

Wallace Stevens' Philosophical Evasions

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IN ORDER TO DRAW attention to an aspect of the philosophical work performed by Wallace Stevens' poetry, let me begin with a broad, simplifying sketch of two very different approaches to philosophy. Both are as old as Socrates, and their differences are primarily methodological. According to one, which might be called the problem-solving school, philosophy is confronted by conceptual problems for which solutions exist, and the goal of philosophy is to find these solutions. Philosophical questions have philosophical answers waiting to be discovered through philosophical means, and if only we could uncover these answers, which take the form of assertions, the questions would be settled once and for all. If there are no answers for certain of these philosophical questions, philosophy can and must nevertheless define, precisely, the state of affairs that explains why there are and can be no answers in these particular cases, as opposed to others. The explanation of why the puzzle cannot be unpuzzled, why the problem cannot be solved, why there are no pores through the given aporia, will also take an assertoric form.

Needless to say, the problem-solving conception of philosophy has proven so intuitively persuasive and institutionally amenable that it has dominated the field in nearly every period of its history. The model of problem-solving has ruled over philosophy with such a masterful fist that many of its proponents, in all periods, have remained wholly unaware of any alternative to it—and this, despite the curious failure (after nearly three thousand years of lifelong labors by some of the world's most brilliant minds) to establish so much as a single philosophical truth, to solve a single, fundamental philosophical problem on its own terms "once and for all." The textbook of philosophical truths, toward which all assertoric philosophy explicitly or implicitly aims, remains totally blank. Plato and Aristotle hoped for it to be filled after the manner of their admired geometers, but it has not; more recent philosophers hoped to succeed on the idealized model of the natural scientists, whose introductory textbooks brim with significant conclusions now no longer in dispute, but they have not. Instead, the usual introductory textbook of philosophy, where used at all, is likely to consist of questions rather than answers, and not even precisely the same questions as were asked fifty or a hundred or a thou-

sand years ago, which were themselves never definitively answered. Another word for problem-solving philosophy might be “dogmatism.”

Defining the alternative to philosophical dogmatism can be very difficult. Just as all happy families are alike, while every unhappy family is unhappy in its own way, so all problem-solving philosophy is united by certain characteristics, while the alternatives seem to share no common essence. We can see one alternative to dogmatic philosophy in the Socrates of Plato’s early dialogues, the figure about whom Aristotle said, “Socrates used to ask questions and not to answer them—for he used to confess that he did not know” (“Sophistical Refutations” 183b7–8). This is the Socrates who became the figurehead of academic skepticism, after the doctrinal Platonism of the later dialogues exhausted itself in Plato’s own Academy. The Socrates of the early dialogues did not claim to possess the solutions to the philosophical problems that concerned him most, such as the nature of virtue, nor did he claim to know whether or how such answers could or could not be obtained. If we view Socrates as one of the first reactions against the problem-solving conception of philosophy—against the interminable speculative disputes, for example, of the nature-philosophers who preceded him—then we can view Plato as having misread his teacher in the middle and later dialogues, relapsing into the very dogmatic asseveration that Socrates so deftly avoided.

Lacking two and a half millennia of evidence that asserting an answer to a philosophical problem will not make the problem go away, Plato can be forgiven for his dogmatic turn. But the problem-solving philosophers of today continue to write and speak as though, in Stevens’ words, they will finally “get it straight one day at the Sorbonne”:¹ as if each problem-solving philosopher, in fact, were personally in the process of drafting an essay that will finally get things right, finally nail down a few solid answers, or at least a firm accounting of the impossibility of such. It is not uncommon to hear, for example, disciples of the contemporary Anglo-American problem-solving tradition saying things such as, “I think Professor X is basically right about knowledge”—as though this were the sort of thing we have been waiting for someone to be “right” about, as though some arrangement of the word “knowledge” with other words on the pages of a research journal somewhere might finally be the *correct* one. “Did you hear? Professor X has determined what knowledge is.” “Oh? I guess I can abandon my studies then.” “What will you do?” “I will become a farmer and spend my days cultivating a garden.” A recent example of non-dogmatic philosophy would be the later, therapeutic Wittgenstein, whose early analytic interpreters, like Plato, came to misread their predecessor as having shared their problem-solving assumptions.²

A common response to philosophical dogmatism, especially among poets, has been a shift from argument into mystical assertion: a refusal to engage the gamesmanship of transitory problem-solving in favor of something else, often religious, as in T. S. Eliot’s turn from the philosophical

puzzles of his doctoral dissertation to the unargued, perhaps unarguable, mystical evocations of *Four Quartets*.³ Others have chosen philosophical silence. In the scheme of dogmatism and its alternatives, the uniqueness of Stevens' poetry lies in its peculiar refusal of either silence or mystical apodicticism. Stevens develops a unique—and in his case, necessarily poetic—way of treating philosophical problems without asserting ultimate solutions in response to them. Unlike the early Socrates or the later Wittgenstein, he does not avoid dogmatic philosophical assertion by asking only questions, or responding only without himself asserting, or asserting only things with which his interlocutor or reader could be presumed not to disagree. He does not recede into a silencing of his ultimate belief, but engages belief in a thousand shifting forms.

