

The Poetry of Matter: Stevens and Bergson

I. Introduction

Stevens' aesthetics and Bergson's ontology considered the relationship between mind and matter outside the Hegelian system, which reluctantly admitted the reality of the material world but only as a necessary moment in the self-determination of spirit. The upshot of Hegel's metaphysics was the self-recognition which spirit attained through alienating itself in its other--nature--and returning to itself as the only absolute resurrected from its self-negation in the material world. The privileged term in this claustrophobic system--reconciliation--presupposed the dialectical opposition between spirit and nature, subject and object, mind and matter. Since Hegel defined the material world as spirit in its otherness, as 'a little death' of the spirit, which, however, spirit was bound to overcome, the material world could not but be reduced to a moment in the uncompromising dialectic of spirit, a moment whose necessity lied merely in its annihilation by spirit. Kant's attempt to distinguish clearly between the different faculties of the mind as well as to preserve the privileged status of reason and of consciousness, along with Hegel's insistence on preserving the opposition between spirit and matter were challenged uncompromisingly by Nietzsche, whose thought anticipated Stevens' poetics and Bergson's philosophy of becoming. Nietzsche's critique of the mechanistic interpretation of the world and of the hypostases of metaphysics--substance, attribute, presence, truth, subject, object, action, quality, space, time, cause/effect--centered around two major prejudices: the concept of motion, which, Nietzsche argued, is rooted in the linguistic habit of attributing a doer to every deed, and the concept of substance or unity "deriving from our 'psychical' experience" (*WP* 338). Nietzsche rejected the mechanistic notion of motion as something that happens to substance, as somehow superadded to it, arguing instead that motion, in its original sense as sensation, is intrinsic to substance(335). In *The Creative Mind* Bergson showed duration to be the very content (substance) of life rather than a form external to it. Similarly, Stevens' theory of poetry made it clear that poetry is life insofar as it reflects the indeterminacy and flux of reality.

The interdependence of the real and the unreal in Stevens' theory, and of mind and matter in Bergson's philosophy, had their roots in Nietzsche's critique of the category of essence. Nietzsche defined the essence of a thing as its relatedness to or embeddedness in other things: "The properties of a thing are effects on other things...i.e. there is no thing without other things"(302). This is essentially a poetic idea describing the nature of metaphor or poetry: the construction of a poetic image is a reflection or an analog of the construction of the thing itself, an idea going back to Baumgarten's view of poetry as "a perfect sensate discourse" (Baumgarten 39). Both the thing and the image are defined as intersections

of relations: the thing is the crossing point of other things, while the image emerges from a drawing together, by analogy, of several things. We perceive things as entities, rather than as constant change, because the objective manifestation of change differs from our subjective perception of it. As a result of the work of memory, which consists in condensing the infinite number of vibrations constituting objects into a specific perception thus reducing multiplicity and repetition to unity and identity, we perceive the material, objective world as changing slowly. It is precisely because it is changing infinitely faster than we could ever perceive that it appears as though it is changing very slowly, and, for the same reason, it appears to be extended, spread out. Things appear to have being because of the nature of our perception. The poetic image, on one hand, and intuition, on the other hand, break through the spell of inscription, intensifying perception to the point where we experience the flux of the world.

Stevens' and Bergson's privileging of an intuitive experience of reality and their mistrust for the intellect, which they considered an impoverished version of intuition (Bergson) or imagination (Stevens), followed in the steps of Nietzsche's critique of consciousness as reactive, as a technique of inscription translating the unfamiliar (the body) into the familiar, and his critique of intellect as that which reduces change to substance, becoming to being. Thought was the privileged term in the Hegelian system. In fact, Hegel defined thought as the proper form of spirit, art being its improper form, the opposition or the detour, in which spirit is able to recognize itself and become one with itself: "Thinking...constitutes the inmost essential nature of spirit. ...[T]he power of the thinking spirit lies in being able not only to grasp itself in its proper form as thinking, but to know itself again just as much when it has surrendered its proper form to feeling and sense, to comprehend itself in its opposite, because it changes into thoughts what has been estranged and so reverts to itself"(12-13). On the other hand, Nietzsche, Bergson, and Stevens considered the intellect as merely a condensation of something bigger and undetermined, a "vague nebulosity" (Bergson, *CE* xii), which could be intuition (Bergson), imagination (Stevens) or "the higher body"(Nietzsche). Indeed, Nietzsche argued, "[t]hinking', as epistemologists conceive it, simply does not occur: it is a quite arbitrary fiction, arrived at by selecting one element from the process [selecting ideas and excluding affects, thereby disguising the visceral nature of thought] and eliminating all the rest, an artificial arrangement for the purpose of intelligibility--"(WP 264).

Hegel saw art's justification in that it liberated phenomena from their transitory, accidental nature. However, as Adorno's critique of Hegel made clear, the nature of art *is* transitoriness, whereas art degrades itself whenever it begins to strive after durability. The subtlety of reality, which Stevens' poetry captured, was the greatest value in life, according to Nietzsche: "An artist cannot endure reality, he looks away from it, he seriously believes that the value of a thing resides in that shadowy residue one derives from colors, form, sound, ideas; he believes that the more *subtilized*, attenuated, transient a thing or a man is, the more valuable he becomes; the less real, the more valuable" (WP 308 italics mine). Adorno's

