THE SUPREME FICTION: FICTION OR FACT?
TWO NOTES ON WALLACE STEVENS AND PHILOSOPHY

A Thesis
Presented to the Faculty of the Graduate School
of Cornell University
In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of
Master of Arts

by
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August 2006
ABSTRACT

The thesis presents two reflections on what it might mean to read Wallace Stevens philosophically. The first section argues that we would be better off avoiding the search for a supreme fiction in Stevens’ poetry. By the poet’s own standards, he never succeeded in creating one. The second section attempts to justify the abandonment of the search for the supreme fiction by suggesting another, perhaps more productive way in which Stevens’ poetry might be philosophically read. In particular, it will be argued that what Helen Vendler calls Stevens’ “qualified assertions” can be seen as a potent technique for the avoidance of philosophical dogmatism.
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For Ludwig Wittgenstein
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS
This thesis would not have been possible without Joel Porte’s generosity during my first year at Cornell. In the spring of 2003, he agreed to supervise a directed study on American thought and literature with me, and it was during our meetings that I gained my first, long-overdue, serious exposure to Stevens. His encouraging response to my final paper led to the revised and expanded version that follows. I would also like to thank Cornell generally, the English faculty and staff in particular, and especially the members of my special committee, Dan Schwarz, Doug Mao, and Jonathan Culler, for the extraordinary flexibility and support they have shown in light of my changing projects. The committee also provided helpful comments in response to an earlier draft of this paper.
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What follows are two reflections on what it might mean to read Wallace Stevens philosophically. The first section argues that we would be better off avoiding the search for a supreme fiction in Stevens’ poetry. By the poet’s own standards, he never succeeded in creating one. The second section attempts to justify the abandonment of the search for the supreme fiction by suggesting another, perhaps more productive way in which Stevens’ poetry might be philosophically read. In particular, it will be argued that what Helen Vendler calls Stevens’ “qualified assertions” can be seen as a potent technique for the avoidance of philosophical dogmatism.

I.

“After all, I like Rhine wine, blue grapes, good cheese, endive and lots of books, etc., etc., etc., as much as I like supreme fiction.”

Wallace Stevens, December 8, 1942

If, as Foucault says, the author is the principle of thrift in the proliferation of meaning, then it is in the spirit of interpretive thrift that this section will draw upon Wallace Stevens’ letters and essays. The author’s words will be used to make the case, as simply and sparingly as possible, for giving up the quest to identify the “supreme fiction,” Stevens’ most ambitious philosophical object. The poet hoped to usher in the creation of an idea that would serve as a fictive replacement for the idea of God, known to be fictive but willfully believed. His hope has remained unfulfilled. By the poet’s own explicit standards, the supreme fiction does not appear in any of his poems, nor in his poetry as a whole, nor in poetry in general. Is it possible for such a long-standing critical quest to be abandoned, or at least qualified as a lesser priority? The
case of Oedipus and the “tragic flaw” offers a hopeful parallel. At one time, it might have seemed inevitable that readers of *Oedipus Rex* would always ask of Sophocles’ play which of Oedipus’ negative character traits had brought about his tragic downfall. It might have seemed a profound, challenging and worthwhile question, posed but left unresolved by Aristotle in his definition of tragedy. But once the “tragic flaw” was recognized as a Victorian mistranslation of Aristotle’s “*hamartia,*” the impetus behind the hunt lessened. Critics were still free to follow the tragic flaw’s trail, but without Aristotelian sanction, the hunt seemed less worthwhile. Today, it has largely receded from scholarly view.

So might scholars one day give up attempting to identify the “supreme fiction” in Stevens’ poetry. As I will argue, Stevens offers little or no sanction for the idea that the supreme fiction can be found there, or even that it exists at all. To read or teach Stevens as though the creation of a supreme fiction were the culmination of his career is to be set up for an unnecessary disappointment. If I cover a good deal of very well-trodden critical ground in what follows, and make points that seem obvious to many readers of Stevens, it will be in the spirit of offering a summarizing reminder: a presentation of what seem to me the most salient arguments in favor of not reading Stevens for a supreme fiction, and a collection in one place of the most relevant evidence.

To what extent did Wallace Stevens lay claim to the title of philosopher? Did he see himself as an inventor of fine philosophical ideas?

On the one hand, Stevens read widely in philosophy, and his poetry, essays and letters abound with references to Schopenhauer, Nietzsche, James, Santayana, 

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Bergson, Kant, Plato, Lucretius, Vico, Descartes, Hegel, Berkeley: the list could go on. He corresponded with philosophers of his time, such as Jean Wahl, and from the start of his career, his poetry is sprinkled with philosophical-sounding terminology and ruminations. He struggled and toyed, through a long poetic career, with various forms of “the dumbfoundering abyss / Between us and the object,” whether the epistemological distance between knowers and things in themselves, or the equally taunting “failure in the relation between the imagination and reality” (WS 649). In doing so, he gave poetic expression to perhaps the central philosophical drama of the modern era. The philosopher Simon Critchley calls Stevens, against great competition, “the philosophically most interesting poet to have written in English in the twentieth century.” Numerous essays and book-length studies attest to the philosophical depth and complexity to be found in Stevens’ works.

On the other hand, Stevens himself confessed, in a letter toward the end of his life, to having “never studied systematic philosophy,” saying that he “should be bored to death at the mere thought of doing so. I think the little philosophy that I have read has been read very much in the spirit of… a substitute for fiction.” Frank Doggett, one of the earliest and most respected philosophical interpreters of Stevens’ poetry, suggests that the “concepts that emerge from long reading of the poetry of Stevens are so slight and so basic that any elementary course in philosophy or even a few years of interested reading could yield all of them.” Stevens’ most concerted phase of philosophical reading does not appear to have begun until the early 1940’s, or at the

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5 He continues that they “are usually some variation of the idea of the subject-object relationship” (Frank Doggett, Stevens’ Poetry of Thought [Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1966], viii-ix).
earliest the mid-1930’s, when the poet was already in his fifties.⁶ As an undergraduate at Harvard, Stevens met with the philosopher George Santayana, but their meetings appear to have revolved around poetry and the exchange of poems, rather than philosophical discussion. The young Stevens took no philosophy courses, never saw Santayana lecture, and concentrated instead on literary study and journalism. Throughout his life, he confessed an intermittent insecurity about his philosophical skills.⁷