Rather than proceeding directly to a consideration of Stevens' poetic techniques for evading dogmatism, however, it might be useful to frame these techniques in the context of a provocative question from the philosopher Simon Critchley's recent study of Stevens, *Things Merely Are*. Critchley's main, overarching argument is that Stevens' poetry can be read as a sort of spiritual exercise, one that teaches "a certain disposition of *calm*, an insight into things that comes from having them in sight" (6). Through the reading of Stevens' poetry, and especially his later works, we can learn to come to terms with the constitutive epistemological limits of a Kantian world, the ultimate inaccessibility of what is represented in our representations, if anything, in this spirit of meditative calm, rather than with romantic, Coleridgean dejection. From the start of *Things Merely Are*, Critchley emphasizes the importance of poetic form to Stevens' philosophical project. He argues that Stevens' poetry "contains deep, consequent and instructive philosophical insight, and . . . that this insight is best expressed poetically" (4). Later, he notes, "As a philosopher, what it is about Stevens that interests me is the fact that he found a manner that is wholly poetic, of developing full thoughts: theses, hypotheses, conjectures, ruminations and aphorisms that one should call philosophical" (15). Again, further on, Critchley poses a related question: "What is it about the particular meditative poetic form that [Stevens] developed that is able to carry genuine philosophical weight and yet which is impossible to translate into prose?" (31). Critchley leaves the question to some extent unanswered. Though he draws attention at several crucial moments to the importance of ambiguity and qualification in Stevens' poetry, the specifically poetic form of Stevens' writing receives relatively less attention than its philosophical content, perhaps inevitably given the brevity of the book.

The closest Critchley comes to addressing the necessity of the poetic form of Stevens' work may lie in his identification of "the twofold task of poetry" (57). According to this twofold task, poetry, first, "permits us to see fiction as fiction, to see the fictiveness or contingency of the world," and, second, gives to life, in Stevens' words, "the supreme fictions without which we are unable to conceive of it" (58–59). If we set aside, how-

ever, a few suggestive but preparatory gestures toward the importance of “the sound of words” (57), Critchley’s two tasks would seem to apply equally to any form of imaginative literature, poetic or otherwise. Would it not be possible for a novel or play to perform the same tasks, reminding us of the fictiveness of the world and offering us further fictions, in prose and without any heightened attention to the sound of words? For that matter, could not a philosophical treatise or prose work of literary criticism argue just as effectively as poetry for the fictiveness of the world? Could it then not go on to offer us “supreme fictions,” as many of the great imaginative creations of philosophy might seem to have done, and, as Critchley elsewhere suggests, they have done?⁴ To go even further afield, if Terrence Malick’s films can perform philosophical work that is similar to that of Stevens’ late poetry, as Critchley suggests in the final chapter of *Things Merely Are*, then do we not have reason to believe that poetry is, strictly speaking, not necessary to such work? (And if Malick’s fundamentally more visual than verbal films can teach a disposition of philosophical calm, then why not a painting by Mark Rothko, Mies van der Rohe’s Barcelona Pavilion, or Gustav Mahler’s 10th Symphony as well?) In essence, how might the philosophical work that Critchley ascribes to Stevens’ poetry *require* the kind of highly crafted, densely figured and musical language that is usually identified as “poetic,” whether or not it follows a meter, whether or not it is lineated? A decade before his book on Stevens, Critchley crafted the memorable epigram, “Poetry needs a philosophy that needs poetry” (“Ancient” 26). But how could this be? How could thought ever benefit from being formed in the mud heap of poetic language rather than the clear waters of prose philosophy? How is it possible for any “insight” or “thesis” to be articulable in poetry but untranslatable into prose? Critchley’s concise treatment of philosophy in the poetry of Stevens leaves this line of questioning relatively open.