critique of Hegel rightfully pointed out the danger in Hegel's understanding of spirit as integrating and thus negating externality, materiality. Adorno observed that absolute, successful integration turns art into "a machine in aimlessly idling motion"(43). Art is authentic only when it preserves an element of indeterminacy, non-subjectivity, unforeseeableness against the pressure of determined reality. Stevens' poetry and Bergson's philosophy of becoming bear witness to the evanescence, the ephemerality of life. Poetry does not reduce the world to something stable and unified but rather intensifies this essential indeterminacy. The imagination in Stevens' theory is constantly in search of a language of things, a language beyond signification. The unreal created by the poetic imagination is impersonal, real, objective, since it does not give in to the ideology of presence. Whereas Hegel idealized only the sensuous in art, Stevens and Bergson went further, claiming that the material world itself--independently of its presentation in art--was "subtle", to use Stevens' term, or ideal. The subtlety or ideality of reality was not seen as the result of spirit's activity upon reality, but as the very nature of matter as "image", to use Bergson's term. This new understanding of reality underlied Stevens' idea of poetry as an intensification of reality. For Stevens and Bergson even the highest degree of abstraction was rooted in materiality. Hence, Bergson searched for the origin of our general ideas in what he called "corporeal, natural ideas" (CM 65), while Stevens considered the real as the matrix of metaphor, of poetry. Whereas Bergson insisted that perception does not add anything to the thing perceived but only offers a limited vision of the thing, Stevens showed that in inventing the rest of the object perceived and thus trying to compensate for what seemed to be a deficiency in perception, the imagination achieves more than the actual. It is in this sense that Nietzsche spoke of the will to power as a will to creating, forming, inventing, which must be valued more than truth: "The perspective of all organic functions, all the strongest instincts of life: the force in all life that *wills* error; error as the precondition even of thought. Before there is 'thought' there must have been 'invention'; *the construction of identical cases, of the appearance of sameness, is more primitive than the knowledge of sameness*"(WP 293 italics mine). Invention or error is the essence of life as continually diverging from itself: invention is differentiation, while "error" is difference and excess. Just as for Stevens poetry is life, for Nietzsche fiction-making is the strongest instinct of life: "The world...is not a fact but a fable and approximation on the basis of a meager sum of observations; it is 'in flux', as something in a state of becoming, as a falsehood always changing but never getting near the truth: for--there is no 'truth'"(WP 330). The will to power as a will to illusion is the will to create. The will to truth, which splits the world into real and apparent, is the "*impotence of the will to create*" (WP 317). "The unreal" (Stevens) and "the virtual" (Bergson) are terms whose origins lie in Nietzsche's celebration of the will to error or the will to illusion.

Philosophers and artists working in the first decades of the twentieth century inherited the question that underlied the grand philosophical systems of Kant and Hegel, the question of the relationship

between mind and matter. In *Appearance and Reality* F.H Bradley set out to show how appearance, which he found to be self-contradictory, was related to absolute reality, whose mark was self-consistency. Every kind of thinking about the world, Bradley discovered, grants us only appearances: “a relational way of thought--anyone that moves by the machinery of terms and relations--must give appearance, and not truth”(28). Bradley considered space, time, self, activity, things, nature and in each case he concluded that these were appearances since he found them to contain indissoluble self-discrepancies. The contradictory character of space and time lies in the irreconcilability of relation and quality: “...space is endless, while an end is essential to its being. Space cannot come to a final limit, either within itself or on the outside. And yet, so long as it remains something passing away, internally or beyond itself, it is not space at all.... Space is a relation--which it cannot be; it is a quality or substance--which again it cannot be”(31). Time posed the same problem of reconciling diversity and unity: “If you take time as a relation between units without duration, then the whole time has no duration, and is not time at all. But, if you give duration to the whole time, then at once the units themselves are found to possess it, and they thus cease to be units. Time in fact is ‘before’ and ‘after’ in one; and without this diversity it is not time. But these differences cannot be asserted of the unity....The relation is not a unity, and yet the terms are nonentities, if left apart”(33-34). A similar inconsistency plagued things: “A thing is a thing..by being what it *was*. And it does not appear how this relation of sameness can be real. It is a relation connecting the past with the present, and this connection is evidently vital to the thing. But, if so, the thing has become...the *relation* of passages in its own history. And if we assert that the thing is this inclusive relation, which transcends any given time, surely we have allowed that the thing, though not wholly an idea, is an idea essentially. And it is an idea which at no actual time is ever real”(62-63). A thing, Bradley concluded, cannot overcome or disguise its essentially contradictory nature: “The thing avoids contradiction by its disappearance into relations, and by admission of the adjectives [its qualities] to a standing of their own. But it avoids contradiction by a kind of suicide. It can give no rational account of the relations and the terms which it adopts, and it cannot recover the real unity, without which it is nothing. The whole device is a clear makeshift. It consists in saying to the outside world, ‘I am the owner of these my adjectives,’ and to the properties, ‘I am but a relation, which leaves you your liberty.’ And to itself and for itself it is the futile pretence to have both characters at once”(19). Rejecting the doctrine of the Thing in itself, which rendered appearances and reality as two absolutely separate realms, Bradley insisted that “[t]he bewildering mass of phenomenal diversity must...somehow be at unity and self-consistent; for it cannot be elsewhere than in reality, and reality excludes discord”(123). The only way to reconcile appearance and reality was, following Hegel, to proclaim existence to be “a form of the appearance of the Real”(354).

Despite Bradley’s idealism, his understanding of things as supplemented by the Absolute came close to William James’ notion of pure experience as consisting of different bits functioning as one

another's substitutes or supplements. Thus, Bradley claimed that there were *degrees* of truth and reality: "Nothing in the universe can be lost, nothing fails to contribute to the single Reality, but every finite diversity is also supplemented and transformed. Everything in the Absolute still is that which it is for itself. Its private character remains, and is but neutralized by complement and addition. And hence, because nothing in the end can be *merely* itself, in the end no appearance, as such, can be real. But *appearances fail of reality in varying degrees*; and to assert that one on the whole is worth no more than another, is fundamentally vicious"(453 italics mine). James opposed Bradley's "ultra-rationalism," which equated truth with consistency: "Immediate experience has to be broken into subjects and qualities, terms and relations, to be understood as truth at all. Yet when so broken it is less consistent than ever. Taken raw, it is all undistinguished. Intellectualized, it is all distinction without oneness"(James 48). Whereas Bradley believed reality to be spiritual (489), James questioned the very description of an experience as spiritual or material: "There is no original spirituality or materiality of being, intuitively discerned...but only a translocation of experiences from one world to another"(74). What makes experiences spiritual or material is "nothing intrinsic in the individual experiences. It is their way of behaving towards each other, their system of relations, their function"(77). While Bradley was concerned with overthrowing the opposition between appearance and reality, James set out to overthrow the opposition between mind and matter, subject and object: "[T]here is only one primal stuff or material in the world, a stuff of which everything is composed, and if we call that stuff 'pure experience,' then knowing can easily be explained as a particular sort of relation towards one another into which portions of pure experience may enter. The relation itself is a part of pure experience"(4-5). James' "radical empiricism" blurred the distinction between consciousness and its content: "Experience, I believe, has no...inner duplicity; and the separation of it into consciousness and content comes, not by way of subtraction, but by way of addition....Just so, I maintain, does a given undivided portion of experience [whether perceptual or conceptual], taken in one context of associates, play the part of a knower, of a state of mind, of 'consciousness'; while in a different context the same undivided bit of experience plays the part of a thing known, of an objective 'content'. In a word, in one group it figures as a thought, in another group as a thing, And since it can figure in both groups simultaneously we have every right to speak of it as subjective and objective both at once"(7). Since consciousness "connotes a kind of external relation, and does not denote a special stuff or way of being"(14), pure experience is "only virtually or potentially either object or subject as yet. For the time being, it is plain, unqualified actuality or existence, a simple *that*"(13).