There appears to have been a brief period, in the wake of his increased attention to philosophy in the early 1940’s, when Stevens at least flirted with the idea of attempting a more systematic and orthodox work of philosophy, or joked about doing so. It was during this time that he created his longest and most philosophically ambitious poem, “Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction,” and began writing the highly theoretical essays on reality and the imagination that would eventually be collected as *The Necessary Angel*. “[I]f I had nothing else in the world to do except to sit on a fence and think about things,” Stevens writes in 1942 to his wealthy expatriate friend Henry Church, whom he admired for spending his life in precisely this way, “… I could very well do a THEORY OF SUPREME FICTION, and I could try to do a BOOK OF SPECIMENS, etc.” (L 431). He soon abandons the idea, however, proposing it instead as a project to “occupy a school of rabbis for the next few generations” (L 435). If Stevens ever considered writing a theoretical treatment of the supreme fiction in philosophical or critical prose, the ambition passed.

Especially after his intensified interest in philosophy began to wane, Stevens came to insist that even his most philosophy-laden poetry should not and could not be read for a paraphrasable, systematic doctrine. He may even have seen his prose in this

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⁷ Richardson 385; L 476.
light. In the introduction to *The Necessary Angel*, he reminds the reader that the essays which follow “are not pages of criticism or of philosophy” (WS 640). Perhaps his most strictly philosophical work, the 1951 lecture “A Collect of Philosophy,” includes the definitive and uncharacteristically unqualified statement, “I am not a philosopher” (WS 860). The lecture itself lends some credence to Stevens’ disavowal. Not only does the “Collect” deal exclusively with the “poetic” rather than logical, doctrinal or systematic aspects of philosophy, but it seems to have been collected largely from letters written by Stevens’ friends and from the summaries contained in Arthur Kenyon Rogers’ 1917 introductory textbook, *A Student’s History of Philosophy*. Though the philosopher Paul Weiss, one of the friends Stevens quotes in the lecture, invited Stevens to submit the final version of the essay for publication in the *Review of Metaphysics*, he eventually retracted the offer and returned the manuscript. Stevens later declined to have it published in any form.\(^8\) In his final years, he repeatedly made clear that he did not view his poetry as a philosophical system disguised in symbol and sound. To Sister Bernetta Quinn, in 1952, he writes, “My object is to write esthetically valid poetry. I am not so much concerned with philosophical validity” (L 752). Again, to an aspiring reviewer in 1954: “[W]e are dealing with poetry, not with philosophy. The last thing in the world that I should want to do would be to formulate a system” (L 864).

And yet, and yet – there is the supreme fiction. It would be extremely misleading to suggest that Stevens was without philosophical ambition, either in the early 1940’s or later. But it was an ambition of a very particular kind. Stevens

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summarizes his project in an important biographical note written in 1954, less than a year before his death:

The author’s work suggests the possibility of a supreme fiction, recognized as a fiction, in which men could propose to themselves a fulfillment. In the creation of any such fiction, poetry would have a vital significance. There are many poems relating to the interactions between reality and the imagination, which are to be regarded as marginal to this central theme. (L 820)

After a lifetime of poetic effort, Stevens presents his central achievement not as the creation of a supreme fiction, but the “suggestion” of the “possibility” of such a creation. What has appeared to many critics to be the central theme of Stevens’ poetry – the “interactions between reality and the imagination” – is in fact peripheral, the poet suggests, to the mere “suggestion” of such a grand “possibility.” The remainder of this section will attempt to maintain as clear a line as Stevens does here between the project for a supreme fiction and the poetry that suggests its possibility. If reality and imagination are marginal to the supreme fiction, “this central theme,” then the central theme is itself marginal to the poetry. Of course, the idea of a supreme fiction owes its prominence to Stevens’ “Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction.” The poem attracts our attention, and its title leads us toward what seems a tantalizingly complex and elusive idea, precisely the sort of implicit profundity that literary criticism excels at hauling up from the depths. Yet “Notes,” as the title suggests, does not present us with any examples of supreme fiction; rather, it offers some preparation of the grounds for the arrival of one. It leads us in a series of peregrinations toward a supreme fiction, but stops short of the promised land. The poetry and the project keep a certain distance from each other, making it possible for one to stand while the other falls.
Before turning to a closer look at what Stevens meant by “a supreme fiction,” we should pause for a moment on the wording of his biographical note. As late as 1954, less than a year before his death, Stevens does not claim to have invented or discovered a supreme fiction. He suggests that men could propose to themselves a fulfillment in such a fiction – not that men can so propose, as we would tend to say if the fiction were already realized. Again, had he believed the supreme fiction to exist, Stevens could have written, “In the creation of any such fiction, poetry has a vital significance.” Had he wanted to leave his own accomplishment more ambiguous, he could have written, “poetry will have a vital significance” – as if to say: whether or not I have created such a fiction, any future creations will necessarily be poetic. But he chooses instead to say, “In the creation of any such fiction, poetry would have a vital significance.” The grammar strongly suggests that Stevens refers to something that, in his opinion, has not yet arrived. On the one hand, there are many poems about reality and the imagination, and on the other hand, there would be a vital role for poetry in any supreme fiction. His poems exist; the supreme fiction does not, but it is possible.

What, then, is a supreme fiction? The notion is grand in scale but surprisingly simple in structure. A supreme fiction would be a specific idea, known to be a fiction, that would be as valid and fulfilling as the idea of God, and which people could will themselves to believe. By willfully believing in this fictive idea, they might compensate for what has been lacking since the generally proclaimed loss of belief in God. Stevens truly seems to have hoped that his poetry, and in particular “Notes toward a Supreme Fiction,” opened the way to the invention of such an idea, a willed replacement for religious belief.