The remainder of this essay attempts to clarify a single, relatively narrow respect in which poetry can perform philosophical work that prose, as such, cannot: the evasion of philosophical dogmatism through Stevensian qualification. The essential techniques of Stevens’ anti-dogmatic art both are necessarily poetic and have been recognized by critics since early in the poet’s reception. In fact, they form one of the most consistent themes in the formalist critical reception of his work. They are what Helen Vendler, in a celebrated early essay, calls Stevens’ “qualified assertions,” and what Marjorie Perloff calls Stevens’ “ironic modes.” Drawing from the techniques noted by the two critics, and by the many others who have followed, we can briefly catalogue the following instruments for the evasion of philosophical dogmatism in Stevens’ poetry:

- his frequent and intricate evasions of “is” through a mobile army of modal auxiliaries, his “may,” “might,” “must,” “could,” “should,” and “would”;

- his more overt, stylistically definitive “as ifs,” “ifs,” “and yet,” “perhapses,” “seemses,” “Say that . . . s,” and “Suppose that . . . s”;
- his sapping of the apparent sense of a passage through the deployment of oxymoron, paradox, and the superfluity of nonsensical sound;
- his seemingly perpetual openness to qualification of a statement after the fact, even within the same poem, no matter how exceptionally solid or even desperately assertive the statement might at first have seemed;
- his sometimes dazzling distribution of logical connectives such as “or,” “if,” “since,” which, like the intricate ornaments of a baroque cathedral, can ultimately issue into a self-dissolution of their own elaborate detail, resulting in a transcendent simplicity;
- his abundant observations, *à propos* of nothing, that things are “not” or are “no longer” what no one would ever have assumed them to be: “It was not from the vast ventriloquism / Of sleep’s faded papier-mâché” (452)—without, as often as not, going on to assert what *is* the case;
- his (to quote Vendler) “distinctive appropriation” of the modal “must” and its related “had to,” “cannot,” and “could not,” with the connotations less of “necessity” or “clear obligation” than of the “constraint, the sadness, the attempts at self-conviction, the enforced nobility” of “obligations or destinies of a less voluntary sort” (166);
- his use of free-floating infinitives, imperatives without known addressee, and constructions casting toward a future, gestures away from the facts as they stand to the imaginable, possible, ought-to-be, desired;
- his frequent questions, seemingly rhetorical, but in fact not so much disguised assertions as “suggestions” (166);
- and above all, his characteristic, almost constant, wriggling of syntax away from the rigidity of plain statement, especially between the iterations of repeated words: “All night I sat reading a book, / Sat reading as if in a book / Of somber pages” (118). (Which is it, reading a book or reading as if in a book? As Vendler suggests, Stevens lets the sense shift in time as the phrase unfolds [174]).⁵

Has there ever been a more subtle and elaborated practice of qualified philosophical assertion than that which appears in Stevens' verse? His specific brand of anti-dogmatism draws for the most part on qualifying turns of phrase and constructions that might appear, for example, in nearly any philosophical writing—but deployed through repetition and intensification to a qualitatively different effect, along with an array of devices unique to poetry. (Insofar as prose contained some of the devices listed above, such as the splicing of syntactical forms, we would be to that extent more likely to label it "prose-poetry," or at least to call it "poetic.") Stevens' evasions cannot simply be dismissed as assertions rhetorically hedged against counterargument, because the qualification is part and parcel of the assertion. Nor can the assertive aspect simply be ignored, as though the poetry were somehow *all* qualification and *no* assertion: without the assertion, the qualification could not qualify. The qualification of a qualified assertion cannot be thought without the assertion, and vice versa. A language poet might attempt the preemptive, indefinite qualification of an assertion that never arrives, but this is not Stevens' mode. His qualified assertions come whole and uncleaved, with the result that we do not always know what to make of his "edgings and inchings of final form" (417), to borrow a phrase from "An Ordinary Evening in New Haven." The structure of this well-known phrase, incidentally, maps isomorphically onto the structure of the concept "qualified assertion": the "edgings and inchings" at once oppose themselves to any "final form" and yet are "of" it. So does the qualification oppose itself to the assertion and yet depend upon it. The two sides of the qualified assertion, in other words, must go hand in hand. Or is it that what Stevens offers with one hand he takes away with another? Are we finally left empty-handed? What is the purpose of this fantastic legerdemain?

The idea of "qualification" in a rhetorical context tends to have one of two senses: one qualifies an assertion in the sense of rendering it more precise; or one qualifies an assertion by softening its force, moderating the degree to which the assertion is asserted, insisted upon, set forth as true. Perhaps we can imagine a scale of assertoric force, with, at one end, an unyielding assertion such as, "It is certain indisputably, beyond any possible doubt, that Wallace Stevens is the most philosophically interesting poet in the English language." Qualifying the assertion, in the sense of tempering its assertoric force, we could say, more simply, "Wallace Stevens is the most philosophically interesting poet in the English language." Going further, we might arrive at, "Wallace Stevens may well be the most philosophically interesting poet in the English language." The further we went, the less we would assert our assertion, the less dogmatic we would become: "It is as if Wallace Stevens is, or could be seen as, the most philosophically interesting poet in the English language." Or even further: "Say that Stevens, among English poets, is not the least of philosophers, or if the most, since poetical, suppose him to be the most of the poet's philo-