James took issue with Bradley's condemnation of experience as self-contradictory, arguing instead that once we accept both conjunctions and disjunctions as equally real, rather than condemning disjunctions as self-contradictory and illusory, otherness itself would turn out to be merely an illusion (30). Bradley's argument was actually closer to James' than James probably realized: "[I]f, seeking for

reality, we go to experience, what we certainly do *not* find is a subject or an object, or indeed any other thing whatever, standing separate and on its bottom. What we discover rather is a whole in which distinctions can be made, but in which divisions do not exist...[R]eality is sentient experience. I mean that to be real is to be indissolubly one thing with sentience...*And what I repudiate is the separation of feeling from the felt, or of the desired from desire, or of what is thought from thinking, or the division...of anything from anything else....*[T]he Absolute...will hence be a single and all-inclusive, which embraces every partial diversity in concord”(Bradley 128-129 italics mine). Blaming Bradley for ignoring finite experience and subordinating it to the Absolute, James pointed out the incompleteness and insufficiency of our knowledge, which is always in transit: “...[S]o much of our experience comes as an insufficient and consists of process and transition. Our fields of experience have no more definite boundaries than have our fields of view. Both are fringed forever by a *more* that continuously develops, and that continuously supercedes them as life proceeds”(35). While James and Bergson were trying to rescue pure experience from the intellect, there were those who, like Julien Benda, considered this emphasis on intuition excessive and even dangerous. Benda was full of doubts about Bergson’s philosophy of intuition, which he scornfully called “intellectual anaesthesia”(131) or a form of aphasia (12). According to Benda, Bergson and his followers ascribed an excessive significance to pure affectivity at the expense of the intellectual or critical experience of art (9). He took issue with their “demand that art shall avoid any attempt to distinguish between things, all clean-cut separations and definite outlines, and shall present them in their inter-penetration, in their mobility, in their fluidity”(18). Benda challenged the Bergsonian critique of the intellect as a distortion of our pure, direct perception of the world. Philosophers of intuition, Benda claimed, refused “to discriminate between intelligence and dry, unimaginative reasoning, in order to bring the former into disrepute”(14). Insofar as Stevens and Bergson were concerned with the relationship between mind and matter, they found themselves at the heart of this debate on boundaries.

II. Imagination and Perception

The relevance of Bergson to a study of Stevens’ theory of the imagination consists in the analogy that can be drawn between the relation of memory, perception and matter in Bergson, on one hand, and the relation between reality and imagination in Stevens, on the other hand. Bergson’s ‘imagistic’ ontology, developed in *Matter and Memory*, describes material objects as “images” and sees only a difference in degree between matter as a self-existing image and perception as the reflection of that image back upon itself. While Bergson claims that perception does not add anything to the image perceived, Stevens asserts that the imagination does not add anything to the perception of an object. Perception is related to the world as a part to the whole: it is an act of selection. Hence, perception does not distort the world; it only offers a limited vision of it. Imagination, on the other hand, is an intensification of normal

perception: it 'corrects' the limited vision of perception and enlarges its object indefinitely. Bergson's theory of the relationship between matter and mind, of the materiality of perception, suggests that mind is separated from matter only by memory. Stevens' theory of the imagination, glimpses of which one finds in *The Necessary Angel* and in the prose pieces in *Opus Posthumous*, also searches for the origin of imagination in the material world. The material world, for Stevens, is poetry: "There is a universal poetry that is reflected in everything...there exists an unascertained and fundamental aesthetic, or order, of which poetry [and the other arts] are manifestations"(Stevens, *NA* 160). Life is always already poetry: "[d]escription [and we read, poetry] is an element, like air and water"(*OP* 196). Bergson's account of the way perception detaches itself from the thing as a picture or a representation shares a lot with Stevens' idea of the origin of poetry: it, too, detaches itself from the perception of the real thing, rather than being added to it. Detachment being a form of obscuring, both Bergson and Stevens argue that there is more in the virtual or the unreal than in the real. The phenomenon of appearing (of the real) is one of obscuring: "Representation is there but always virtual--being neutralized, at the very moment when it might become actual, by the obligation to continue itself and lose itself in something else. To obtain this conversion from the virtual to the actual, it would be necessary, not to throw more light on the object but, on the contrary, to obscure some of its aspects, to diminish it by the greater part of itself, so that the remainder, instead of being encased in the surroundings as a thing, should detach itself from them as a picture"(Bergson, *MM* 36). Bergson and Stevens use a similar rhetoric, Bergson talking of consciousness as continually expanding and contracting, and thus enlarging or diminishing its content (*MM* 166), Stevens considering poetry as an intensification of reality: "Reality is the object seen in its greatest common sense"(*OP* 202). Both discourses could be described as discourses of tension, in which 'physical' metaphors serve to enhance even further the objectivity of mind and matter that both authors affirm. Stevens believes that the life of the imagination is 'separated' from our life in the material world only by its higher intensity and we continually move between weaker and stronger states, the stronger ones being colored by the imagination. Similarly, Bergson remarks that there are "divers tones of mental life, or, in other words, our psychic life may be lived at different heights, now nearer to action [or perception, which prepares us for action], now further removed from it, according to the degree of our attention to life"(*MM* 14). Both Stevens and Bergson talk of poetry and life, respectively, in terms of tendencies rather than states. For Bergson, "Vital properties are never entirely realized, though always on the way to become so; they are not so much states as tendencies"(*CE* 13). Things and states "are only views, taken by our mind, of becoming"(*CE* 248). Stevens regards poetry and life as analogues of each other, both partaking of a common tendency, "the tendency to become literature"(*NA* 43). It is difficult to resist the widespread and tempting argument that Stevens' poetry aimed at a synthesis of reality and imagination and yet such a resistance, as Bove urges, is necessary. Comparing Stevens to Williams, for

instance, J.Riddel argues that, unlike Williams, Stevens “was never so much attracted by the discovery of ‘things as they are’...as by the discovery of himself in the act of discovery”(12). Insisting that Stevens’ subject was “not the world-as-seen so much as the process of seeing it”(62), Riddel perpetuates the dualism Bergson and Stevens rejected, the separation of seeing from the thing seen. Bove, on the other hand, feels that the simultaneous existence of opposites in Stevens’ poetry should not be sublated. The idea of contradiction, Bove contends, is part of Stevens’ “centerless vision”; this idea “which in itself emerges from the language of ‘presence,’ of onto-theology, is a fiction which should not be granted any superior metaphysical status”(207-208).

