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Beyond the Chilly Chariots: A Contemplation of Nothingness in Wallace Stevens's *Harmonium*

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Abstract

This paper deals with Wallace Stevens's first collection of poetry, Harmonium, in light of Heidegger's philosophy, with a particular emphasis on Da-sein as the place of negativity. The focus is particularly on Heidegger's later philosophy, where he defines Man as the juncture where the four constitutive elements (earth, sky, divinities, and mortals) converge to let Da-sein appear as the futural authentic animal whose Being matters to him as his distinctive mark. Stevens's poetry in Harmonium displays an experimental development along the same lines. The collection consists of poems dealing with the effect that the prospects of death and finitude have on its protagonists. Stevens achieves authentic protagonists who accept the nihilating power of death in order to save themselves from any form of social, poetic, and philosophical closure. This is significant because Stevens conceives a creative potential that not only runs counter to the romantic nostalgia for a return to an innocent past, but also openly embraces the idea of finitude as the only way out of any logocentric and metaphysical forms of thinking. This study, therefore, aims to show how in Harmonium Stevens poetizes an endless creative power that sets upon reproducing the non-closure associated with nihilation and nothingness.

Keywords

Romanticism; Transcendence; Death; Negativity; Fourfold; Creativity.

1. Introduction

In a letter to Bernard Heringman on May 3, 1949, after rejecting the idea that he might have been influenced by poets such as Mallarmé, Albert Samain, or Paul Verlaine, Stevens willingly resisted the possibility of any such influence coming from his contact with what he calls "systematic philosophy" because, as he said, "I have never studied systematic philosophy and should be bored to death at the mere thought of doing so…. I could never possibly have any serious contact with philosophy because I have not the memory" (*Letters* 636). Well-educated though he was in philosophy, Stevens' modesty should not make us construe it as his aversion to any philosophical discipline. On the contrary, what he tries to achieve is to move away from any systematic philosophy and

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towards a new philosophical vision which attempts to take man away from the anthropocentric metaphysics. In fact, Stevens believed that the path of knowledge takes us through a circular course which begins "from romanticism to realism, to fatalism and then to indifferentism, unless the cycle re-commences and the thing goes from indifferentism back to romanticism all over again" (350).

As clear as Stevens is on the implications of fatalism and indifferentism, he is much less so when it comes to the definition of romanticism. In order to shed some light on it, he states that "what the world looks forward to is a new romanticism, a new belief" (*Letters* 350) that could supplant the disappearance of God from the public sphere during the Victorian period. Stevens explains to Hi Simons that "About the time when I, personally, began to feel round for a new romanticism, I might naturally have been expected to start a new cycle. Instead of doing so, I began to feel that I was on the edge: that I wanted to get to the centre: that I was isolated, and that I wanted to share the common life" (352). Although Stevens claims to celebrate the innocence of common life, his desire to return to the centre of the circle should not be taken at face value.

This scepticism should be regarded as an occasion for Stevens to not only distance himself from the older versions of romanticism but also to adopt a more radical approach to poetry and philosophy. For Stevens, the common is associated with a new beginning whose transformative powers are found only in the poet's imagination that resists the forces of external reality. He was quite articulate about his relation to romanticism when in *The Necessary Angel* he says that he feels "without being particularly intelligent about it, that the imagination as metaphysics will survive logical positivism unscathed" but "it is not worthy to survive if it is to be identified with the romantic. The imagination is one of the great human powers. The romantic belittles it. The imagination is the liberty of the mind. The romantic is a failure to make use of that liberty" (138). As a result, the only thing that could help protect ourselves against the pressure of reality so as to restore the power of contemplation is a beginning that opens the way to an unprecedented form of contemplation. It is perhaps only by means of the imagination that the mind can decreate only to resist the encroachments of reality.

In a different essay from the same book of prose Stevens envisages for us a condition in which "the virile poet is always surrounded by a cloud of double characters, against whose thought and speech it is imperative that he should remain on constant guard. These are the poetic philosophers and the philosophical poets" (*The Necessary Angel* 54-5). Stevens believes that apart from their shared "habit of forming concepts" (*Collected Poetry and Prose* 862), the disparity between these two disciplines of thought concerns both their aims and the way they approach them, for the philosopher aims to be 'fateful'

while the poet is intent on being 'effective'. This, according to Stevens, amounts to saying that the world a philosopher envisages is "intended to be a world, which yet remains to be discovered and which…will always remain to be discovered" while the world of the poet is "a world, which yet remains to be celebrated and which, at bottom, the poets probably hope will always remain to be celebrated" (864).

Stevens knows perfectly well that a thoroughgoing definition of what poetry is would thrust him deep into the tradition of philosophical knowledge, and that is the reason why he refuses to offer a clear-cut definition about his abstraction. If poetry, and by extension the imagination, are only 'the intricate evasions of as,' determined by varied qualities, it appears logical to feel sympathetic towards the view that sees in Stevens a predilection towards Heideggerian forms of undecidability. In what follows we will focus on these 'intricate evasions of as' as moments of non-humanistic authenticity and will show how they contribute to the formation of what Heidegger referred to as Dasein in the attempt to bring out in Stevens' poetry moments when he is interested not so much in the categories of presence and absence as he is in the ontological status of the negative that takes precedence over both presence and absence.