sophical might." As if traveling by asymptote, we move further and further away from the strong-armed dogmatism of the opening phrase. But we remain on assertoric territory, despite the potentially almost limitless qualification. We qualify our assertion, rather than abstracting the question of our belief entirely from the scene as Socrates might do. We do not simply propose. The assertion maintains some hold over us, not simply as a description of a belief that one might have, as in a thought experiment, or as the detached report of a belief held by someone else, but as something we ourselves might say, think, believe. The assertion revolves in consideration over a possible position, handled in a distinctive way, so that the possible belief remains alive. Again, Stevens avoids dogmatism not by asking only questions ("the early Socrates"), or asserting only that with which his interlocutor can be presumed already to agree ("the later Wittgenstein"), or by using his speech as a kind of skeptical tool without actual belief in what is said ("Sextus Empiricus"), or by occasionally qualifying everything he has asserted retroactively as just a good way of talking ("pragmatism"), but by cooling his assertoric force until it sometimes approaches, but never reaches, despite its enormous wintry-mindedness, an impossible zero degree.

The work of Stevensian qualification seems to encompass both making an assertion more precise and lessening its assertoric force, and if its peculiar art lies especially in the latter, it is capable of the former as well. (Indeed, the two categories might be seen as not entirely distinct: the lessening of assertoric force could, at a stretch, be seen as a form of making an assertion more "modally precise.") His devices allow us not only to approach our asymptote of unassertoric assertion, but to qualify in the other sense, to render more precise: to qualify "the most philosophically interesting poet in the English language" with "who lived in the twentieth century," for example.⁶ Such lawyerly honing in on finely delineated semantic precision has a role in Stevens' poetry, but it is not necessarily an anti-dogmatic one. After all, many of the most dogmatic philosophers have been expert at "qualifying" in the sense of restricting the meaning of a claim with the help of endlessly elaborated *ad hoc* distinctions. Dogmatic philosophy has tended to be less aware of the possible philosophical significance of the other sense of "qualification," that of lessened assertoric force. G. P. Baker, a Wittgenstein scholar who once wrote at the forefront of the analytical reception but came to question that approach later in life, describes in a late essay the inattention paid by some of his colleagues to Wittgenstein's qualifications. "Ironically," Baker notes, "the neglect of such qualifications, and even of modal auxiliaries such as 'need not,' 'may,' etc., is a conspicuous aspect of many expositions and analyses of Wittgenstein's ideas, as if these niceties were not worthy of attention among philosophers" (70). The philosophy that sees no real significance in the difference between "we might say" and "it is so" may also tend to ignore the embodied, contingent, and more "literary" features of language in

general. "As if" will give way to the procrustean "is," context will melt into air, "would" and "seem" will fall by the wayside, metaphor will cash out into simile into assertion of specific similarities. In general, any aspect of a sentence not readily translatable to logical symbols will run the risk of being bowdlerized. The result is "precision," "clarity," and "rigor."

The roots of this contemporary analytic approach to language may lie partly in Gottlob Frege's imagining the "sense" (*Sinn*) of a sentence as something existing apart from the contingent material of any particular language, as if it were a sort of self-standing, disembodied substrate lying beneath the linguistic signs in which it happens to be "represented" or "expressed." If poetry is what is lost in translation, the Fregean "sense" is what remains.⁷ But in Stevens, the *Ding an sich* is not just a thought; it is three syllables of tuneful German: "a vocable thing," "a visible thing" (23, 24), as Stevens writes in "The Comedian as the Letter C." Once language, meaning, sense, propositions, or beliefs are seen as concrete, spatio-temporal matters, embodied somewhere and somewhen, whether as ink on the page, vibrations in the ear, or habits of action, questions about the *Ding an sich* become, also and inescapably, questions of "the *Ding an sich*," the specific, concrete written or spoken words. Philosophical dogmatism, for a variety of reasons, becomes more difficult to sustain.

Rather than whittling down the sense of an assertion to a sharp, indisputable point, Stevens' verse more often moves between and among fairly simple, more indefinite claims. We do not drive toward an ultimate refinement of a crude beginning, like a perfect geometrical pattern hewn out of rough stone, but shift from one relatively plain form, often half-glimpsed or indistinctly qualified, to another. We move through Stevens' qualified assertions as in a gallery, or as on one of the long, rambling weekend walks he took during his youthful stay in New York.⁸ Continuing the metaphor, we could say that the Stevensian mode of philosophical thinking is peripatetic, but not in the Aristotelian sense: it is philosophy of wandering, of error in its root meaning. Stevens did not, in the manner of an Aristotelian scholastic, consume a lifetime of massively complex philosophical distinctions, digest them, and ultimately regurgitate them in masterfully synthesized form; rather, he selected a few appetizingly simple, sometimes paradoxical materials from the philosophical buffet and tasted or tested them in various, subtly altered combinations. Even when the philosophical work of his poetry appears most internally differentiated, most complicated and ornate, the materials, though elusive, remain relatively plain. They have been transmuted through the "literary" or rhetorical devices that are not supposed to make any difference to philosophical sense, but that Stevens uses to such startling philosophical effect.