The earliest roots of the supreme fiction seem to lie in Stevens’ rejection of the Puritan faith of his childhood. In a January, 1940 letter to Hi Simons, Stevens writes of “thinking of some substitute for religion” not as a new interest but as “a habit of
mind with me… My trouble, and the trouble of a great many people, is the loss of belief in the sort of God in Whom we were all brought up to believe” (L 348). Several months later, in another letter to Simons, this habit of mind has metamorphosed into the beginnings of a project. “If one no longer believes in God (as truth),” Stevens continues, “it is not possible merely to disbelieve; it becomes necessary to believe in something else” (L 370). It is necessary to believe in something that can fill a similar role to that previously filled by the idea of God, but Stevens seems unable to find an adequate surrogate. In a hint of things to come, the specific alternatives to religious belief proposed in the two letters – “humanism” and “the imagination” – are both rejected as inadequate. Just as, in the earlier letter, Stevens notes, “Humanism would be the natural substitute [for religion], but the more I see of humanism the less I like it” (L 348), so in the later letter, he expresses dissatisfaction with a presumably Coleridgean, romantic conception of the imagination. “Logically,” he writes, perhaps with the implication “because I am a poet,” “I ought to believe in essential imagination, but that has its difficulties. It is easier to believe in a thing created by the imagination. A good deal of my poetry recently has concerned an identity for that thing” (L 370). Here, in 1940, a short while before the composition of “Notes,” Stevens has performed the crucial shift, identifying the presumed substitute for religious belief as “a thing created by the imagination,” or in other words, a fiction.

Stevens goes on in the letter to refer to “Asides on the Oboe,” a recent poem in which the identification between something like religious belief and fiction is made explicit. The work begins with the pivotal pronouncement,

The prologues are over. It is a question, now,
Of final belief. So, say that final belief
Must be in a fiction. It is time to choose. (WS 226)
“Final belief” could mean chronologically final, as what is reached after all searching has ended, the belief that will never be superseded; or logically final, as the ultimate ground for all other beliefs, the belief that cannot itself be questioned. Either way, it would seem to bear affinities with the kind of belief one previously had in God. Stevens asserts the equivalence of final belief and belief in a fiction even more clearly in an undated notebook entry, possibly from the same period: “The final belief is to believe in a fiction… The exquisite truth is to know that it is a fiction and that you believe in it willingly” (WS 903). The fundamental contours of the supreme fiction are now in place. In order to compensate for the loss of God, one will believe in a fiction. Only the name for this kind of fiction is lacking.

But what sort of idea, fictional or otherwise, could replace the idea of God? What would such an idea look like? In a frequently cited October 15, 1940 letter to Henry Church proposing the establishment of a chair of poetry, Stevens offers a few hints as he attempts to define poetry and its aims. We can read the resultant “Memorandum” as a partial summing up of the progression in the previous two paragraphs. First, Stevens cautions that by “poetry” he does not so much mean words written in verse form as he does “poetic ideas,” the “subject-matter” of poetry. What is a “poetic idea”? Stevens illustrates by example. “The major poetic idea in the world,” he explains,

is and always has been the idea of God. One of the visible movements of the modern imagination is the movement away from the idea of God. The poetry that created the idea of God will either adapt it to our different intelligence, or create a substitute for it, or make it unnecessary. These alternatives probably mean the same thing, but the intention is not to foster a cult. (WS 806)
The extreme seriousness of Stevens’ ambition for poetry is evident in his distinguishing this ambition, twice in a three-page memorandum, from a *cult*. Two centuries after the death of William Blake, who would mistake the goal of poetry for the creation of a religious sect? Yet once we understand that Stevens hoped to see poetry offer an adaptation, substitution, or negation for belief in God, his insistence becomes more comprehensible. As Stevens suggests, the three possibilities for poetry may amount to the same thing: “adaptation” can be seen as substitution with an altered original, and “making it unnecessary” can be seen as substitution with nothing. All three possibilities represent modes of substitution for the idea of God. The choice of the phrase “poetic idea,” a concept Stevens will put to great use a decade later in the lecture “A Collect of Philosophy,” sheds light on Stevens’ conception of the “voluminous master” of Christianity. In that lecture, “poetic ideas” or “poetic conceptions” are those “concepts of philosophy” or “philosophical ideas” that are “inherently poetic.” Stevens offers no straightforward definition of what he means by “poetic,” though he does suggest at one point that anything qualifying as a “poetic idea” would have to be “securely lofty” (WS 853). Again, he defines primarily through examples. Poetic ideas include “God” (here, similarly to the letter to Church, “the ultimate poetic idea” [WS 859]), “the ascent to heaven,” “the infinity of the world,” and the “inexhaustible infinity of a priori” in our minds (WS 860). Poetic ideas can also have the form of propositions, such as “all things participate in the good,” “the world is at once the best and most rational of worlds,” “all things happen by necessity,” and “everything is everywhere at all times” (WS 855, 858). Ideas such as these are to be themes of what Stevens calls, without elaboration, but echoing the title of his by then celebrated long poem, “supreme poetry” (WS 854). He notes, “The great poetry I have projected is a compensation of time to come” (WS 855). At the end of the lecture, Stevens draws even closer to the language of supreme fictions,
identifying the “willingness to believe beyond belief” with “the presence of a poet” (WS 867). If we assume Stevens’ use of the phrase “poetic idea” did not change substantially between his letter to Church and his lecture on philosophy, and the parallel phrasing regarding the idea of God suggests he did not, we might conclude that the supreme fiction itself, the subject of “supreme poetry,” would be a “poetic idea.” It would possess a family resemblance with the poetic ideas listed above: “the ascent to heaven,” “all things happen by necessity,” and so on. These are the sorts of things one might believe in, once one disbelieves in God and yet finds less fictive alternatives, such as humanism, somehow inadequate.

Stevens had used the phrase “supreme fiction” in a short poem from Harmonium, “A High-Toned Old Christian Woman,” but had then abandoned it. The name suddenly re-emerges decades later in the May, 1941 lecture, “The Noble Rider and the Sound of Words.” There, Stevens describes “how poets help people to live their lives”:

There is, in fact, a world of poetry indistinguishable from the world in which we live, or, I ought to say, no doubt, from the world in which we shall come to live, since what makes the poet the potent figure that he is, or was, or ought to be, is that he creates the world to which we turn incessantly and without knowing it and that he gives to life the supreme fictions without which we are unable to conceive of it. (WS 662)

What does Stevens mean by “supreme fictions” in this lecture, composed only months before “Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction”? Several key terms in the passage allow for very divergent interpretations, especially “poet,” “world,” “conceive” and “incessantly.” On the one hand, Stevens’ earlier quotation of a poem by Wordsworth indicates that he does, at least partly, mean “poet” to refer to historically-situated individuals who wrote in verse. But in what sense do their poems give to “our” lives
anything so essential that we would be unable to “conceive” of life without them? Do I really turn to the creations of Wordsworth and others like him “incessantly”? And in what sense do these poets create “worlds,” if, as Stevens has just said, they “adhere to reality” (WS 662)? Perhaps we should read “incessantly” as hyperbole, or “poet” as a label not only applied to writers of verse like Wordsworth but to all those who have shaped our inherited ways of thinking. In either case, Stevens’ use of “supreme fictions” in “Noble Rider” seems irreconcilable with what will soon be called “a supreme fiction,” the newly formed fictional substitute for God recognized as a fiction. He does not speak here of a “possibility” but of (plural) fictions which we must already possess, since if we did not possess them, we would be unable to think as we do. We seem forced to take the passage not as the long-awaited christening of Stevens’ philosophico-religious project, but as one more step in that direction, a deferral of the grand conjunction of signifier and signified.