2. Literature Review

What J. Hillis Miller says of "Sunday Morning" is true about the entire poems collected in *Harmonium*. Miller contends that this piece is "the most eloquent description of the moment when the gods dissolve. Bereft of the supernatural, man does not lie down paralyzed in despair. He sings the creative hymns of a new culture, the culture of those who are 'wholly human' and know themselves" (81). Miller's observation is particularly penetrating *vis-à-vis* Stevens' attempt to replace an absent god with the human imagination. Nevertheless, this assumption is constrained by the humanism from which both Heidegger and Stevens wished to distance themselves.

Another such observation, which implicates Stevens deep within an egoistic tradition of humanism, is made by Charles Altieri. In "Stevens and the Crisis of the European Philosophy," Altieri claims that instead of focusing on the relationship between Stevens and the American pragmatism, a phenomenologically-driven enquiry is better equipped to "allow us to talk about the dynamics of poetry rather than focusing on abstract claims about the imagination" (62) in Stevens' poetry. Altieri proposes that Husserl's 'transcendental ego' sets the stage to begin to explain the role of the imagination in Stevens. Altieri emphasises how the formation of a transcendental subject, whose affects are responsible for the creation of a shared lived-experience, "proves most important for its giving sharp content to the 'we' [which] defines our power to adjust to necessity, and it embodies the power to feel what one shares with others even as one is most sharply

confronted with one's own isolation" (74). As in the case of J. Hillis Miller, here too, Altieri elevates Stevens' use of the poetic imagination to the level of a metaphysical transcendence as a creative force that remains outside the confines of both knowledge and experience. As such, Altieri makes Stevens remain faithful to the European humanist tradition that sees the human as the shaper of its world.

In a separate study, Krzysztof Ziarek moves in the opposite direction. Focusing primarily on Stevens' later poetry, in "Without Human Meaning: Stevens, Heidegger, and the Foreignness of Poetry," Ziarek shows how the poetic process of making meaning "remains not only without human meaning but without meaning as such" (80). Ziarek shows how Stevens puts on display the "dishumanizing moment of poetry when poetry attempts to take language beyond meaning as such" (79). It is tantamount to saying that without succumbing to the absence of meaning, Stevens tries to establish an ontological link between meaning and nothingness.

Another influential study which focuses on the relationship between meaning and nothingness is by the British philosopher Simon Critchley. In *Things Merely Are: Philosophy in the Poetry of Wallace Stevens*, Critchley argues that Stevens' attempt to "reduce reality to the imagination or extend the imagination into reality" (87) is a failure from the start. The failure in question is not the effect of Stevens' inability to capture in poetry the transition from the imagination to reality but a value that remains immanent to poetry, bordering on nothingness itself. "Such nothingness," continues Critchley, "prescribes a task and requires a craft, namely the endless activity of description in the full awareness of failure" (88). As such, the power of nothingness in Stevens brings to the fore the fact that, once freed from the exigencies of meaning, things merely are without a transcendental subjectivity imposing fixed meaning. According to Critchley, then, Stevens is trying to give shape to an ontology whereby "We see things in their mereness, in their plainness and remoteness from us" (88) without regard to the subject-object dichotomy.

In "Deleuzian Underpinning: An Affective Emergence of Stevens' Concept of a Supreme Fiction" Raina Kostova points convincingly to the fact that "Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction" is an example that "reveals Stevens' hesitation to apply a propositional logic to the definition of a supreme fiction," and therefore "as the title suggests, the poem is not *about* a supreme fiction but constitutes a movement *toward* one, and is, therefore, a work in progress with an unpredictable outcome, in which… a supreme fiction does not pre-exist the composition of the poem, but is produced alongside the creation of the 'Notes'" (33-34). If this much is true, Stevens' attack on the omens of presence takes on a wholly different meaning. One could argue that it was not the *actual* present time that

he bemoaned but the representational logic that dictates the objectification of concepts in the form of the metaphysics of presence. In accordance with this, Kostova concludes that Stevens experiments with "language to relay a sense of the abstraction and elusiveness of the concept of a supreme fiction" (53).

3. Theoretical Framework

Heidegger begins *Being and Time* with an introduction that aims to provide a clear exposition of the meaning of Being. In Heidegger's estimation, throughout the entire history of metaphysics the meaning of Being has undergone a forgetfulness from which philosophy has never been able to free itself. He contends that "on the basis of the Greek's initial contribution towards an Interpretation of Being, a dogma has been developed which not only declares the question about the meaning of Being to be superfluous, but sanctions its complete neglect" (*Being and Time* 21).

What Heidegger strives to achieve is to reawaken philosophy or for that matter ontology. In order to achieve this, Heidegger's initial step is to stress that this long tradition of the forgetfulness of Being must be deconstructed since it is precisely the history of metaphysics that is responsible for the obfuscation of the meaning of Being, as it is handed down to us through numerous distorted ways. One aspect of deconstructing the history of metaphysics is to save what Heidegger calls Dasein from the constrains of such tradition by no longer applying to it "any idea of Being and actuality …, no matter how 'self-evident' that idea may be; nor may any of the 'categories' which such an idea prescribes be forced upon Dasein without proper ontological consideration" (37). The first of such considerations entails that we understand Dasein not as an ahistorical subject who remains constant and unchanged. On the contrary, Dasein is a historical Being who is born into a determinate historical community with a certain past into which it is *thrown* without its own volition. Therefore, Dasein's thrownness dictates the manners in which it deals both with its environment and other Daseins.