Virtually every poem in the Stevens canon displays some of the qualificative devices detailed above, and the more overtly philosophical poems likewise contain qualified assertion of a philosophical kind. "The Ultimate Poem Is Abstract," a minor, twenty-one line work from *The Au-*

roras of Autumn, will provide an especially fitting illustration of the sort of philosophical work that Stevens' poetry can perform. Despite the declarative finality of its title, "The Ultimate Poem Is Abstract" is in fact a typically unresolving and qualificative meditation on questions without final answers, and their seeming inevitability. The poem's irresolution is so thoroughgoing that it refuses, in its final two stanzas, even to resolve itself to being unresolved: it closes with a glimpse of a hope or longing for precisely the kind of reassuring fixity and rest that its preceding five stanzas seemed to deny. The poem begins:

This day writhes with what? The lecturer
On This Beautiful World Of Ours composes himself
And hems the planet rose and haws it ripe,

And red, and right. The particular question—here
The particular answer to the particular question
Is not in point—the question is in point. (369)

Our first sense that "The Ultimate Poem Is Abstract" may not deliver on the stark resoluteness of its title—that the title will not have been abstracted, straightforwardly, from what the poem contains—comes in the opening line, not a statement but a question: "This day writhes with what?" We find ourselves not so much at the beginning of a poem as in the middle of an incomplete thought preceding the composition of a poem: a blocked passage from which the poem never fully releases us. What is our first model of assertion? The temporizing "lecturer," who seems to have committed himself to a discourse on "This Beautiful World Of Ours" for which he is not adequately prepared, fills the silence with an exhausted rhetoric of alliteration ("rose," "ripe," "red"), and putters to a stop at the unconvincing assurance, culminating his hems and haws, that the planet is "right." After making anxiously explicit the importance of addressing the opening question as a question rather than immediately asserting an answer, the poem continues:

If the day writhes, it is not with revelations.
One goes on asking questions. (369)

Even the assumption in the poem's opening question, its seemingly stable or quasi-assertive aspect, is soon qualified by a Stevensian "if": "If the day writhes, it is not with revelations." We can no longer even be certain that the day writhes, since the grounds for the question have themselves been qualified, called into question. From this perspective, "If the day writhes, it is not with revelations" does not so much offer a first triangulation of a final answer to the opening question as a comment *on* the question: if the day writhes, it is not with answers to questions such as,

"This day writhes with what?" In fact, we might be tempted to say that if the day of this poem writhes with anything, it is with questions, snake-like, and moreover questionings of questions, like the proverbial serpent of self-devouring paradox that swallows its own tail. In sedate, colloquial tones, the poem concludes that questioning is our inescapable lot—"That, then, is one / Of the categories," as if asking questions were one of the fundamental forms of human understanding and, we might add, since this is the errant Stevens, of human misunderstanding. Previous poetic imaginings of our heroic imaginative powers, as in "The Man with the Blue Guitar," have overreached, and as a result the "placid space" of our existence is "not so blue as we thought," because, "To be blue, / There must be no questions" (369). Having qualified blue "revelation[]" down to the counterpoised, less blue "question," the poem seems to have taken us to a midpoint of relative stability, a tentative conclusion about the inconclusiveness of our world.

It might seem at first glance highly presumptuous, and in all likelihood incomprehensible, to conclude that "asking questions" belongs among the categories, alongside Aristotle's list of ten (substance, quantity, quality . . . asking questions?) or, more probably, given Stevens' usual frames of reference, Kant's table of twelve (unity, plurality, totality, reality . . . asking questions?).⁹ But this baffling conclusion does not arrive shrouded in grand dogmatic pomp or the robes of metaphysical certainty. On the contrary, it rests on nothing more than an informal observation ("One goes on asking questions"), probably the most humble of conclusive terms (not "therefore," not "thus," but merely "then"), and the equally abbreviated and simple "So said. . . ." A metaphor for the inescapability of questioning, the way in which (like Kant's categories) our questions help to constitute how things appear for us, the conclusion of the inference ("That, then, is one / Of the categories") does not offer an absolute stability, but a qualified one—qualified by the humble route of its arrival and the fallibility of the steps that brought us to it.