Judging by the published letters and other writings, it seems that Stevens did not decide upon “supreme fiction” as the name for his long-germinating idea of a substitute for religious faith until he decided upon the title of his latest work. This appears to have happened at some point in early 1942, a little less than a year after writing of “supreme fictions” in “The Noble Rider.” Stevens composed the poem at an uncharacteristically brisk pace, assembling all 630 lines, ten for each of his sixty-three years, in barely three months. When he was nearly finished, he wrote his publisher with details of the project, now (finally) entitled “Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction.” The three sections of the poem, he explained, “are three notes by way of defining the characteristics of supreme fiction” (L 407). When naming his poem and writing of these “characteristics,” did Stevens have in mind the project to invent a fictional substitute for the idea of God, as described in the pages above?
The identification seems clear enough in letters written shortly after the poem’s completion, such as the following note to Henry Church. Speaking of the “fiction… of the NOTES,” Stevens writes:

> We are confronted by a choice of ideas: the idea of God and the idea of man. The purpose of the NOTES is to suggest the possibility of a third idea: the idea of a fictive being, or state, or thing as the object of belief by way of making up for that element in humanism which is its chief defect.⁹

From the vague project of a substitute for religious belief that would compensate for the flaws in humanism, to the idea that this substitute would be a fiction, to the idea that this fictive idea would be willfully believed, we finally arrive at the name of such a substitute: the “fiction” of the “Notes,” that is, the “supreme fiction.”

The “supreme fiction” toward which the “Notes” direct themselves is, as of this April 21, 1943 letter, something both possible and not yet realized. As we have seen, it will remain possible and unrealized for the remainder of Stevens’ life, from the “Collect” of 1950 (“a compensation of time to come”) to the biographical note of 1954, in which Stevens’ work “suggests the possibility of a supreme fiction.” Someone may one day dream up an idea of “a fictive being, or state, or thing” that will “adapt” the idea of God “to our different intelligence, or create a substitute for it, or make it unnecessary,” at the same time “making up” for the insufficiencies in humanism. An idea of a “being”: perhaps something like the being of God, the ultimate poetic idea; or of a “state”: perhaps something like the state of all things happening by necessity, another poetic idea; or of a “thing”: perhaps something like

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heaven, the “securely lofty” poetic invention that Stevens seems to have admired second only to that of God. Someone may one day be inspired with such a fictive idea, and perhaps the inspiration will have had something to do with Stevens’ “Notes.” But Stevens never recorded encountering one, nor did he leave any evidence of believing he had created one.

In must be acknowledged, however, that a gap exists in the story sketched above. In the time between the composition of “Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction” in early 1942 and the April 1943 letter to Henry Church, Stevens composed a handful of letters that have, perhaps even more than the “Notes” themselves, fueled the quest to identify a supreme fiction based on or in Stevens’ poetry. In these letters, Stevens sometimes seems to identify “poetry” as the supreme fiction toward which the “Notes” gesture. For example, in the letter from Stevens to his publisher, quoted above, immediately after explaining that the three sections of the poem “are three notes by way of defining the characteristics of supreme fiction,” Stevens continues, “By supreme fiction, of course, I mean poetry” (L 407). What could be more unequivocal? Does this not prove that, in spite of all we have seen, Stevens did believe he had identified the supreme fiction, the grand replacement for God? Does this not prove that he believed poetry itself (in general, or as an ideal) would stand in for God, and believed this during the very period in which he composed “Notes,” which, as I suggested, probably provides the ultimate source of our interest in “supreme fiction”? Even if he later renounced the identification of poetry as a or the supreme fiction, this renunciation would not negate his having identified the two during the composition of the poem.

Two aspects of Stevens’ identification of “supreme fiction” and “poetry” might hold us back from proclaiming that Stevens did, after all, find in poetry what he could
not longer find in God. The first is the absence of an article. Stevens does not say that poetry is “the supreme fiction,” or even “a supreme fiction,” but simply “supreme fiction.” A poet who writes, “Where was it one first heard of the truth? The the” (WS 186) – such a poet is not unaware of the semantic weight of an article. “The” or “a supreme fiction” might have suggested the supreme fiction toward which the “Notes” direct themselves, a supreme fiction that might fill the gaps in humanism and compensate for the demise of musty old Jehovah. Instead, we have “the characteristics of supreme fiction,” and “by supreme fiction.” We have a term without article that largely disappears from Stevens’ subsequent letters.

The second element which might give us pause is the “of course.” It seems highly doubtful that at any time Stevens saw the precise nature of a monumental, fictive successor to religious belief as something obvious or self-evident. No matter what the substitute for the idea of God might be, it would almost certainly not be a matter of course, nor of an “of course.” Whatever Stevens means to equate poetry with, then, it would seem not to have been “the supreme fiction” that would satisfy the sense of post-theistic longing. Perhaps by saying he “means” poetry when he says supreme fiction, Stevens uses the word “means” in a sense analogous to its use in the following scenario: A choreographer intends to create a “supreme spectacle” in an upcoming show. She informs the producer that “supreme spectacle” consists of the following characteristics: abstraction, change, and pleasure. “By supreme spectacle,” she adds, “of course, I mean dance.” Here, the “of course” makes perfect sense: the three characteristics of “supreme spectacle” were so general, they left it unclear that the spectacle would involve (of course) the medium of dance, which is after all the choreographer’s trade. So might Stevens have meant to note, in passing, that any supreme fiction would, of course, also be the subject for poetry, and would be embodied in poetry. He says as much in the 1954 biographical note, cited above: “In
the creation of any such fiction, poetry would have a vital significance.” Why would a supreme fiction appear in poetry, and not, say, in philosophy, politics, cuisine or dance? Is this purely a poet’s bias? Part of the explanation may be that Stevens, as we saw in the closing lines of “Collect,” identifies the very idea of “belief beyond belief” with the “presence of a poet.” It may be possible to create a supreme idea in theology, equestrian sculpture, or science, and it may be possible to create an entertaining and otherwise adequate fiction in prose, but a supreme fiction – both fictive and capable of holding its own against religious faith – demands a poetic vehicle. Or so Stevens seems to have believed.