For Stevens the imagination operates in the same way as perception for Bergson, as a condenser: “[A]ll the categories of perception....correspond to the choice of a certain order of greatness for condensation”(CM 68). Perception condenses since it needs a fixed point upon which to act. Condensation is the flip side of delay in Bergson’s theory. Consciousness is born in the delay between an external disturbance and the body’s reaction to it. The delay consists in the ‘failure’ or choice of the brain not to prolong the disturbance into a motor activity. Our mental life then is an aggregate of such delays, of potential actions on other images. The imagination, too, condenses: “what light requires a day to do, and by day I mean a kind of Biblical revolution of time, the imagination does in the twinkling of an eye”(Stevens, NA 61-62). The imagination, for Stevens, is not a separate faculty but the sum of all our faculties (NA 61). Stevens does not want to localize it but instead he considers the intellect, perception, and memory as different manifestations of the imagination, which becomes coextensive with the mind. Poetry includes imagination, instinct, and intellect in various degrees. Perception, memory and the intellect are only different phases of the imagination, determined by different degrees of sophistication, intensity or vitality. Perception is the privileged of these three since it is determined in terms of sight. Memory is the imagination of the past. The imagination is the most intensified kind of perception. The poet’s perceptions spring from the most extreme ranges of sensibility. The poetic genius, “because of the abnormal ranges of his sensibility, not only accumulates experiences with greater rapidity, but accumulates experiences and qualities of experience accessible only in the extreme ranges of sensibility”(NA 66). The intellect is a condensation or a weakening of the imagination. Bergson also stresses that the intellect is only a condensation of something bigger and undetermined. The intellect, a “luminous nucleus,” is made up of the “vague nebulosity” that surrounds it (CE xii). The imagination in Stevens’ theory shares with memory in Bergson’s theory the capacity to heighten the sense of reality. The imagination enhances the sense of reality since it is analogous to reality. Memory, on the other hand, “capable, by reason of its elasticity, of expanding more and more, reflects upon the object a growing number of suggested images...[which] results in creating anew not only the object perceived, but also the ever widening systems with which it may be bound up”(MM 105). The virtual part of the image,

representing “a higher expansion of memory...attains...deeper strata of reality”(MM 105). The memory-image and the poetic image bring into the open the virtual part of reality and thus heighten the sense of reality.

Stevens privileges the imagination over thought, which he calls “an infection” (OP 185) just as Bergson privileges philosophical intuition over the intelligence. Thought usually pictures to itself the new as a rearrangement of pre-existent elements--nothing is ever lost to thought and nothing ever created but intuition perceives unforeseeable novelty and sees that “the mind draws from itself more than it has, that spirituality consists in just that, and that reality impregnated with spirit is creation”(Bergson, CM 38). The imaginative activity that “diffuses itself throughout our lives”(Stevens, NA 149) exemplifies a poetic value which is an “intuitional value,” not one of knowledge. In this respect, Stevens’ idea of the imagination as metaphysics is analogous to Bergson’s idea of intuitional metaphysics. As J.Riddel points out, the task Stevens faced was to define the modern, secular imagination: “Having no metaphysics on which to hang imagination, he makes of imagination a pure metaphysics, an activity of process analogous to the vital process of the material, which perpetuates the self as a part of, yet apart from, ‘things as they are’”(35). Both Stevens and Bergson attempt to show that our ideas originate in our imagination, that the intellect is just an anemic version of the imagination: “We live in concepts of the imagination before reason has established them. If this is true, reason is simply the methodizer of the imagination”(NA 154). The common ground of imagination and intellect are the resemblances they establish between things: “Perhaps resemblance which seems to be related so closely to the imagination is related even more closely to the intelligence, of which perceptions of resemblance are effortless accelerations”(NA 75). Linking resemblance to intellect, Stevens echoes Bergson’s analysis of the formation of general ideas, developed in *The Creative Mind*. Abstractions or general ideas are formed, according to Bergson, through an “automatic extraction of resemblances” and the “resemblance between things or states, which we declare we see, is above all the quality common to these states or things, of obtaining from our body the same reaction”(CM 63). Concepts are therefore constructed on the model of corporeal or natural ideas, i.e. the reactions of the body to external objects. Artificial ideas (language) are anticipated or embodied in these natural ideas, which they imitate. Our ideas “translate essential resemblances” which lend some of their firmness or credibility to language. Poetry, as metaphor, is then closer to the origin of language, i.e. of general ideas, since its essence is the postulation of resemblances between things. Resemblance, as distinct from identity, which is merely geometrical (spatial), belongs to the domain of art. In fact, Bergson suggests that evolution itself ought to be considered in aesthetic terms as it is the elaboration of resemblances: “it is often a purely aesthetic feeling which prompts the evolutionary biologist to suppose related forms between which he is the first to see a resemblance”(CM 67). Echoing Stevens’ claim that poetry and life are one, Bergson here implies that ontology is a kind of aesthetics. Stevens, like Bergson,

argues that “All of our ideas come from the natural world: trees: umbrellas”(OP 189). Hence the “umbrellas” in “Tea”: “Your lamp-light fell/On shining pillows,/Of sea-shades and sky-shades,/Like umbrellas in Java”(CP 113).