What follows could stand as an epigraph to any study of qualifications in Stevens' language and thought and their significance. Speaking of this "placid space" in which we are, now changed and less heroic-romantically "blue," the poem goes on:

It is an intellect
Of windings round and dodges to and fro,

Writhings in wrong obliques and distances,
Not an intellect in which we are fleet. . . . (369–70)

Reality offers resistance to us, limits our fleetness of movement, the realization of our imaginings. It is possible for us to be wrong and to fail in

our intellectual creations. Our strengths are themselves qualified, restricted. As in Stevens' earlier "Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction," it is clear

that we live in a place
That is not our own and, much more, not ourselves
And hard it is in spite of blazoned days. (332)

Even in the intellect, we are more subjects than sovereigns, more inhabitants than possessors. Our mind is not some heavenly receiver, "present / Everywhere in space at once, cloud-pole / Of communication" (370). The serpentine windings and writhings of our thoughts do not circle toward a single center where the answers lie. It is as if Stevens composes a picture here of the usual movements of thought in his poetry. The sense of an assertion is as often as not ambiguous, not a single "winding" but an indefinite quantity of "windings"; the qualification winds *round* the assertion, without arriving at the center; and one qualified assertion frequently gives way to a conflicting other, as if with a change of mind or point of view, the centripetal winding-round giving way to an uncentered "to and fro": one does not "dodge" *toward* something, but away.

Applying the tripartite schema of "Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction," we could say that the heart of "The Ultimate Poem Is Abstract" lies not in *abstraction*, as its title might suggest, but in *change*: the change brought about by the questioning that the poem considers, though not unconditionally, as our constitutive condition; the change that brought us from "This day writhes with what?" to the more qualified "If the day writhes," and from the lecturer's musings of rightness to the writhings of the intellect "to and fro." Or perhaps abstraction is itself a kind of change. *Abs-trahere*, to draw away: the title may suggest that what is "ultimate" pulls back from us, and must do so by its nature because, as Critchley's Stevens suggests throughout his later poetry, to be "us" is to fail to possess things in their ultimacy, in finality and completion. The ultimate anything—poem, reality, answer—would have to abstract itself from our questioning categories.

Surprisingly, however, the poem ends neither on a note of abstraction nor of change, but in a vision of the third category from "Notes": *pleasure*. It envisions a peaceful enjoyment arriving through stability, not through an authentic or playful acknowledgment of groundlessness:

It would be enough
If we were ever, just once, at the middle, fixed
In This Beautiful World Of Ours and not as now,

Helplessly at the edge, enough to be
Complete, because at the middle, if only in sense,
And in that enormous sense, merely enjoy. (370)

As clauses of qualification accumulate, employing so many of the devices catalogued in the list above, the precise nature of the qualifications begins to fall away. We are left with an unexpected simplicity, here, "[to] merely enjoy." (In a typically Stevensian instance of syntax distorting itself through the iterations of a not-quite-parallel structure, the "to" must be carried all the way down from "to be."¹⁰) At an antipode from the poem's assertoric title, we arrive at anything but a dogmatic, unquestioned assertion. It "would be," "If," "just once," "and not," "enough," "if only," "in that enormous sense," to "merely enjoy." Not "it will be . . . when we are," but "It would be . . . if we were": a modal modification from future necessity to contingency. Not the absolute "good" but the relative "enough." Soon the "we" drops out entirely and leaves us with the even more indefinite "it would be . . . to be." The closing, hypothetical vision of completeness has as modest a scope as possible: "just once," not "always." It shifts from the much greater demand "to be / Complete" to the lesser idea of centeredness "only in sense": no longer to *be* complete but to *feel* so, without demanding objective confirmation. For this poem, "only in sense" is itself an "enormous sense," sufficient for us to "merely enjoy." Again, in paraphrasing we lose the sense of a drawn-out dissonance in the syntax between "to" and its final resolution in "enjoy," a dissonance like that in a piece of music that draws out the listener's expectation for several long moments before returning, finally, to the tonic.

As Vendler notes, Stevens' "untoward modulations of tense are simply not available to the critic who tries to paraphrase Stevens in prose" (165). It might be possible to say, in summing up some of the above interpretation, "The ultimate poem is abstract; but our human poem, it appears, must be qualified. We will find ourselves complete only by abandoning the demand for objective confirmation of our completeness." But it is important to recognize that the poem does not conclude, assertively, that we are doomed to inconclusiveness. It qualifies its way to a qualified end. Any philosophical paraphrase, to the degree that it achieves a helpfully definitive assertoric synthesis, must to that degree lose touch with what may be Stevens' most significant philosophical work in the poem.