In associating supreme fiction and poetry, Stevens may also have had in mind his isolated first use of the phrase “supreme fiction,” decades earlier, in the teasingly blasphemous poem from Harmonium mentioned above, “A High-Toned Old Christian Woman.” The poem begins with the declaration, “Poetry is the supreme fiction, madame” (WS 47), and goes on to imagine poetry and the “fictive things” of its creation as an exuberant, transformative “opposing law” to the severe moralizing of orthodox Christianity. As we have seen, the poem long predates Stevens’ identification of the phrase “supreme fiction” with his hope for a fictive replacement for religious belief, so we have no reason to read the poem’s first line through the lens of the later and larger project. Without any further specification, the “supreme” in “supreme fiction” would naturally evoke the idea of a “supreme being,” in which case the line might be paraphrased, “Your Jehovah, madame, may be the supreme being, but poetry is the supreme fiction.” Given the delight the poem takes in “fictive things,” such an assertion would be tantamount to suggesting that poetic fiction trumps the high-toned Christian’s grave deified being. Alternately, and with even more pagan mischief, the line could be read as saying, “Your Jehovah, madame, is certainly a fiction, but poetry is the supreme fiction.” Such iconoclasm might be a little too biting
even for *Harmonium*, but in either case, “fiction” would mean something like “imaginative creation,” “act of the imagination,” and would need no connotation of a specific, fictive idea with which to fill a God-shaped void. Certainly, there have been writers who have valorized poetry to religious heights, and Stevens may have been among them, but it is unclear how his respect for the powers of poetry could constitute an identification of the supreme fiction. In one of his undated aphorisms, Stevens writes, “God is a symbol for something that can as well take other forms, as, for example, the form of high poetry” (*WS* 907). God and high poetry may both be symbols for the same lofty idea or thing, and perhaps Stevens believed that poetry could serve as some recompense for the loss of God. But did he see poetry itself as a fictive idea that men could will themselves to believe? What would it mean for the very idea of poetry to be a fiction? (Does anyone not believe that poetry exists?) Perhaps we could imagine a poet inventing a supremely lofty, or even somehow mystical, conception of the nature and importance of poetry. Then we could see this conception, if recognized as a fiction and nevertheless believed, and if sufficient as a surrogate for the idea of God, as fitting Stevens’ standard for a supreme fiction. But Stevens will offer us little guidance in the articulation of such a self-consciously fictive and elevated conception of poetry.

By the end of 1942, Stevens had already revised the ambiguous terms of his letter to the Cummington Press (“By supreme fiction, of course, I mean poetry”). He writes to Henry Church, “I have no idea of the form that a supreme fiction would take. The NOTES start out with the idea that it would not take any form: that it would be abstract.” Then, once again adding a provocative “of course,” Stevens adds, “Of course, in the long run, poetry would be the supreme fiction; the essence of poetry is change and the essence of change is that it gives pleasure” (*L* 430). Keeping in mind the loftiness of the poetic implied by Stevens in his treatment of “poetic ideas,” could
this idea of changeably pleasing poetry constitute the fictive idea that might replace the idea of God? Yet as soon as Stevens begins to articulate how poetry might be a supreme fiction, he displaces it into a potential, not actual, “long run.” If poetry is to become in some sense the supreme fiction, then the precise contours of that sense must remain unclear. A month later, in another of his explanatory letters to Hi Simons, Stevens has become even less definite than he was to Church: “I ought to say that I have not yet defined a supreme fiction… I don’t want to say that I don’t mean poetry; I don’t know what I mean” (L 435). He laments his failure to “rationalize” the “enigma,” to make it more precise, and in a follow-up note two weeks later abandons such attempts altogether. “I think I said in my last letter to you that the Supreme Fiction is not poetry,” Stevens concludes, now clearly marking out the stature of the idea with capitals, “but I also said that I don’t know what it is going to be. Let us think about it and not say that our abstraction is this, that or the other” (L 438). Such refusal of speculation about the location of his fictive grail settles into an official position for Stevens. “I confess that I don’t want to limit myself as to my objective” (L 485), he writes of the supreme fiction in 1945. Never again does he identify “a” or “the” supreme fiction, or supreme fictions in general, with poetry, or with anything else. But on another point he is equally consistent: the kind of supreme fiction gestured toward in his poem’s title “would never amount to much… until it has all come to a point” (L 435). A supreme fiction must be specific, a specific idea. It must be the sort of thing one could hold in one’s mind, clearly, perhaps on the way to war, as Stevens implies in the epilogue to “Notes.” It will be an “arbitrary object of belief,” and will serve as an “artificial subject for poetry, a source of poetry” (L 485). Idea, belief, subject: the supreme fiction may be abstract, but it will also be specific and articulable, perhaps with as much rhetorical precision as the older “poetic ideas” of God, heaven, or the necessity of all things.
Once again, the crucial fact, unchanged since Stevens first began to muse on the need to believe in “something else” once one no longer believes in God, is that he does not believe this other belief to have yet been created. Even during the period in 1942 and 1943 when he seems to speculate, in shifting terms, about the possibly poetic status of a supreme fiction, Stevens does not assert that he or anyone else has arrived at or even realized in poetic practice the relevant idea of poetry. He writes of “Notes” during this period, “the nucleus of the matter is contained in the title. It is implicit in the title that there can be such a thing as a supreme fiction” (L 430). There can be, though there is not. He insists to Hi Simons, in one of the rare passages in the letters containing an underlined phrase, “In principle there appear to be certain characteristics of a supreme fiction and the NOTES is confined to a statement of a few of those characteristics” (L 435). As if anticipating the half-century of critical controversy that would enshroud the supreme fiction of the poem’s title, Stevens emphasizes that the “Notes” do not contain that which they point toward. Nor do they constitute an exhaustive or systematic statement of the nature of the thing. They merely offer a “few” of the characteristics it would “appear” “in principle” to need. But in this letter to Simons, Stevens also makes his suggestion, noted above, that the subject of a supreme fiction “could occupy a school of rabbis for the next few generations,” and characterizes such work as “trying to create something as valid as the idea of God has been, and for that matter remains” (L 435). The supreme fiction can, conceivably, be created. It is possible.