Our senses then determine even the highest levels of abstraction. Stevens traces the origin of what he calls “emotional images” back to emotions shared by everyone: “the nature of the image is analogous to the nature of the emotion from which it springs; and when one speaks of images one means analogies. If then an emotional image...communicates the emotion that generates it, its effect is to arouse the same emotion in others”(NA 111). Just as Bergson shows the transition from individual bodily experiences to universally shared concepts, Stevens’ understanding of images as analogous to emotions makes possible the transition from the physical to the intellectual, from the particular to the abstract. Insofar as the responses of the body are lived, i.e. immediate, whereas it ‘takes time’ to group those resemblances in ideas, it can be said, with Stevens, that the resemblances the imagination perceives are the accelerations of those same resemblances that our intelligence unfolds so slowly. This would explain why metaphors at first strike us as artificial--our intellect needs to unfold these instantaneous, accelerated perceptions of resemblances. The intellect always lags behind and it does not notice a resemblance unless it is first unfolded, slowed down, its condensed form dissolved, which usually means spatialized. Since the intellect is insensitive to “the instantaneous disclosures of living,” it remains within the bounds of analysis: “It may be that the imagination is a miracle of logic and that its exquisite divinations are calculations beyond analysis, as the conclusions of the reason are calculations wholly within analysis”(NA 154). The imagination is the intensification of the intellect and, to that extent, it is still a form of “calculation,” only a calculation so accelerated that it does not lend itself to analysis. In discovering resemblances, the imagination enhances the sense of reality: “If resemblance is described as a partial similarity between two dissimilar things, it complements and reinforces that which the two things have in common. It makes it brilliant”(NA 77). The reality of a thing is enhanced because it is made ambiguous: “The proliferation of resemblances extends an object,” and the point where this growth starts is “the point at which ambiguity has been revealed”(78-79). Ambiguity, instead of creating doubt, or perhaps precisely through increasing doubt, heightens the sense of reality. The paradoxical nature of poetic images, the fact that their reality depends on their ambiguity, was accounted for as early as in Baumgarten’s *Reflections on Poetry*. Baumgarten distinguished confused and extensively clear poetic representations from distinct, intensively clear ideas. Since more aspects of an object are represented in a confused representation, the object represented is more determinate and thus both more ambiguous or poetic and more real (42-43).

III. Transparency

Citing Whitehead's *Science and the Modern World*, in which Whitehead claims that "everything is everywhere at all times, for every location involves an aspect of itself in every other location"(qtd. in *OP* 273), Stevens comments that Whitehead's idea comes "from a level where everything is poetic, as if the statement that every location involves an aspect of itself in every other location produces in the imagination a universal iridescence, a dithering of presences and, say, a complex of differences"(*OP* 273). Stevens' understanding of identity is postmodern. Every object, Stevens believes, participates in every other object and no object exists in isolation, as a universe in itself. Things are only as the intersections of interrelations between things. The transformation of substance into subtlety is the disclosure of each thing as immersed in the network of all other things: "Nothing is itself taken alone. Things are because of interrelations or interactions"(*OP* 189). Despite the postmodern character of his premise, however, Stevens does not draw from it the already banal conclusion that the world is just as an image in our mind or a construct of language. In this he is in agreement with Bergson, who also believes that "[e]very image is within certain images and without others; but of the aggregate of images we cannot say that it is within us or without us, since interiority and exteriority are only relations among images"(*MM* 25). The predominantly anti-postmodern nature of Stevens' theory of poetry becomes especially evident when we consider the relationship of transparency that Bergson affirms between matter and perception and Stevens affirms between language and reality. Language can be considered by analogy with Bergson's idea of the world as "an aggregate of images" i.e. words, as signifiers, can be thought of as Bergson's "images". The meanings of a word are produced just like our perceptions of things. Both are like mirages: they are the reflections of images/words back upon themselves. Words are not added to things but they are thoughts, and if they are thoughts they are also things, which, in the imagination, are the condensation of thought and feeling. Words are not added to things; rather, things are dissociated from words in the form of thoughts, thoughts being the intensification of things.

This transparency of language expresses Stevens' general rejection of meaning and depth. When things are subtilized into words (thoughts), poetic language attains the transparency of an Impressionistic painting. Reality is then no longer mediated through language nor is language reduced to its referential function. That poetry is the intensification of reality means that language can intensify things to thoughts, can incorporate the word signifying a thing, which is to say the thought about the thing, into the very substance of the thing. This transparency is possible because, for Stevens, a thing is not absolutely separated from the word signifying it, but the two of them approximate each other. The middle term in the relationship between things and words are thoughts. A thing becomes a thought, when we think about it intensely, and the thought is embodied in a word. A thing's transformation into a word is a real process that starts in the real and never surpasses it. When a poem fails, it does because it is a work of fancy, not of the imagination. Fancy, Stevens writes, "is an exercise of selection from among objects already

supplied by association, a selection made for purposes which are not then and therein shaped but have been already fixed”(NA 10-11). The unreal is not the fantastic but the unbelievable. An image becomes less credible the more it is predetermined by an end external to it. The more the image is inscribed in an already fixed system of associations, the less real it is. Paradoxically, the unreal is the absolutely real. the absolutely given, the most familiar, the most immediate. Conversely, the most fantastic image, if credible, if not predetermined, not purposeful, will be the most real. The imagination loses vitality as it moves toward fancy, toward inscription, toward what we call ‘fact’ or ‘reality’. Adorno was to develop this notion of the objectivity of the new, the unreal or experimental in his *Aesthetic Theory* (28-37).

IV. Real and Unreal

It might be helpful to use Bergson’s diagram of our mental life in order to illustrate Stevens’ understanding of the relationship between the unreal and the real. The language Stevens and Bergson use to talk about the relationship between memory and perception, and between the unreal and the real, is strikingly similar. Both speak about these relationships in terms of intensity, tension, contraction and expansion, vitality. Bergson’s diagram of our mental life is a cone, turned upside down, of which the base is the ‘location’ of pure memory, while the tip of the cone cutting into the plane of the real is the point of perception (*MM* 162). The cone is filled with memory-images at different stages of condensation--the closer one moves to the base, the more the memory-images dissolve into pure memory, and the closer one moves to the tip, the more memory is concentrated and made relevant to the demands of perception. Now imagine this cone, only turned in such a way that the base is at the bottom and the tip at the top. Stevens argues that the poet starts from the real: “The real is only the base. But it is the base”(OP 187). The real, material object, once it is thought and felt intensely, becomes poetry; the unreal is not added to the real but “decreated” from it. Thus, the base of Stevens’ cone would be the real, and the cone would be filled with the real at different stages of intensification or concentration, so that poetry--the tip of the cone--would be the highest intensification of the real. Now it becomes possible to explain Stevens’ paradoxical claim that the unreal is the most real: “The magnificent cause of being,/ The imagination, the one reality/ In this imagined world” (“Another Weeping Woman,” CP 25). Since the unreal is the intensification of the real, the closer one moves to the tip of the cone, the more intensified the real becomes, hence the more real, while the closer one moves to the base of the cone, the more rarified and diluted the real becomes, the more unreal, since we are habituated to it. Richard A. Macksey observes that Stevens shares with the Impressionists the quest for an identity “before the object” and cites Ramon Fernandez’s explication of “the naive impression”: “D’ou vient donc ce sens de la realite qui est incontestablement le don precieux de l’impressionisme? De ce que l’objet qui n’est plus percu qu’a travers les lunettes du sens commun n’est plus senti par nous, *nous sommes anesthesies par l’habitude*. Survienne une circonstance qui eveille