Accordingly, Heidegger contends that what is of paramount importance in the existential constitution of the everyday 'there' is how Dasein finds itself thrown in the world and among entities. This 'how' brings itself out most prominently in what is called Dasein's 'state-of-mind' (*Befindlichkeit*). Put differently, it is precisely the fact that Dasein invariably finds itself in some mood which helps it to disclose its 'there' in the facticity of its thrownness which we have already discussed. As such, the thrownness indicates that, quite tautologically, Dasein is always in a mood, something that "*makes it possible first of all to direct oneself towards something*" (*Being and Time* 170).

Apart from thrownness, which defines Dasein's historical sense of Being, Dasein is also futural, meaning that it is always projecting itself towards and anticipating its inevitable ontological death that throws everything into nothingness. In accordance with the two dimensions of time, Dasein is always defined with respect to the past which it

has never chosen and a nullifying future towards which it is directed. This amounts to saying that Dasein temporalises within the two poles of nothingness. The implication of this is that it is not possible to "have power over one's ownmost Being from the ground up" (*Being and Times* 330). As Heidegger makes it clear, to be able to live authentically implies that Dasein should be able to call itself "*forth* to the possibility of taking over, in existing, even that thrown entity which it is" (333).

Taking over here points to the fact that Dasein must take responsibility of its finite existence. However, it must be noted that Heidegger warns against conceiving of taking responsibility of one's thrown existence in positive terms, meaning that any philosophy which dictates to Dasein the manner in which it must comport itself towards Being is should be considered as inauthentic. Nevertheless, lack of any positive content does not warrant a nihilistic approach to life since, as Ziarek shows, Heidegger sees the nothingness of authenticity "as prior to the binary of negativity and positivity, as the force that opens up the very space in which positing and negation both become possible" (90). This makes it obvious that the main concern of Heidegger's philosophy is not the subjectivity of the metaphysical subject but the Dasein who transcends the subject-object dichotomy, only to reach a point where what truly exists is the nothingness between thrownness and death. Dasein is the appellation that Heidegger gives to this expanse of nothingness between these two poles. Consequently, the temporal pole of the present becomes the point where Dasein brings together its thrownness and being-towards-death. The present becomes imbued with both the past and the future, the two temporal dimensions that, if constitutive of Dasein, remain outside it. Hence the hyphenated noun *ex-sistene*. The prefix *'ex'* denotes an adverbial outside while the verb '*sistene'* signifies standing. When taken together and hyphenated, *'ex-sistene'* means standing outside oneself. Dasein is always ex-sisting, that is, it is constantly comporting itself towards things into which it has been thrown, and towards the ever- present death.

4. Discussion

4.1. Transcendence as Nihilation

In "Invective against the Swans," which appeared as the second piece of *Harmonium*, Stevens tries to give an intimation of his poetico-philosophical preoccupations regarding the authentic understanding of a contemplation in order to discard what he deemed to be old-fashioned and dead. The first and the last couplets of this poem are particularly interesting because there Stevens achieves a twofold objective at the very beginning of the collection. He presents his philosophy by pitting it against Plato's famous allegory in *Phaedrus* about a charioteer riding two black and noble horses towards heaven to see the eternal Forms or Ideas. Being lonely, and probably a stranger, Stevens' charioteer,

however, chooses a different trajectory towards the "skies" and away from heaven, only to dismiss the perennial realm of Ideas. The last couplet captures the essence of the whole poem and, probably, the whole collection: "And the soul, O ganders, being lonely, flies / Beyond your chilly chariots, to the skies" (lines 11-12).

In contrast to Plato's allegory referred to above, the fact that the soul is "lonely," and not alone, implicitly indicates that for Stevens the new understanding of truth never finds a solid footing in the metaphysical tradition of the past. The loneliness is the consequence of flying the chariot away from what is commonplace and ordinary into a realm "beyond". Stevens is justifiably reluctant to give us the exact geographical location of the "beyond" because it is never beyond anything. For both Heidegger and Stevens these two realms are flattened out so that truth is no longer attributed to what lies above the finitude of the sensory world. In "Large White Man Reading Stevens' Genealogy of the Giant" Joseph Kronick puts forward a similar argument when he claims that "the divorce of memory from divine origins frees the texts from an inner essence that would make the surface, the words a shell housing 'meaning.' With the separation of truth from the house of language, appearance is all that counts…. For the poet, as Derrida claims for the Nietzschean philosopher, history begins when he is exiled from truth" (90). The exile occasions a separation of mind from the object because truth is no longer outside language, but rather it "already exists in and as language" which "does not operate through a process of nominalization but is itself a trope" (92), making truth abide in Stevensian 'evasions of as'.

The flight of the charioteer becomes synonymous with the act of creation because, as Stevens acknowledges, "the power of literature is that in describing the world it creates what it describes. Those things that are not described do not exist" (*Letters* 495). This is perhaps the reason why in narrowing down the meaning of Supreme Fiction, Stevens says "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" (438). It is precisely this ride of the soul beyond metaphysics and into productive acts that makes the poet wonder "Of what was it I was thinking? / So the meaning escapes" (lines 20-21). Meaning escapes Stevens not because he cannot ascertain it, but because it is the essential nature of truth to be open to any possibility of interpretation. Put differently, truth is nothing but the possibility that Dasein's finitude vouches for an infinity of meaning.