Given the late composition of the 1954 biographical note, and its gesture toward “the possibility of a supreme fiction,” it seems reasonable to assume that Stevens hoped a sufficient supreme fiction might appear after his death. Perhaps tragically, or simply inevitably, it has not. I would even have to disagree with Marjorie Perloff’s already less-than-optimistic claim that Stevens comes to recognize in the
course of “Notes” that the supreme fiction can exist “only in the ‘fluent mundo’ of poetic language, a series of endless figural repetitions.” This would suggest that Stevens recognized the impossibility of creating his supreme fiction. The biographical note of 1954 suggests he did not, and continued hoping for its arrival. His death-bed conversion to Catholicism, if it occurred, might even suggest that he finally decided to adopt an older poetic idea (God), an earlier poet’s fiction, as his own, in light of his inability to find a self-made fiction that would suffice.

Stevens appears to disagree with critics who identify the supreme fiction as the idea in “Notes” of “this invented world,” or of “the major man,” or who say that the supreme fiction is the ecstasy the poet experiences, or that it is a solitary poet sublimated into a mortal god, or “perception beyond reason,” or a belief lying behind Stevens’ final poems in “the world as inhuman meditation” or “reality as cosmic imagination,” or “a poetic vision of the supreme spirit creating space and time and manifesting itself in each creative act of human consciousness.” At the same time, the poet also seems to distance himself from critics who would read a concept like the supreme fiction as inherently, necessarily or structurally “absent,” rather than provisionally lacking but capable of arriving at any moment, once someone thinks of a


11 On the conversion, see Bates 296-7, as well as the letter from Father Arthur Hanley to Stevens scholar Janet McCann, dated July 24, 1977, available at http://www.writing.upenn.edu/~afilreis/Stevens/conversion.html. “He said if he got well,” Father Hanley concludes, “we would talk a lot more and if not – he would see me in heaven.” If Stevens succeeded in believing he would, after death, meet people he knew in a place called heaven, it is difficult not to think that his success would exemplify the possibility of belief in an idea recognized as a fiction.

good enough idea. It is not that any of these interpretations fails to find support in Stevens’ poetry. Rather, nearly all of them find more than adequate support. We seem to be confronted with precisely the kind of “equipollence” by which the ancient skeptics aimed to bring about *epochê*, or suspension of judgment. Perhaps we should set the readings off against one another in an illustration of the peculiar “impossibility” of reading Stevens, or the pluralistic richness of his verse. Perhaps the best way of reading Stevens would be to adopt one, as if by a leap of faith, or by the fiction that one identification alone could be correct – to choose a door arbitrarily and enter it, rather than standing perpetually in the interpretive hallway. Or perhaps not. But we can at least recognize the possibility of an alternative, and the fact that this alternative seems to have been the poet’s own: a recognition that he did not fully realize the project set out in (what he saw as) the “central theme” of his poetry.

Having argued that Stevens did not believe he had created a supreme fiction, and that we have no reason to doubt him, a few peripheral questions remain that might make us question, on independent grounds, the ultimate value of a search for the supreme fiction. To begin with, even if someone had arrived at a fictive, quasi-religious idea worthy of being believed despite its evident lack of truth, even if Stevens or someone else had created a supreme fiction, what would the apostate have done with it? Certainly not prayed to it or gathered on Sunday mornings to worship it, as in the cult that Stevens disclaimed. The poets would have written poems inspired by the idea, but what would it have been like to read one of these ultimate poems? Would

the idea at their source really have given the modern apostate all that she felt was missing? The readers of poetry are supposed to find in the supreme fiction a “fulfillment,” at least for a while, until a new, changed supreme fiction comes along. But is this all that the ideas of religion offer? In “The American Sublime,” Stevens describes a peculiarly American, Emersonian and Jamesian view of what matters in religion, stripped of any definite surrounding community or ritual context, largely reduced to a personal experience that itself may be ultimately unspeakable. Perhaps the supreme fiction would offer something like this kind of “experience.” But the more one tries to imagine the concrete circumstances of the kind of idea Stevens envisaged, the more doubtful one becomes that anything could ultimately have “sufficed,” to borrow Stevens’ central term from “Of Modern Poetry.”

A possibility we have not yet considered is that Stevens’ idea of a supreme fiction could itself be the supreme fiction. But even here it is difficult to meet the poet’s demanding standards for what a supreme fiction must be and do. We can distinguish between at least two senses of “Stevens’ idea of a supreme fiction” that could serve as candidates for supreme fictionhood: the idea that there could be a substitute for the old religious ideal, recognized as invented and yet believed; and the specific idea that would fulfill this role, which the critics mentioned above find in one aspect or another of Stevens’ poetry. In the first case, it is difficult to see how such a mere possibility could suffice to fill the gap left by a departing God. Could believing in the simple, bare possibility of the eventual concoction of some grand poetic idea honestly suffice to drown out what Pascal referred to as “the eternal silence of these infinite spaces”? In the second case, we can begin by wondering whether there are indeed any critics who truly believe in the existence of some particular supreme fiction, though they know it to be of Stevens’ own creation, something he made up and wrote about in his poetry. We can imagine, for the sake of argument, that at least some
of the most philosophically or theologically ambitious interpreters of Stevens’ supreme fiction might, in fact, believe in the existence of what they describe—“reality as cosmic imagination,” for example—not only as a theme in Stevens’ poetry but as the truth. But a problem arises only when we consider the nature of their belief. Does our imaginary critic believe that reality as cosmic imagination truly exists? Or does he recognize that it doesn’t really exist any more than Jove in the clouds above, and yet believe in it anyway? Only in the latter case would “reality as cosmic imagination” qualify as a supreme fiction in Stevens’ sense: believed though recognized as make-believe. Yet, if the imaginary critic knows that what he believes is not true, in what sense exactly does he “believe” in it? And is such a belief truly strong enough to stand in the footsteps of an outmoded but in time past very imposing divinity?

