stage, while “waking” becomes a testimony to the equality of “selfhood” and “otherness.” As “A Clear Day and No Memories” indicates, Stevens also finds it easier now to arrest linear thought and to empty language and mind of their conceptual burden (consequent, to a significant extent, on relinquishing what Bevis calls the “dazzling metaphor”). Contrary to what this may imply for a typically Western mind, with the late Stevens such an experience does not lead to renunciation. In fact, many of the pieces, including the aforementioned text, are pervaded by a sense of elation. This is verified by the use of positive statements for rendering “voidness” and the experience of the “no mind”—as, for instance, in “Vacancy in the Park.” In light of this, we may argue, together with S. Phillips, that “everydaymindedness” (that is, a condition impervious to conceptual thinking) becomes a central characteristic of Stevens’s final poetry.

We conclude our excursion into the possible parallels between the poet and Oriental spirituality by a *brief reference to the previously mentioned problem of “critical framing”* and the relevance of establishing such connections for readings of Stevens’s poetry. In particular, we enlarge upon Bevis’s critique of M. Perloff’s arguments on the “Pound – Stevens era.” As Bevis suggests, of the two poets, it is Stevens who manages to better capture the essence of the Modernist spirit, that is, its pursuit of “impersonality in art.” Analogically, we propose circumscribing Stevens’s peculiar position among other Anglo-American Modernists (Eliot and Pound) from the viewpoint of the function of the “Oriental element” in their works. Such an analogy, we believe, is justified, given the fact that Modernism and Zen are connected at a fundamental level—namely, in their emphasis on fluidity of perception and their suspicion toward rigid, conceptual thinking. Our succinct reappraisal of the question of “translating” Oriental values into a radically different spiritual and cultural space leads us to the conclusion that of the three Stevens is the one most closely affiliated with the “Zen way.” Unlike Eliot or Pound, for whom the Eastern material served primarily as a testing ground for aesthetic explorations or for formulating their own ideas of order, Stevens *intuited* that the only mode of approaching reality which may ensure “illumination” is reliant on selfless contemplation, constant engagement and immersion in the quotidian. Especially in his final poetry, knowledge emerges in the wake of lesser subjectivity, and the return to a “quiet normal life,” which seeks satisfaction in the experience of “thingness” and “ordinariness,” aligns him even more with the Zen spirit of “just now, just as it is.”

Conclusions: Two Versions of the Same Poet, or the “Amassing Harmony” as “Savage Harmony”

We begin the Conclusions of our thesis by pointing, once again, to the two disjunctive drives in Stevens’s poetry—fact remarked by many of the scholars we have quoted in support of our research. On the one hand, there is the Stevens of “gaps,” “absence,” “severance,” and conflicting “impulses”—the poet of exaggerations, ambiguity, ambivalence and “contrary theses;” at the other end, we find the advocate of harmony, selfless meditation and reintegration—a spirit whose impetus for order arises from the intuition of a mysterious underlying commonality of being and world. As our argumentation has tried to prove, common to these “two versions of the same poe[t]” is the relentless “motion of thought,” the prime-mover of Stevens’s universe, the force that creates and re-creates “undulation,” yet the necessary ingredient for the discovery of an “amassing harmony” which is at once “savage and subtle and simple.”

Along our inquiry, we have come across numerous occasions on which recourse to a variety of methods of investigation, aimed at setting Stevens’s vision in relation to an aesthetic, philosophical and scientific background, has led us to the conclusion that the poet’s vision is not altogether singular. What this sinuous course, targeted at the “finding of a satisfaction,” exposes in the final analysis is the fundamental weakness of dualistic thinking and the central role of the percipient in the general process of knowledge—both of which are seminal characteristics of the Modern / Modernist mind. Stevens’s “poetic apprehension” is a most eloquent example of the limits of a human-centric perspective, manifesting itself in various forms: the inability of poetry to comprehend the complexity of the phenomenal world, the provisional nature of one’s imaginative proposals, the imperfect character of rational thought or the blurring of reality through perception. In fact, we may argue that a strict adherence to a dualistic-deterministic perspective that disposes the world into categories (and the only one that would justify, by force of logic, the belief in the possibility of a “supreme fiction” or the existence of a “ding-an-sich”) is conducive to a form of recursive thinking, sending the pensive subject into an endless loop. Thus, the primary paradox behind the poet’s vision is a derivative of his creed in the essentially fluid nature of reality, which makes the subject’s compound of perceptual, rational and imaginative faculties just as elusive, effectively precluding the possibility to arrive at any form of knowledge of the absolute. Since he intuits this contradiction all too often, he finds himself engaged in a search for escape routes, which may explain the complementary impulse for the transcendent and the stable (Hesla). To paraphrase Richard Rorty, we may say that Stevens’s “essentialist” drive is an expression of a certain “totalitarianism” of the mind.