This is what Stevens formulates in "Of Heaven Considered as a Tomb". The whole poem consists of two questions addressed to two groups of philosophers who concern themselves with the existence of life after death. The first group imagines the dead carrying lanterns to find their way *towards* salvation while the burial of the other group

signifies the "passage into nothingness" (line 9) itself. For the first group salvation must be sought in the afterlife, whereas for the second, it is the *passage into nothingness* that is itself the much-awaited salvation. They seek salvation in death and nothingness and not in the promised life that transcends the world of the living. Stevens abstains from providing a definitive answer to the question he raises since in the last stanza, which traditionally functions as the resolution of the whole poem, he summons the dead themselves to come forward from their "topmost distances / For answer from their icy Élysée" (lines 15-16) to impart their own first-hand experience to us. He expresses his distrust of the answer provided by the philosophers in "On the Manner of Addressing Clouds," a poem placed immediately before "Of Heaven Considered as a Tomb". In this piece he accuses "Gloomy grammarians" and "Funest philosophers and ponderers" of mystification because they only engage in useless linguistic virtuosity by

> Eliciting the still sustaining pomps
> Of speech which are like music so profound
> They seem an exultation without sound (lines 3-5)

and, consequently, without meaning. The music they play is as doleful as the "mute bare splendors of the sun and moon" (line 15).

Hearing in Stevens the echoes of romantic irony that metamorphoses into a deconstructive one, R. D. Ackerman acknowledges that this strategy involves a deconstructive ironic distance from the representational discourse whereby Stevens arrives at a "process of self-creation and leads via this detour to the uncreated particulars of living reality" (553). As such, meaning is not a construction that unites itself with the reality with which it faithfully corresponds; on the contrary, what Stevens achieves is directing irony not simply at the representational product of such communion but at "the very possibility that such originary events occur at all" (557). As a result, the poet becomes a 'potent figure' who "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" (*The Necessary Angel* 31). Stevens' creative act has nothing to do with creation in the sense of producing something new from the ground up; rather, what it signifies is that via ironic distance he is able to bring to the fore the open space of Being, that is, the space between the two nullifying poles of temporality.

Devoid of any representational logic, the creation of supreme fictions becomes an artistic activity which, instead of referring to something outside itself, remains wholly immanent in such a way that meaning becomes synonymous with what Heidegger calls nihilation. Nihilation is the essence of Being. It is Dasein's nihilating power, as it is revealed in the mood of anxiety for example, that is responsible for "the detachment it

provides from worldly concerns, personal prejudices and other conditioned ways of seeing things" and enables us to "see things *as they are* in their naked beingness, rather than in terms of all the familiar use-meanings connected with things" (Watts 71). The effect of lack of use-value and use-meanings on Dasein is that as soon as beings slide into nothingness in the mood of anxiety, Dasein is "held out into the nothing. Holding itself out into the nothing, Dasein is in each case already beyond beings as a whole. Such being beyond we call *transcendence*," meaning that if "in the ground of its essence Dasein were not transcending… then it could never adopt a stance toward beings nor even toward itself" (Heidegger, *Pathmarks* 91). Any leap into a new beginning, into a new romantic contemplation requires that Dasein transcend the familiar in order to project itself into a future that is brimming with new meanings and is yet to come. As Bart Eeckhout observes, the movement of transcendence is the one "from homogeneity to heterogeneity, from monolithic identity to pluralistic difference, from the unified to the diversified" (181).

This is the motif behind the poem "The Ordinary Women". This piece which narrates the escapist desire of some unimaginative women to presumably go to a movie palace to watch a film, rests on the disjunction between how a desire to engage in an uplifting cultural activity result in failure. Stevens incorporates his vision of a degenerate popular culture into the figures of these ordinary women who

> Then from their poverty they rose,
> From dry guitars, and to catarrhs
> They flitted
> Through the palace walls. (lines 37-40)

One expects that after watching the film, the women would cast their cultural poverty aside and gain a new perspective on life. Instead, their

> Insinuations of desire,
> Puissant speech, alike in each,
> Cried quittance
> To the wickless halls (lines 33-36).

Apart from the hollow cries by these women into the dark halls, the emptiness and futility of their attempts is attested to by Stevens' choice of words to reflect this. In the third stanza, these women are shown to be going towards "The lacquered loges huddled there, / Mumbled zay-zay and a-zay, a-zay" (lines 9-10). Also, in the seventh stanza he describes the sound of the guitar that so attracted these women as: "The gaunt guitarists on the strings / Rumbled a-day and a-day, a-day" (lines 25-26). As Benjamin Madden explains "No amount of looking for homophonic clues or speculating about the etymology will settle the word's meaning" because "the chiastic pair of expressions 'a-zay, a-zay' and 'a-day, a-day' elude definition. These neologisms are not quite

onomatopoeic – indeed, there is no rhetorical term to describe them, underscoring that they have no argumentative function" (19).

As well as these non-signifying expressions, the images of coldness and lack of light emphasise Stevens' dissatisfaction with popular culture which invariably rise at the expense of imaginative capacities of the human mind. In *The Necessary Angel* Stevens gives an intimation as to how these women can put their poverty behind and see the light for itself. When talking about the function of the poet and the imagination, Stevens expresses his belief that a poet's role "is not to lead people out of the confusion in which they find themselves. Nor is it to comfort them. I think his function is to make his imagination theirs and that he fulfils himself only as he sees his imagination become the light in the minds of others" (29). This imaginative light should teach the ordinary women that "the ordinary, the popular, and the commonplace are the domain of ideology" (Madden 21), and in order to transcend the logic of the ordinary, they should follow the beacons of light emanating from their imaginative powers.