Stevens was aware of the paradox lying at the heart of any possible supreme fiction, though it does not seem to have caused him many sleepless nights. Simply put, how is it possible for anyone to believe in something she recognizes as untrue? Those whom Stevens called the “rationalists” in their “square hats” may see such an objection as a knock-down argument against the very possibility of a supreme fiction, but not the poet. Though Stevens tends to avoid speaking of supreme fictions in veridical terms, preferring locutions such as “a fiction, recognized as a fiction” to “a fiction, recognized as untrue,” he does not hold back from this step unconditionally, at least in his poetry. In a poem collected in the same volume as “Notes,” the speaker refers to “the nicer knowledge of / Belief, that what it believes in is not true” (WS 291). The phrase occurs in a consideration of the world as metaphor, and the desire to believe in such a metaphor, but it at least suggests that Stevens’ poetic speaker has no categorical objection to saying of something that it is known as “not true” and at the same time that it is believed, or believed in. Stevens does not seem to draw any strict distinction between “belief” and “belief in.” It might also be noted that nowhere in his
writings, so far as I know, does Stevens speak of belief in something known to be “false,” though such a possibility would seem implied by his other statements, from a square-hatted point of view. Stevens favors the use of “fiction” to the more philosophically weighted “untrue” or “not true,” and “not true” to the more jarring “false,” just as he favors the cognitively weaker “recognized” to the epistemically definitive “known.”

How does Stevens extricate himself from the paradox of belief in something known to be a fiction? He does not take the easy way out of contradiction, by crafting a clever, Thomistic distinction. “The belief in a supreme fiction is of a different kind than ordinary belief,” or, “the supreme fiction is untrue in one sense, but true in another, higher sense” – the poet will have no commerce with such mickey-mocking. Nor does he insist that a supreme fiction would be “neither true nor false,” like Planck’s “working hypothesis” in “A Collect of Philosophy.” Instead, he confronts the paradox of fictive belief head-on and casually dismisses it. In the same 1942 letter to Henry Church in which Stevens imagines writing a “book of specimens” and states that he has “no idea what form a supreme fiction would take,” he also reports the following encounter with a student at Trinity College:

I said that I thought that we had reached a point at which we could no longer really believe in anything unless we recognized that it was a fiction. The student said that that was an impossibility, that there was no such thing as believing in something that one knew was not true. It is obvious, however, that we are doing that all the time. (L 430)

As an example, Stevens mentions the idea of heaven: “There are plenty of people who believe in Heaven as definitely as your New England ancestors and my Dutch believed in it” (L 430). But do they recognize it as a fiction, much less know it to be untrue? The helpless philosopher might intrude to say helpfully that Stevens
must assume anyone in his time and milieu to know, in some sense, heaven to be unreal. Or he might attempt to square Stevens’ language with Kant’s Copernican revolution, as if the poet were drawing attention to the way that objects must conform to our knowledge, that what seemed real apart from us is in fact, in a sense, a “fiction” “created by us.” But must we attempt to make the irrational rational once again? Can we, in the end? Why does Stevens’ supreme fiction keep running into problems at seemingly every turn – including the final turn, its apparent failure thus far to be created?

Perhaps we should not be surprised. In Stevens’ letters, references to the supreme fiction are sometimes accompanied by allusions to William James’ “will to believe”:

if we are willing to believe in fiction…

the need to believe, what in your day, and mine, in Cambridge, was called the will to believe… (L 431, 443)

The most extended invocation of James’ idea occurs immediately following the passage about the skeptic-minded youth from Trinity, the boy who insisted “that there was no such thing as believing in something that one knew was not true. It is obvious, however,” Stevens continues, “that we are doing that all the time”:

There are things with respect to which we willingly suspend disbelief;

if there is instinctive in us a will to believe, or if there is a will to believe, whether or not it is instinctive, it seems to me that we can suspend disbelief with reference to a fiction as easily as we can suspend it with reference to anything else. (L 430)

It is as if Stevens has in mind a model of belief as a sort of mental feat, as if we could will ourselves to believe arbitrarily through a kind of inner exertion – like stretching something inside one’s mind into an unfamiliar pose, or lifting a peculiarly
heavy mental weight. On this view, coming to believe something known to be untrue would present only a practical difficulty, not a logical one. If we found ourselves unable to believe something, such as a fiction known to be untrue, an appropriate response might be: try harder.

But James does not speak of the will to believe in this way. He makes a point of noting the many senses in which belief is not volitional, and never argues that belief or a suspension of disbelief can always be brought about simply through willing. In fact, he regretted the title he chose for his famous essay, suggesting he should have called it instead “The Right to Believe.”14 Whether or not Stevens read the essay, which would have been published in his first year at Harvard, or simply picked up the idea as it circulated through conversation, he makes the same mistake as many of James’ early critics, assuming that “the will to believe” refers to the possibility of believing in something known to be false. Nietzsche and Proust may believe in this possibility, but James only wanted to say that we have a right to believe in whatever is most advantageous to us, and only in those situations when we are faced with an unavoidable, momentous choice between two live options which cannot be decided on rational grounds. 15 In order for an option to be a “live” option, we must find it plausible. Stevens’ supreme fiction would not possess this plausibility, because we would know it to be a fiction, presumed untrue.

Future readers of Stevens might benefit if a critical consensus emerged recognizing that Stevens’ grandest poetic project, as he conceived of it, turned out to be something of a failure. His poetry was meant to lead toward the creation of a

14 “I once wrote an essay on our right to believe, which I unluckily called the Will to Believe. All the critics, neglecting the essay, pounced upon the title. Psychologically it was impossible, morally it was iniquitous. The ‘will to deceive,’ the ‘will to make believe,’ were wittily proposed as substitutes for it” (The Writings of William James: A Comprehensive Edition [Chicago: U. of Chicago Press, 1967], 457).
15 James 718, 723.
specific, vivid, fictional successor to the idea of God, but it has not. The failure of this “supreme fiction” to materialize, despite Stevens’ best efforts, may cast a new light on his poetry. Perhaps it becomes less monumental, more humble and human. Certainly, we will be less tempted to scour the poems for a gargantuan theoretical discovery, a quest which can stand in the way of appreciating the many things Stevens’ poetry does offer, and the philosophical work it does perform. It leads the reader to expect something, a grand philosophical idea, ripe for systematic paraphrase and explication, which not even Stevens felt he had delivered. Helen Vendler, probably Stevens’ most perceptively sympathetic critic, has always read his poetry without reliance on a theoretical apotheosis. In On Extended Wings, she offers no identification of “the supreme fiction.”