That the dualistic frame is prone to failure can also be seen in the limits it imposes on the ontology of the known. Thus, due to the fact that comprehension of reality is severely curtailed by the imperfect, selective nature of both senses and reason, any contact with the object leads, by definition, to its transformation, making the absolute even more intangible. This uneasy realisation often compels Stevens to re-compose reality, erring on the side of creative imagination. Hence, the return to undulation is inevitable. As Hillis Miller explains, one of the ways in which Stevens seeks to reconcile opposites and escape this condition consists in rapid oscillation between extreme poles, to such an extent that his final verse becomes almost completely “disembodied.”

In addition to the above, we should point to another fundamental flaw in the subjectivist stance, founded on the belief that the “objective” reality, though dependent on the percipient, is a something “out there” to be comprehended. Its limits become evident once the subject is deprived of a solid point of reference and consequently forced to face himself. As the exponent of an entire generation marked by the “disappearance of God,” Stevens considers it mandatory to secure his own frail position as an individual and as the representative of a whole race by looking for viable alternatives that could replace such lost values. Rorty aptly points to the misguided nature of such a conviction and the path Stevens is afraid to contemplate—that that which has disappeared,

including “God,” may not need to be replaced by anything. In line with this suggestion, Stevens is also exemplary of a group of thinkers that F. Lentricchia calls “conservative fictionalists,” who admit that the world is a fundamentally chaotic, violent and illusory space, yet fail to acknowledge within this scheme the illusoriness of their own fictions.

Summing up the above, we may say that Stevens’s sensibility encompasses two types of poetry, one of “fragmentation” and “neurosis” and another of “the imagination latent within the words themselves” (Falck).

Yet, along this image of a poet of tensions and paradox, our thesis has also tried to point to another facet of Stevens’s personality, suggesting that his vision progresses in a circular way. This circularity, converging toward the revelation of harmony in his final phase is sustained by the symbolic titles of his volumes of poetry. Furthermore, not only does “*The Rock*” evoke the immutability of order wished-for by “*Harmonium*,” but the opening pieces of each of the cycles are supportive of Stevens’s concern for thematic unity, all of them epitomising the pervasive mood of the volumes they are part of. Such pointers go counter to Hillis Miller’s claim that “at the beginning Stevens is as far as he goes,” and enable us to read his oeuvre as “a poetry of return”—one which constantly announces the reconciliation of opposites characteristic for his conclusive stage. His final stance is not a mere reproduction or recuperation of origins, but rather an illumination through the necessary experience accumulated between “issue and return.” Among its characteristics, we mention the equivalence of “stillness” and “motion,” the need to turn outward, the secondariness of the anthropic element, the depletion of the imagination, and a generally more minimalistic poetic expression. Having developed a more intimate bond with ordinary local realities, in his final years Stevens writes a poetry that we may call, following Falck’s suggestions, a poetry of “identification” or “sympathy,” illustrating the creed that the “transcendent” is manifest in the quotidian. In his last years, Stevens also manages to apply the supreme Modernist solution to dichotomies—the adoption of a formula of the kind “both/and and/or either/or” (McFarlane) that simultaneously accepts the complementarity of opposites, the difference between the individual parts and the ultimate equivalence of complementarity and difference (as in “Not Ideas about the Thing...,” where the “scrawny cry” is at the same time a “chorister” preceding the sun, “part of the colossal sun,” and “still far away”). In consequence, the “savage harmony” ceases to be oxymoronic.

On the whole, Stevens’s poetry engulfs almost all major modes of approaching reality. His insistence on the “thing in itself” makes him a substantialist; the belief in imagination and the percipient’s central role in knowledge renders him a subjectivist *par excellence*, while the inseparability of the two reveals his allegiance to the holistic perspective. In addition, by attesting to the necessity of both dualism and holism for the knowledge of reality—often along the same segment of his path, or even in a single poem—Stevens’s “undulatory” course also suggests a solution to the holistic paradox we have referred to in the previous chapter.

In light of these, we may claim that “ambivalence” is ultimately a virtue with Stevens (Longenbach; Vendler). It is required for questioning one’s stance and as part of the possibly finest poetic feat—that of revealing the imperfect human core of inhuman reality, thereby making it “inhuman for a little while / Inhuman for a little, lesser time” (“The Sail of Ulysses”). For Stevens’s readers, the added benefit of this (apparent) “mind of conflicting oppositions,” hesitant to provide definitive answers, is the challenge his art and thought imposes on any interpretive effort, calling for ever renewed revaluations and a multiplicity of approaches.

Works Cited

Includes a number of 193 titles we have used in support of our research. They have been cited in the body of our thesis or included among the footnotes together with short explanatory remarks. Their formatting follows the rules of the MLA style and citation guides.