In a similar study, Hannah Simpson observes that Stevens' recourse to the powers of the imagination, as they are particularly manifest in his use of circular imagery, is an attempt to guard against the destructive encroachments of the social and political chaos of modern ideologies. She contends that the prevalence of these circular images in Stevens' poetry "consistently embody his rejection of any totalizing political view, vaunting instead the imaginative, personal ordering of existence" (47). By riding the chariot of the imagination, as the site of nothingness, away from representational logic that both the ordinary women and the poet are able to transcend the limits of metaphysics.

4.2. Man as "pierced by a death"

But how does Stevens manage to ride his chariot home? Stevens, like Heidegger, believes that in order to rescue truth from the contours of metaphysics and the ordinary, it is not necessary to engage in a wholesale destruction of the past. Instead, in "Another Weeping Woman" Stevens forces us to make the decision to "Pour the unhappiness out / from your too bitter heart / which grieving will not sweeten" (lines 1-3), in order to embrace the "magnificent cause of being" (line 7) which leaves us "pierced by a death" (line 12). The hunt for the originary truth does not mean for Stevens a quasi-romantic nostalgia in the form of a grieving over what has been lost and ought to be recovered. On the contrary, truth is an *event* that *occurs* in the other beginning as the futural commencement of what is to come. In the words of Stevens, the return to a certain condition in the past is a

> Poison [that] grows in this dark.
> It is in the water of tears
> Its black blooms rise (lines 4-6).

Evidently, what comes to the fore in "Another Weeping Woman" is that Stevens is particularly concerned with the question of how to *poetise* truth, that is, how to unravel the cipher of the relation that obtains between man and Being.

Stevens makes it clear early on in "Le Monocle de Mon Oncle" that to do so involves an attempt to "uncrumple this much-crumpled thing" (line 16). He is convinced that nothing would come forward as a more viable solution to the problem of Being than first acknowledging the existence of the problem. In his notes to this poem, Eleanor Cook remarks that to "uncrumple is the English translation of the Latin *explicare*, that is, to explicate" *(A Reader's Guide* 38). The uncrumpling that Stevens speaks of is parallel to the Heideggerian 'laying-open' of the foundation of Being in the form of an anxiety-induced confrontation with nothingness which is achieved in the form of an uncanniness, the latter being a term that Heidegger uses to refer to the existential-ontological condition of *not-being-at-home*.

The movement of thought in "The Comedian as the Letter C" could be read alongside "The Invective Against the Swans" as perfect embodiments of the necessity of the leap out of (trans-position) metaphysics and towards the truth embedded in the new romantic contemplation. The poem begins in the first part with a reminder to Crispin that he has complete domination over the flora and fauna: Crispin "is the intelligence of his soil, / The Sovereign ghost" (lines 1-2). As a consequence of being a sovereign subject, Crispin is at the same time the "principium and lex," that is, he is the principle and the law of nature, the one who bestows meaning by re-presenting the entities of nature in his consciousness. He has intelligence, which is conducive to the full mastery over nature. What runs beneath this anthropological claim is the metaphysical notion that when Man is put at the centre of the lived experience anything and everything is *possible* for so long as the subject, who is endowed with soul and reason, wills it. That is why nonsensical combinations such as "the Socrates of snails," "musician of pears," "wig of things," "nincompated pedagogue" are attributed to Crispin.

Crispin has for some time come to the realisation that his current life in the world without imagination is devoid of any vigour and vitality that is necessary for the grounding contemplation to occur. He decides to set sail to a new dwelling place to find a new idea of colony. Immediately after the first nota which designates him as the sovereign ghost, "Crispin at sea / Created, in his day, a touch of doubt" (lines 6-7). This attuning doubt is evidently different from any form of scepticism vis-à-vis an outside reality that exists independently of its representations in the human mind. For Crispin doubt is more fundamental than scepticism. To shed more light on this, it is worth quoting Heidegger in full:

> The doubt of those who doubt is sustained by a genuine will to know, and stands firm in the face of a true not-knowing. In true doubt there comes to pass [*ereignet sich*] the collision of knowing and not-knowing, and there is temporalized that originary need that transposes our Dasein into fundamental attunements. Here, accordingly, doubt does not mean a merely corrosive denial, driven on from one reservation to another, nor the blind assertion, weary of all questioning…. In doubting, the most profound abandonment is endured…. The poet tells of this monumental doubt, which encompasses the entire historical Dasein of the people and transports us toward the mystery. (*Hölderlin's Hymns* 91)

Looking deep into the sea, Crispin beholds in his image a figure that is not an intelligence and has misgivings about being the "intelligence of his soil." He is no longer the introverted sovereign ghost who appeared at the beginning. Towards the end of the first part of the poem the result of the initial doubtfulness emerges: "Crispin beheld and Crispin was made new" (line 80). This feeling of newness that has overwhelmed Crispin is quite different from the one Heidegger refers to as curiosity. Together with idle talk and ambiguity, curiosity is an existential mode that belongs to the ordinary being of the "there" into which Dasein has inauthentically fallen. Heidegger defines curiosity in terms of a 'seeing' that seeks novelty only in order to leap from it anew to another novelty. In this kind of seeing, that which is an issue for care does not lie in grasping something and being knowingly in the truth; it lies rather in its possibilities of abandoning itself to the world…. Consequently, it does not seek the leisure of tarrying observantly, but rather seeks restlessness and the excitement of continual novelty and changing encounters. (*Being and Time 216*)