en nous des impressions vives et naives, aussitôt nous reprenons possession de notre sensibilité, nous nous connaissons devant l'objet"(Fernandez qtd. 199). Where does the sense of reality, which is undoubtedly the precious gift of Impressionism, spring from? It has to do with the fact that the object perceived only through the mirror of common sense is no longer really felt, *we are anesthetized by habit*. As soon as something produces in us vivid and naive impressions, we recover our sensibility, we perceive ourselves before the object (my translation, italics mine). The poet engages in two opposite movements or gestures: on one hand, he abstracts reality and places it in his imagination, thus defamiliarizing it but, on the other hand, in this very gesture of defamiliarization he renders reality familiar inasmuch as before reality is placed in the imagination, its complete poverty has made it unfamiliar, foreign to us. Interestingly, Stevens associates this poverty of reality specifically with the spatial perception of the world as an extension of objects in space. Thus he echoes Bergson's critique of metaphysics as the forgetfulness of time or the reduction of time to space. After all, space is what is most immediate to us; it is the very substratum of our idea of immediacy and familiarity. All of reality, before it is placed in the imagination, is poor but this poverty characterizes especially the part of reality most immediate to us because it is the part we are most prone to reduce to spatiality. If the poet is concerned with the life lived in the composition of a scene, rather than with the scene itself, his major concern must be change, mobility, duration. It is not surprising then that Stevens elevates the sound of words as the essence of poetry: "above everything else, poetry is words, and...words, above everything else, are, in poetry, sounds"(NA 32). Duration, after all, is the essence of a sound.

The "decreation"--a term Stevens borrowed from Simone Weil (NA 174)--of the unreal from the real is possible because the unreal is the virtual aspect of the real. Bergson describes the relation between a perception and the continuity from which it is isolated as an infinite number of circles inside one another: "the immediate horizon given to our perception appears to us to be necessarily surrounded by a wider circle, existing though unperceived, this circle itself implying yet another outside it and so on, ad infinitum. It is then of the essence of our actual perception, in as much as it is extended, to be always only a content in relation to a vaster, even an unlimited, experience which contains it"(MM 144). The material object, for Bergson, consists of "the multitude of unperceived elements by which it is linked with all other objects"(MM 147). In aesthetic terms, this means that the material object has the structure of metaphor inasmuch as a metaphor reveals this very "multitude of unperceived elements." Stevens insists that reality "includes all its natural images, and its connotations are without limits"(NA 24). Reality is not given but attained: "Reality is not what it is. It consists of the many realities into which it can be made into"(OP 202). The enlargement of an object by the imagination is particularly evident in Stevens' landscape poems. Stevens usually begins with a single object and, accumulating metaphors or similes, expands the identity of the original particular but also, retrospectively, the identity of all other particulars that get

'sucked into' this avalanche of resemblances, until the reader forgets the original object. Thus, a poem typically starts from a center and gradually moves out into circles. Such is the case, for example, in "The Load of Sugar-Cane"(CP 12) and in "Metaphors of a Magnifico"(CP 19), as well as in "Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird": "When the blackbird flew out of sight,/It marked the edge/Of one of many circles"(CP 94). Distinguishing between the intellect's work of "manufacturing" and the intuition's work of "organization" or between a manufactured thing and a creation (by nature or by the artist), Bergson invokes the same metaphor of a series of circles expanding from a center: "To manufacture...is to work from the periphery to the centre, or, as the philosophers say, from the many to the one. Organization, on the contrary, works from the centre to the periphery. It begins in a point that is almost a mathematical point, and spreads around this point by concentric waves which go on enlarging. ...The organizing act [the artistic act]...has something explosive about it: it needs at the beginning the smallest possible place, a minimum of matter, as if the organizing forces only entered space reluctantly"(CE 92).

That Stevens' idea of the real and its perception is indebted to Bergson's, Stevens makes clear in *The Necessary Angel*, where he quotes Bergson's analysis, in *Creative Evolution*, of a motionless object: "Bergson describes the visual perception of a motionless object as the most stable of internal states. He says: 'The object may remain the same, I may look at it from the same side, at the same angle, in the same light; nevertheless, the vision I now have of it differs from the one I have just had, even if only one is an instant later than the other. My memory is there, which conveys something of the past into the present'(NA 25). Since what we perceive as reality's substantiality is just an infinite series of vibrations, our perception of it is equally unstable and mobile. Reality is the subject matter of poetry but Stevens, like Bergson, understands reality not as a "a collection of solid, static objects extended in space...the space [being] blank space, nowhere, without color, and...the objects, though solid, hav[ing] no shadows and, though static, exert[ing] a mournful power"(NA 31), but as the life lived in the "external scene" thus composed. The metaphysician in "The Curtains in the House of the Metaphysician"(CP 62) is oblivious to motion as the unity in which everything participates. "All motion is beyond" the metaphysician as he is only concerned with "bar[ing] [t]he last largeness, bold to see"(62). Motion is the substratum of the material world: "the drifting of these curtains/Is full of long motions; as the ponderous/Deflations of distance; or as clouds/Inseparable from their afternoons;/Or the changing of light"(62). The clouds are inseparable from their afternoons because the clouds, a particular substance, participate in the general movement that underlies everything. Clouds have a duration relative to that of afternoons. Time is not a sequence of positions but is indivisible, and as it is the substratum of everything, things, too, are indivisible and have no identity except in terms of one another. The intellectual representation of movement, on the other hand, always reduces time to "a series of positions," i.e. to substance, forgetting that "the mobile exists... in each of the points of the line it is moving along"(Bergson, CM 15).