Joan Richardson records in her biography of Stevens that the poet harbored a secret wish to be the Dante of his time, and in one respect we can now see how his dream could one day, at least in a small way, come true (212). We remember Dante, at least in part, as the poet of medieval scholasticism, a philosophical movement whose most remarkable feature may be the degree to which it no longer exists. It is a dead tradition, or as dead as such a dominant philosophical tradition can become. There are vanishingly few philosophers who directly concern themselves with finding the correct solution to the arcane scholastic puzzles that Aquinas and his contemporaries, predecessors, and followers attempted to solve ("Is the understanding of the angel identical with his substance?"). One reason, of course, is that epistemology displaced scholasticism as the dominant West-

ern philosophical tradition. Contemporary philosophers, such as Richard Rorty, who advocate setting aside the tired skeptical problems of epistemology, and with them the epistemological tradition in general, often point to the demise of scholasticism as a model for the possibility of changing the philosophical conversation. (The fact that Rorty's call for an end to epistemological puzzling has so often been misconstrued as a call to end *philosophy* illustrates how deeply rooted epistemology continues to be. For many, it may be difficult to imagine a viable philosophy without a focus on solving epistemology-related problems.¹¹) Like the work of Stanley Cavell, Stevens' closest philosophical peer in the exploitation of qualified assertion, Stevens' poetry and prose dwell in the intercalations of narrowly philosophical, epistemological problems and problems of broader human scope. If the era of epistemology ever comes to an end, just as medieval scholasticism once did, Stevens may get his wish. He may become the poet of epistemology, the Dante of our perhaps fading philosophical era. One day a student's first exposure to the idea that there is some threatening "abyss" of epistemic uncertainty between me and the things and people around me may come from a poem by Wallace Stevens.

Unable to understand the pathos of the situation, the student may ask his professor for some explanation, and the professor may helpfully offer: "But how can you be *certain* that you are not deceived by demons, or that you are not a brain in a vat? And if you cannot be certain of that, how can you be certain of *anything*?" The student may shrug, slightly perplexed that so much was made out of so little, if in fact it was. But if he returns to the poetry of Stevens with a suitably wintry mind, he may come to understand the odd contours of the epistemological way of thinking, its dualistic hopes and disappointments. He may eventually read the following passage from Stevens' late poem "The Rock":

the poem makes meanings of the rock,
Of such mixed motion and such imagery
That its barrenness becomes a thousand things

And so exists no more. This is the cure
Of leaves and of the ground and of ourselves. (447)

It seems to me no coincidence that in some of Stevens' final poems, the closest he comes to a resolution of what he calls "the dumbfoundering abyss / Between us and the object" (375), perhaps the central dilemma of an epistemologized world, comes in a form suited to the ongoing questioning and qualifying evasions of his poetry. By making "meanings" (plural) of the inhuman rock, by making of the rock's barrenness a thousand poetic images and sounds, covering it in the overabundant leaves of an unresolving human imagination, rather than by searching for the single dogmatic answer allegedly lodged impenetrably within it, poetry may

cure us not of our limitations in the face of the rock—these often appear in Stevens' final poems to be inescapable—but of the sense that through the rock we are chained to something beyond consolation, a "total leaflessness" (407) in a barren sense. Poetry will not assert, as dogmatic philosophy might, that the problem of the rock is an epistemological or ontological question of the rock's nature. It will not assert an answer. Rather, it will be through the overflowing multiplicity of images, qualifications, fictions, and sounds, precisely those linguistically embodied and contingent aspects of Stevens' thought that dogmatic philosophy might most tend to ignore, that the rock as an unappeasable desolation might be "cured."

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Notes

¹ Wallace Stevens, *Wallace Stevens: Collected Poetry and Prose*, 351. Further references to this source will be cited in the text with page number only in parentheses.

² For a comparison of the later Wittgenstein's methods with those of Sextus Empiricus, see Robert Fogelin's *Wittgenstein* (226–34). Of course, a broad sketch such as the one offered above can be defended only, if at all, at its own panoramic level of generality. Nearly any individual philosopher will show traces of both schools in practice. The metaphilosophically undogmatic American pragmatist, for example, can sound decidedly dogmatic in the heat of debate, asserting and defending some pragmatic deflation of a concept as if it were made indisputably true by the nature of things, while a seemingly dogmatic philosopher such as Berkeley can sound almost undogmatic when he steps back and speaks of his theories as if they were *simply* tools for clearing away needless skeptical doubts. The possible avoidances of dogmatism performed by many more recent "Continental" philosophers present especially knotty problems of interpretation.

³ For more on Eliot's dissertation and his path through skepticism to religion, see my "The Alleged Pragmatism of T. S. Eliot" (263).