Evidently, for Heidegger the contrast is the one between "tarrying observantly" and curiosity, both of which are concerned with different ways of seeing and of relating to time. If the latter leads to the *acceleration* of the "excitement of continual novelty," the former aims at an authentic *augenblick* or "moment of vision". In *Being and Time* Heidegger remarks that the "*present* which is held in authentic temporality and which is *authentic* itself… must be understood in the active sense as an ecstasis" (387). It is easy to establish the connection between ecstasis as standing outside and ek-sistence as Dasein's essential ground where time is not a sequence of 'nows' that stretches into eternity. On the contrary, the ecstatic time is an awaiting anticipation through which Dasein is transported into nothingness while anticipating its possibilities and death. Since in being-toward-death Dasein never concerns itself with death as something actual, as something constantly present, but as something that never arrives, it is, through and through, defined as being always *ahead-of-itself* and towards-death. This impassioned anticipation of death is what Heidegger calls 'fate,' which is an authentic temporality

revealed to Dasein in the moment of vision as the appropriating event. But what does this all have to do with Crispin? And how is he fateful?

Crispin's journey towards the city of Yucatan in the West is decidedly not towards a new land just for the sake of what strikes him as new in a new land; nevertheless, he passionately anticipates his fate in Yucatan when he "sensed an elemental fate, / And elemental potencies and pangs, / And beautiful barenesses as yet unseen" (lines 127-129). The 'barenesses' of Crispin's fate should be interpreted from out of and alongside ecstatical temporality which through fateful anticipation enables Crispin to only 'foresee' a land which, in its bareness, is unseen but anticipated. The fact that Yucatan is unseen does not pertain so mush to its unprecedented novelty as to its being-ahead-of-itself into the future that is yet to come but never arrives. Being affected by the thunderstorm, being-ahead-of-itself becomes the underlying cause of freedom that Crispin enjoys towards the end of the second part:

> And while the torrent on the roof still droned
> He felt the Andean breath. His mind was free
> And more than free, elate, intent, profound
> And studious of a self possessing him,
> That was not in him in the crusty town
> From which he sailed. (lines 176-181)

It is interesting that Crispin's freedom comes at the expense of being exposed to the thunderstorm which lets him "vociferate again". For Stevens, the thunderstorm is the bearer of the message of freedom from Being to Crispin, while he is able to harken to its message only after it subsides. Crispin's vociferation is equivalent to the thunder of the storm which betokens his being overwhelmed by the sway of Being: it is the same thunderstorm which has taught Crispin to harness "the lightning flashes of the God, compelling them into the word" (Heidegger, *Hölderlin's Hymns* 30) so as to allow himself to be appropriated by the appropriating event of his fateful historicality, that is, to be overwhelmed by his ownmost potentiality-for-being-one's-self. If earlier he was the 'sovereign ghost,' he is now "studious of a self possessing him" (line 179). A self which is possessed by itself is a self-constancy which "signifies nothing other than the anticipatory resoluteness," and that the "ontological structure of such resoluteness reveals the existentiality of the Self's selfhood" (Heidegger, *Being and Time* 369). The content of self-constancy is a being-ahead-of-itself that looks towards the future that is not meant to arrive. As Heidegger says in "What Is Metaphysics?," since nothing "is neither an object nor any being at all" (104), it is absurd to speak about its categorial features. As such, the act of defining the new colony becomes a description without a

place. In "Meteoric Poetry: Wallace Stevens' 'Description Without Place'," Michael Beehler maintains that "Since it is always 'without place,' description is not a revelation of anything beyond itself. It is only an internally-reflective system of vacant names… with no referent beyond itself" (257). That is why Crispin's "book of moonlight is not written yet / Nor half begun" (lines 186-187).

After having his self appropriated by "the indulgences that in the moonlight have their habitude" (lines 238-239), Crispin learns that soil, as a metaphor for truth, must not be subordinated to his intelligence. This is the reason why the initial nota, advertising for such submission, is inverted at the beginning of part IV ("The Idea of Colony"). The first nine lines are significant:

> Nota: his soil is man's intelligence.
> That's better. That's worth crossing seas to find.
> Crispin in one laconic phrase laid bare
> His cloudy drift and planned a colony.
> Exit the mental moonlight, exit lex,
> Rex and principium, exit the whole
> Shebang. Exeunt omnes. Here was prose
> More exquisite than any tumbling verse:
> A still new continent in which to dwell. (lines 280-288)

Crispin "planned a colony" and learns to *dwell* in the proximity of the soil. Now that he has exposed himself to Being, at the end of the poem he makes the purpose of his journey manifest to us: "proving what he proves / Is nothing" (lines 571-572).

4.3. The Fourfold

In his seminal collection of essays, *Poetry, Language, Thought*, Heidegger touches upon two very important issues that define nearly the whole project of the book, namely the fourfold and language. According to Heidegger, earth is the "building bearer" of whatever exists on earth; it is the "material basis" of fruits, rocks, plants, animals, and the thing, more specifically. But the earth is not a positive materiality for the things that *appear* on earth. On the contrary, the earth is that which withdraws into nothingness after letting the thing appear or shine forth, and it is this paradoxical relation between shining forth and withdrawal that Heidegger refers to as strife. As such, the earth is a groundless ground (ab-ground) that, after letting the thing shine forth, withdraws into concealment.