V. Reflection and Refraction

The relationship of perception to imagination in Stevens is analogous to the relationship of matter to perception in Bergson. The question of the relationship between reality and imagination in Stevens is a restatement of the question Bergson asks in *Matter and Memory*: “How is it that the same images can belong at the same time to two different systems: one in which each image varies for itself and in the well-defined measure that it is patient of the real action of surrounding images; and another in which all images change for a single image and in the varying measure that they reflect the eventual action of this privileged image?”(25). Perception does not add anything to the object perceived since both the object and its perception are essentially images. Just as perception is nothing more than matter reflected back upon itself, so the unreal (the object of the imagination, or the poetic image) is the real reflected back upon itself i.e. intensified. The unreal is the real thought and felt so intensely that thought and feeling have become a part of the real, transforming it into a “subtlety.” Bergson’s ‘eccentric’ definition of matter opens *Matter and Memory*: “Matter, in our view, is an aggregate of ‘images.’ And by ‘image’ we mean a certain existence which is more than that which the idealist calls a representation, but less than that which the realist calls a thing--an existence placed halfway between the ‘thing’ and the ‘representation’”(9). Material objects or “images,” bathed in “a colorless light”(35), exist in a network of indifference: “Indifferent to each other because of the radical mechanism which binds them together, they present each to the others all their sides at once: which means that they act and react mutually by all their elements, and that none of them perceives or is perceived consciously”(37). The relations between images are likened to the phenomenon of refraction, which excludes the possibility for a virtual image to detach itself as a picture from the actual image. Only in the case of the image that is our body does this refraction turn into reflection and the actual produces its own virtual image: “When a ray of light passes from one medium into another, it usually traverses it with a change of direction. But the respective densities of the two media may be such that, for a given angle of incidence, refraction is no longer possible. Then we have total reflection. The luminous point gives rise to a virtual image, which symbolizes, so to speak, the fact that the luminous rays cannot pursue their way. Perception is just a phenomenon of the same kind...[wherein] the rays...instead of passing through...will appear to be reflected and thus to indicate the outlines of the object which emits them. There is nothing positive here, nothing added to the image, nothing new....Perception then [conscious perception] resembles those phenomena of reflexion which result from an impeded refraction; it is like an effect of mirage”(37). Bergson suggests here that perception is the virtual aspect of the actual “image” or material object. The actual exists independently of the virtual: “images” do not need to be perceived in order to be. In “Stars at Tallapoosa” Stevens offers a vision of the world independent of our perception that is strikingly similar to Bergson’s idea of the world

as an “aggregate of images.” Conscious perception in Stevens’ poem is excluded from the world: “The body is no body to be seen/But is an eye that studies its black lid”(CP 71). The eye is not yet open, consciousness has not yet broken into “universal consciousness” or matter. The world is no more than a grid, on which one and the same lines “fall without diverging”(72), just as, in Bergson’s model, images send out rays that are merely refracted off the surface of other images. The stars in Stevens’ poem are Bergson’s “images”: “A sheaf of brilliant arrows flying straight,/Flying and falling straightway for their pleasure,/Their pleasure that is all bright-edged and cold”(72).

Reflection and refraction define the relationship not only between perception and matter but also that between imagination and perception. Valéry’s comparison of the poem to a diamond repeats Bergson’s observation of the objectivity of perception, extending it to poetry: “Diamant.--Sa beaute resulte, me dit-on, de la petitesse de l’angle de reflexion totale...La tailleur de diamant en faconne les facettes de maniere que le rayon qui penetre dans le gemme par l’une d’elles ne peut en sortir que par la meme--D’ou le feu et l’eclat. Belle image de ce que je pense sur la poesie: retour du rayon spirituel aux mots d’entree”(Valéry qtd. in Macksey 223). The diamond--Its beauty, I am told, results from the extremely small angle of total reflection...The maker of diamonds works on its sides in such a manner that the ray of light that penetrates the gem through one of its sides can get out only through that same side.--Hence the fire and the brilliance. A beautiful image that expresses my thoughts about poetry: the return of the ray of spirit to the entrance of words (my translation). A “particular,” to use Stevens’ terminology, or an “image,” to use Bergson’s, leaves its impression on the mind, which is just another “image” in the “aggregate of images.” Instead of being refracted off the mind, the object=image is reflected back upon itself and retrospectively outlines its own contours. The object=image ‘splits’ into two: the actual object and its virtual aspect, which remains locked in the mind, as the ray of light is locked in the gem. In writing a poem, the poet’s aim is to make it into a diamond. He attains the real whenever the actual (the particular) enters the poem and cannot leave it except through the same entrance, creating a reflection within the poem--the virtual is precisely this reflection--in which the actual coincides with the virtual. This means that there is a certain transparency between the actual image and its virtual reflection in the language of the poem: “The word must be the thing it represents; otherwise, it is a symbol”(OP 194). Poetry functions like perception: both originate in the material world, whether that is made up of Bergson’s “images” or Stevens’ real things.. The reality or objectivity of perception is suggested, for example, in the poem “Tattoo.” The material world, in the poem, is ‘bathed’ in light. As light “crawls over” things (water, snow), it also “crawls under your eyelids/And spreads its webs there-/Its two webs”(CP 81). Perception is analogous to the original source of light, and, to the extent that the material world is already in the light, it is also in our perception. External perception originates in the material world and is intimately connected to our body: “The webs of your eyes/Are fastened/To the flesh and

bones of you/As to rafters or grass”(81). To think of the mind, or of the imagination, as separate from the material world is to reduce the imagination to a mere simulacrum of the world. The unreal is not a simulacrum of the real but appears as such only when its materiality is denied: “Now, of the music summoned by the birth/That separates us from the wind and sea,/Yet leaves us in them, until earth becomes,/By being so much of the things we are,/Gross effigy and simulacrum”(“To the One of Fictive Music,” *CP* 87).

VI. Resemblances: Imagination and Memory

Stevens’ imagination is turned both backward and forward: it starts from the real, out of it creates the unreal, but that unreal makes possible new ways of seeing, so that the unreal creates the real. This process is repeated infinitely, the unreal decreated from the real, the unreal creating a new reality, which in turn is decreated into the unreal. But this is exactly what memory does in Bergson’s theory: it enriches perception, then condenses it into memory-images, stores those and releases them to enrich new perceptions. Memory propels the past into the future; the imagination propels the unreal, which it has distilled from the real, back into the real. The relation between pure memory and perception has the form of analogy: a memory has to be matched to a present perception. In the same way, in poetry an object is referred to the multiplicity of aspects constituting its materiality so that the most apposite of these virtual versions of the object can be chosen. The actual is related to its virtual aspects the way perception is related to memory--by analogy. Formally, then, poetry (metaphor) is analogous to the structure of our mental life as described by Bergson. Although poetry is the subtilizing of reality, its dematerialization, it is not correct to say that the poem moves from a thing to an idea of the thing. To understand abstraction, which plays a crucial role in Stevens’ theory of poetry, we need to understand the process by which ideas are formed. Here we refer to Bergson’s account of that process. The formation of a general idea requires the elimination from an image of the details of time and place, but the reflection on those details already presupposes noticing differences, i.e. a memory of images. Thus, Bergson claims, “we start neither from the perception of the individual nor from the conception of the genus, but from an intermediate knowledge, from a confused sense of the striking quality or of resemblance: this sense, equally remote from generality fully conceived and from individuality clearly perceived, begets both of them by a process of dissociation”(MM 158). Bergson here suggests that the particular (perception) and the abstract (intellect) are both rooted in resemblance. The poet does not start from the thing as such but from an intermediary stage, from a vaguely sensed resemblance, “a similarity felt and lived...a similarity which is automatically acted” and thus different from the “similarity intelligently thought” that results in the formation of a concept (Bergson, *MM* 160). The perception of the individual objects resembling each other, as well as the general idea which classes together similar objects, are produced from this sense of