⁴ As Critchley himself writes in "The ancient quarrel," his review of Mark Edmundson's *Literature Against Philosophy*, "the so-called 'final vocabularies' of the major philosophers abound in creative metaphors . . . and philosophy at its best displays a poetic inventiveness, a coining of concepts that is similar to (but not the same as) the myth-making power of a major poet" (26). Critchley criticizes Edmundson for not having considered "the comparative merits of philosophical versus poetic language; for example, the felicity of propositional versus non-propositional forms of utterance" (26).

⁵ Among the many sources to which a reader might be directed for more thorough treatments of the formal devices listed above, the most comprehensive and illuminating single work remains Helen Vendler's "The Qualified Assertions of Wallace Stevens." My account of qualified assertion is especially indebted to Vendler's study. Marjorie Perloff echoes Vendler's thesis in a condensed form in her "Irony in *The Rock*" (111). For more on the qualifying force of Stevens' auxiliaries, see Roger Gilbert's entertaining and thorough "Verbs of Mere Being: A Defense of Stevens' Style." Gilbert draws attention to Stevens' tendency to employ auxiliaries in conjunction with "to be" verbs, especially when those verbs serve to assert (196). Beverly Maeder provides a complementary investigation of the philosophical and linguistic questions underlying Stevens' "to be" verbs in Part II of her *Wallace Stevens' Experimental Language*. For a more detailed investigation of the "enigmatic nonsense" of Stevens, see Alison Rieke's *The*

Sense of Nonsense. For more on the dazzling quality of Stevens' logical connectives, see the similar point made by Vendler at 175. The general model of excessive complexity dissolving into simplicity can be found in an especially developed form in Walter Benjamin's *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*. Benjamin describes the ceaseless accumulation of fragments and allegorical meanings in baroque drama as a mode that issues ultimately into the denial of all detail and discrete reference in favor of the apotheosis of a theological absolute. For more on the "not" construction, see P. Michael Campbell and John Dolan's "Teaching Stevens's Poetry through Rhetorical Structure." Campbell and Dolan coin a term for this characteristically Stevensian trope: "praeteritic antithesis." According to the general structure of antithesis, one term is asserted and another, contrasting term is denied, whereas in the specialized structure of praeteritic antithesis, the rhetorical attention bestowed on the denied term so exceeds that given to the asserted term that the latter, the term which we would generally expect to occupy the privileged position in any antithesis, tends instead to disappear from view. See 175–76 for Vendler's related treatment of the "not X but Y" formula in Stevens. As a final note, I am deeply indebted to the very helpful comments, questions, and references provided by two anonymous reviewers at *The Wallace Stevens Journal*.

⁶ In fact, the inspiration for this phrase comes from Critchley's opening statement in *Things Merely Are*, "In my view, Wallace Stevens is the philosophically most interesting poet to have written in the twentieth century" (15).

⁷ See "On Sinn and Bedeutung," in which Frege distinguishes between the *ideas* subjectively associated with a proper name by various individuals at various times; the *sense* of a proper name, "which is . . . no longer subjective like the idea, but is yet not the object itself"; and the *Bedeutung* of a proper name, which "is the object itself which we designate by using [the proper name]" (155). "The difference between a translation and the original text," Frege writes, "should properly not overstep the first level" (155), that is, the level of ideas. The sense can and should remain the same, though the language of its expression has changed.

⁸ For a consideration of "the walk" and its movement of traversal in Stevens' poetry, see Roger Gilbert's chapter on Stevens in his *Walks in the World* (75–106). Gilbert's thoughts on traversal echo Jonathan Levin's reading of Stevens as a poet of transition in *The Poetics of Transition* (167–98). Beverly Maeder, in turn, arrives at a similar vision of the "motility" of Stevens' "word-worlds" (73).

⁹ See the entry on "Categories" in Howard Caygill's *Kant Dictionary* (102).

¹⁰ William W. Bevis, following Vendler, makes a similar point in *Mind of Winter* (103).

¹¹ Even as unorthodox a philosopher as Critchley seems to sympathize with those who present the relation between "thought and things or mind and world" as "arguably the fundamental concern of philosophy" (*Things* 4). By contrast, others might argue that the fundamental concern of philosophy is to ground the truth-claims of other fields of inquiry, perhaps through the study of logic or language rather than thought or mind. A contemporary philosopher such as Alexander Nehamas might note that philosophy has often, following Socrates, concerned itself fundamentally with how best to live rather than with skeptical questions regarding the nature of things. Rorty might suggest that the leading concerns of the figures sometimes labeled as "philosophers," from Parmenides and Pascal to Marx, Thoreau, and Foucault, have been so diverse and variously weighted as to render hopeless, or at least arbitrary, the search for any single fundamental concern.

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