But what is important about the sky is its relation to the groundless ground of the earth. The relation between the two constitutes a dimension that must be explained vis-à-vis the relation that obtains between absence and presence. Andrew Mitchell observes that the dimension of the between is an attempt by Heidegger to

> think the 'there' of Dasein apart from metaphysical notions of presence and absence.... The between *is* between presence and absence, but without there being presence and absence to bound it. In other words, the between *is not* between presence and absence.... On the contrary, there is only the between. (119)

Stevens captures the unnameable space of the dimension in "The Apostrophe to Vincentine," where he says

> I figured you as nude between
> Monotonous earth and dark blue sky.
> It made you seem so small and lean
> and nameless,
> Heavenly Vincentine" (lines 1-5).

Vincentine is exposed in nudity and is without a name because she is no longer the self-assertive Dasein who wills in order to dominate; she is disrobed and nameless because she *has become* the "there" of her being, the dimension. In the final stanza Stevens speaks *in propria persona* by saying:

> And what I knew you felt
> Came then.
> Monotonous earth I saw become
> Illimitable spheres of you,
> And that white animal, so lean,
> Turned Vincentine,
> Turned heavenly Vincentine,
> And that white animal, so lean,
> Turned heavenly, heavenly Vincentine. (lines 20-26)

Only after Vincentine becomes unified with the earth as the origin which has the paradoxical character of shining forth out of the abyss and withdrawing into it does it become possible for her to break the bounds of her heretofore animality and turn heavenly, to have the earth surround her as the paradoxical "illimitable spheres" of her. Implicit in this piece is the fact that in order to have the earth as her unbounding boundary, Vincentine made a transforming decision with respect to her animality and presented herself to Stevens as the guardian and preserver of truth. In order to be able to become heavenly, she has turned herself into the dimension of Being itself. The prerequisite, however, of this transformation is that Vincentine must listen to the message of the gods.

The element that brings the message to Dasein regarding the space of the between is the divinities. The message that they bear does not have a specific content, but arrives at its destination only in the form of a 'call' to Dasein. This call hints at Dasein the arrival of the last God; however, the last God is not meant to arrive since if it arrived, then it would be equal to things present-at-hand. Hence the fact that Vincentine exposed herself in nudity and did not have a name. If we take Heidegger to his words, then the earth, sky, and the hinting of the last God are all different variations of the theme of the withdrawal of Being into nothingness. And that is why the last of the four is mortals, who are called so because they are the only entity that dies. "To die," Heidegger says, "means to be capable of death as death…. Death is the shrine of Nothing, that is, of that which in every respect is never something that merely exists, but which nevertheless presences, even as the mystery of Being itself" (*Poetry, Language, Thought* 176).

The interconnectedness of the four means only one thing: that Dasein is nothing other than a groundless ground as the space of the between whose presence is only hinted at him. The world, by worlding, brings the thing near while keeping it at a distance. Thus the fourfold is that unity by means of which the world worlds not as "an object that stands before us and can be seen" but as the "ever-nonobjective to which we are subject as long as the paths of birth and death, blessing and curse keep us transported into being" (43). Well aware of these, in "The Place of the Solitaires" Stevens makes it clear that the message from the gods never arrives in its final form but is only hinted at because "There must be no cessation / of motion" (lines 6-7) to it; everything is in constant flow since Dasein manages to catch sight of "the motion of thought / And its restless iteration" (lines 10-11) *by* having always already transported himself into Being. Iteration is manifestly not an unimaginative reproduction of what there is, it is not the uniformity of what is counted as equal. It is, on the contrary, the "restless iteration" of the same, the difference between the two being that what is equal to something else must correspond exactly to what is actually present-at-hand; what is more, what is equal always already presupposes the obliteration of difference, while that which is the same always acts upon an element of difference, meaning that the same is the site where presence and absence converge, the time-space between birth and death that is defined, through and through, by the shining forth and the withdrawal of Being. Dasein is confronted with the reproduction of the same but never reaches the content. This is why Heidegger states that "difference is neither distinction nor relation. The difference is, at most, dimension for world and thing…. The difference is *the* dimension, insofar as it measures out, apportions, world and thing, each to its own" (*Poetry, Language, Thought* 200).

To warn us against the intrusions of constant presence which fixes the thing in place (*das Gestell*) so as to make it possible for it to be replaceable with what is new, Stevens begins *Harmonium* with "Earthy Anecdote". As Eleanor Cook explains in *A Reader's Guide To Wallace Stevens*, the readers are wont to having collections of poetry begin with a certain invocation to a Muse, while Stevens begins his collection with a warning (30). By using the adjective 'earthy' (in "Earthy Anecdote"), Stevens does not intend to introduce a contradistinction between what is divine and what is mundane, but to bring forth the groundless ground which guards the beings that dwell on earth against the intrusions that put the unity of the fourfold in danger. This danger is incarnated "Every time the bucks went clattering / Over Oklahoma / A firecat bristled in the way" (lines 1-3). Earth is the abode of the bucks that are approached by the firecat

> Until they swerved
> In a swift, circular line
> To the right,
> Because of the firecat.
> Or until they swerved
> In a swift circular line
> To the left,
> Because of the firecat. (lines 6-13)

The firecat is the danger that denies the bucks their stay within the fourfold and leaves them unguarded, because it is only on earth and under the sky that the bucks are allowed to receive the message that hints at them the nearing of the nothing. The warning that Stevens issues at the beginning is levelled at the fact that the essence of the world, which is the Being of beings, might recede into forgetfulness and refuse itself to Dasein. One could, therefore, reach the conclusion that Stevens is not going against the tradition of invocations, but, on the contrary, he is addressing his invocation to the earth itself, that is, by placing the "Earthy Anecdote" in the position of the invocation, Stevens suggests that during the whole collection he is dealing with Being, with its (non)arrival, and more importantly, with nothingness. The invocation and the hinting of the nothing are all couched in seemingly meaningless linguistic terms.