II.

“Probably new fault-findings, more soundly based on Stevens’ actual limitations, will arrive as the decades pass. Someone will rise to ask the hard question: How many qualifications can you get into a single poem and still have a poem?”

Harold Bloom, 1985

What philosophical work can Stevens’ poetry perform for us?

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 we could only uncover these answers, which take an assertoric form, 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 as to why the puzzle cannot be unpuzzled, why the problem cannot be solved, why there are no pores through the given aporia, will also take the form of assertions. 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 labor by some of the most brilliant minds ever produced, to establish so much as a single philosophical truth, to solve a single, fundamental philosophical problem “once and for all.” The textbook of philosophical truths, which all assertoric philosophy explicitly or implicitly aims toward, 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 statements no longer in dispute, but they have not. Instead, the usual introductory textbook of philosophy, where used at all, is as likely as not to consist of questions rather than answers, and not even precisely the same questions as were asked fifty or a hundred or a thousand 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 core. We can see one alternative to dogmatic philosophy in the Socrates of Plato’s early dialogues, the figure about whom Aristotle said, “He asked questions but gave no replies, because he confessed he had no knowledge.” 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 right one day at the Sorbonne: 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, as a friend of mine once heard in a graduate philosophy seminar, philosophers in the problem-solving tradition say things like, “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 really? I guess I can go home then.” “What will you do?” “I will go to cultivate my 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.¹⁶

A common response to philosophical dogmatism, especially among poets, has been an escape from argument into mystical assertion: a refusal to engage the gamesmanship of transitory problem-solving in favor of something else, often vaguely religious. Others have chosen philosophical silence. In the scheme of dogmatism and its alternatives, the uniqueness of Wallace Stevens’ poetry lies in its peculiar refusal of either silence or heavenly 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

¹⁶ For a comparison of the later Wittgenstein’s methods with those of Sextus Empiricus, see Robert Fogelin, *Wittgenstein* (London: Routledge, 1987), 226-234. Of course, such a broad sketch can only be defensible, 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 the seemingly dogmatic Berkeley, as a contrasting example, 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. Some varieties of ancient skepticism, though apparently undogmatic in their aims, can also be and have been read as dogmatic and consequently self-underrmining. The possible avoidance of dogmatism among many more recent “Continental” philosophers – Hegel through his logic beyond and yet preserving the law of non-contradiction, Kierkegaard through the deployment of opposed philosophical voices, Nietzsche through the attempted perspectival deployment of a single philosophical voice, Heidegger through the continual reweaving of central terms in the “task of thinking,” Derrida through a synthesis of Hegel’s and Heidegger’s avoidances with the linguistic structures of Saussure… The success or failure of these potential avoidances of dogmatism hinges on difficult points of interpretation for which, in many cases, nothing remotely approaching a consensus yet exists.
interlocutor or reader could be presumed not to disagree. He does not recede into a silencing of his ultimate belief, but engages belief loudly and in a thousand shifting forms. The essential techniques of Stevens’ anti-dogmatic art have been noted by critics since early in Stevens’ reception. They are what Helen Vendler, in a celebrated essay, calls Stevens’ “qualified assertions,” and what Marjorie Perloff calls Stevens’ “ironic modes.” Drawing from the techniques noted by the two critics, we can 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.

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18 Vendler makes a similar point at V 175.
• His helpful-toned observations, à propos of nothing, that things are “not” or “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…” – without, as often as not, going on to assert what is the case (V 176);

• 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” (V 166);

• His use of free-floating infinitives, imperatives without reply, and forward-casting constructions, 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” (V 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” (V 174). (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.)

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, it would begin to approach prose-poetry.) His 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,” 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 “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 like, “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 is not the least of philosophers, or if the most, since philosophical, must be the most in English, or suppose him to be the most of the poet’s must…” 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 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. 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.”¹⁹ 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.” But if the goal is to understand the subtle nuances of qualified assertion, Wallace Stevens will be the vastly superior philosopher.

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 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. 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 systems and distinctions, digest them and ultimately regurgitate them in altered, 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

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20 The roots of this contemporary approach may lie partly in 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. 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,” 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 letters on the page, or some other contingent, material thing. Philosophical dogmatism, for a variety of reasons, becomes more difficult to sustain.
to make any difference (so say the logically reductive dogmatists) 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 philosophical poems likewise contain qualified assertion of a philosophical kind. “The Ultimate Poem Is Abstract,” a minor, twenty-one line work from *The Auroras of Autumn*, the 1950 volume following that containing “Notes toward a Supreme Fiction,” 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 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. For convenience of reference, I will quote the poem once in full:

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.

If the day writhes, it is not with revelations.
One goes on asking questions. That, then, is one
Of the categories. So said, this placid space
Is changed. It is not so blue as we thought. To be blue,
There must be no questions. 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: present
Everywhere in space at once, cloud-pole

Of communication. 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.

Our first sense that “The Ultimate Poem” 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, hemmed and hawed, that the planet is “right.”

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 like, “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 snake 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.” Having qualified blue “revelation” down to the counterpoised, less blue “question,” the poem seems to have taken us to a mid-point 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?). 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 is not 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…

Reality offers resistance to us, limits the realization of our imaginings. It is possible for us to be wrong, and constrained in our mind’s movement. 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.

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.” 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,” 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 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
acknowledgement 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.

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.”) 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 only find ourselves complete 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.

Stevens 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.21 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. Though its influence on the philosophical and religious thought of today can be easily traced, 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 (“Do angels know themselves?”). One reason, of course, is that epistemology displaced scholasticism as the dominant Western philosophical tradition. Contemporary philosophers, like 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 mistaken as a call to end philosophy

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21 Richardson 212.
illustrates how deeply rooted epistemology continues to be. For many, it is difficult to imagine a viable philosophy without a focus on solving epistemology-related problems.) 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.
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,” 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” 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 its 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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