In "The Plot Against the Giant" the third girl chases the giant

> With a curious puffing.
> He will bend his ear then.
> I shall whisper
> Heavenly labials in a world of gutturals. (lines 14-17)

There is something curious about the combination of "heavenly labials" and its opposite gutturals as harsh-sounding speech. In linguistics, labials are those sounds which are produced by the lips but generally require them to be completely, or at least partially, closed. The closed lips produce no meaningful utterance and that is why the adjective 'heavenly' is appended to it. The whisper is "heavenly" because it does not have a fixed referent outside itself; it does not refer to anything: the call is heavenly as long as it does not speak but only says the essential swaying of Being. Since we have already established that Dasein is nothing more than the "there" of its Being, the "heavenly labials" must issue from the place of Being, and this is precisely why in "Anecdote of Men by the Thousand" Stevens says that "There are men whose words / Are as natural sounds / of their places" (lines 9-11).

The best piece in *Harmonium* that so succinctly poetizes the relations between the four of the fourfold is the most anthologised one in the collection: "The Snow Man," particularly its final tercet. In the last stanza, after having gone through the season of winter and having endured all its pain and misery, Stevens puts his poetic talents on display. He emphasises his speaker's potentiality-for-hearing as follows: "For the listener, who listens in the snow, / And, nothing himself, beholds / Nothing that is not there and the nothing that is" (lines 13-15). For Stevens, the listener is tantamount to nothingness, and this is the essence of Dasein. In the final line Stevens treats the Being of nothingness in two seemingly paradoxical ways. On the on hand, the listener rightly beholds the "Nothing that is not there" since nothing is not an object over against which the listener could stand; the nothing cannot be objectified or re-presented whatsoever. The second nothing, however, is there because this time the nothing *is there*, that is, nothing, as the "there" of Being is the only thing that *is*. Only once we realise that the first unrepresentable nothing is the same as the second nothingness of the "there" is the paradox resolved. So how does Dasein guard something that is not there? The answer Stevens provides for this question appears in "Le Monocle de Mon Oncle". Before answering the question, Stevens reformulates it in his own poetic words at the end of stanza nine: "Where shall I find / Bravura adequate to this great hymn?" (lines 98-99) Having realised that to be the guardian of the truth of Being entails the bravura to sing a great hymn to the Godhead, Stevens responds that

> Every day, I found
> Man proved a gobbet in my mincing world.
> Like a rose rabbi, later, I pursued,
> And still pursue, the origin and course
> Of love, but until now I never knew
> That fluttering things have so distinct a shade. (lines 127-132)

With regard to the fact that love and death hint at man the fidelity to god, Stevens rightly observes that what is beautiful is precisely what shines forth in both death and love. In "Sunday Morning" Stevens says that "Death is the mother of beauty, mystical, / Within whose burning bosom we devise / Our earthly mothers waiting, sleeplessly" (lines 88-90). The mother, as a being who is responsible for procreation and regeneration, is herself ensnared within the bounds of death, and must only be awaited, sleeplessly. Metaphorically, the mother of beauty does not procreate what is beautiful anew and each time but, like divinities who hint, she only awaits the arrival of what is beautiful. Put differently, death, as the mother of beauty is the origin from which "Alone, shall come fulfilment to our dreams / And our desires" (lines 64-65).

5. Conclusion

Stevens' poetic trajectory from the beginning of *Harmonium* to its very last resembles Crispin's desire to found a new dwelling place in the Americas but realises that dreams and desires are essentially and inherently unrealisable, and what *is* is only Dasein, not an actual human being, but an entity whose being is the abyssal dimension of the between where earth, sky, divinities, and mortals meet, which is commensurate with nothingness. In *Harmonium*, Stevens' protagonists are the mortals who, by anticipating their death and finitude, await the nearing of the Godhead in its absolute distance, showing to them that no positive and stable meaning is possible to be conferred upon their existence. It is only in this way that they can transcend the limitations of anthropology while at the same time remain wholly immanent in the world in order to accept the responsibility of their nullified existence by creating their own meanings. It is only after such transcendence that Stevens is able to shatter the illusions of a humanist poetic imagination which dictates it is only by means of *man's* imaginative manipulations that it can resist the pressure of reality.

For both Heidegger and Stevens, the truth of Being is not the final destination that Dasein is moving towards. It is the "there" which has always been there from time immemorial; it has only refused itself to Dasein by withdrawing from him. This authentic turn to the origin is what has framed Stevens' poetical argument in *Harmonium*. The whole trajectory of this collection of poetry is the one between two poles of nothingness from the beginning to the end; poetic creation *is* the nothingness of the "there," and must return to its originary "there" at the end. The departure from nothingness and the subsequent landing in nothingness indicate nothing other than the fact that for Stevens, as for Heidegger, man and Being are synonymous with nothingness.

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