resemblance by a process of dissociation. Metaphor (resemblance) being the trope of poetry, we can say that poetry is the condition of both perception and conception, which are dissociated from it. Metaphor, though it requires that the poet abstract himself from reality, is not an abstraction. Rather, it oscillates between a particular and an abstraction. The general idea, says Bergson, oscillates between perception and memory. Resemblance, then, oscillates between the real and the unreal. Stevens suggests as much when he claims that “There is no such thing as a metaphor of a metaphor. One does not progress through metaphors. Thus reality is the indispensable element of each metaphor. When I say that man is god it is very easy to see that if I also say that a god is something else, god has become reality”(OP 204). Poetry cannot alienate itself from the real because the second term in a metaphor, that which establishes the resemblance and creates the unreal, automatically slips into the position of the first term, the real, from which the metaphor started and thus becomes real in its turn only because it occupies the position of the real. It is as if the very form of the metaphor guarantees the adherence of poetry to reality. The vitality of poetry derives from the form of analogy constituting it. In “Hibiscus on the Sleeping Shores”(CP 22), for example, Stevens not only establishes a resemblance (mind/moth), but once the resemblance is established, Stevens can take the second term (moth) and talk about it in a such a way that it remains unclear whether the rest of the poem refers to the mind or to the moth. The poem does not consider one of the terms as a symbol of the other but oscillates between the two equally credible alternatives suggested by the two terms. The metaphorical is incorporated back into the real from which it sprang, instead of turning into a mere symbol easily disengaged from its real counterpart. The decreed is incorporated back into the real, from which it was produced by a process of dissociation. As the real splits, the unreal detaches itself from it as a picture.

Since memory, as Bergson shows, is always a part of perception, the material world becomes immaterial. Thus, the nature of perception itself--the fact that it is always informed by memory--dematerializes or subtilizes the world (without, however, destroying its reality) and makes it readily lend itself to imagination. Although Stevens does not explicitly consider the relationship between imagination and memory, it is significant that all the examples he gives of resemblances involve memory. Resemblance occurs when something reminds us of something else, as, for example, when “the wig of a particular man reminds us of some particular man and resembles him...[or a] strand of a child’s hair brings back the whole child and in that way resembles the child”(NA 75). Metaphor then seems to be based on recollection. One is immediately reminded of Wordsworth’s ‘definition’ of poetry as “emotion recollected in tranquility” (“Preface” 328), but whereas this definition emphasizes the emotional resemblance of poetry, as a kind of melancholia, to memory--although it is true that Stevens himself says that poetry is “a form of melancholia”(OP 188)--Stevens suggests that the very structure of poetry--metaphor being the form of poetry as metamorphosis--is that of memory. Memory is the imagination of

the past and perception is the imagination of the future, the possibilities of things: “We cannot look at the past or the future except by means of the imagination”(NA 144).

The relationship between the unreal and the real in Stevens’ theory is analogous to that between the past and the present in Bergson’s. The past, according to Bergson, cannot be used up but it constantly expands as new perspectives on it emerge in the present. The intellect does not understand this because it is retrospective: “it cannot help throwing present realities, reduced to possibilities or virtualities, back into the past, so that what is compounded now, in its eyes, always have been so. It does not admit that a simple state can, in remaining what it is, become a compound state solely because evolution will have created new viewpoints from which to consider it”(CM 27). The intellect does not accept “the idea of an indistinct and even undivided multiplicity, purely intensive or qualitative, which, while remaining what it is, will comprise an indefinitely increasing number of elements, as the new points of view for considering it appear in the world”(28). Just as the present is never fully given or eternal but is continually enriched by the past, which is itself never useless, dead, so the real, in Stevens’ theory of the imagination, is never given but continually complemented by the imagination, by the possible. The material world cannot be used up since new thoughts/words keep appearing. These are not added to a reality already given and fixed but are simply brought into the open from the obscurity, which accompanies perception as a process of selection. The unreal, insofar as it is defined as words without things, is already contained in the real and the real is continually giving birth to the unreal by purging itself: “Poetry is a purging of the world’s poverty” (Stevens, *OP* 193). Just as memory expands our psychic life, of which it is a part, so the unreal, or the imagination, or poetry, expands reality by thinking and feeling ‘the things that are there’ in new ways.

Yet, the imagination cannot be absolutely identified with memory. Poetry, through its metaphors, reveals the real nature of matter (substance) as motion, which remains obscured in perception as a result of the work of memory. In this respect, the imagination acts as a resistance to memory, memory having solidified the fundamental mobility or subtlety of the world. To criticize the mechanistic view of perception that reduces the world to a scene, in which objects are extended in space, possessing certain attributes, which are somehow added to their substance, Bergson offers an analysis of light, which for him is a constant. His aim is to illustrate through a rigorous scientific analysis that what we perceive as substance is in fact the condensation of an infinite number of vibrations, i.e. that movement is constitutive of the real and that any spatial explanation of the nature of the real excludes movement: “Take, for example, a luminous point P, of which the rays impinge on the different parts a, b, c, of the retina. At this point P, science localizes vibrations of a certain amplitude and duration. At the same point P, consciousness perceives light...[which shows that] there is no essential difference between the light and the movements, provided we restore to movement the unity, indivisibility, and qualitative heterogeneity

denied to it by abstract mechanics; provided also that we see in sensible qualities contractions effected by our memory”(MM 41). What is the significance of this idea--the idea that substance and attributes differ in degree, not in kind--for Stevens’ theory of poetry? We find an illustration of it, in “Domination of Black,” for example, where Stevens establishes a resemblance between an object (leaves) and an attribute (the color of the leaves). What allows Stevens to ‘isolate’ an attribute of an object and compare it to the object itself? If light is composed of vibrations, if its essence is movement, then any object must be thought in the same way, as a concentration of vibrations “of a certain amplitude and duration.” Therefore, what is perceived as leaves is actually the movement of colors which is so condensed that it appears to us as a solid object. The discrimination between solid objects and their attributes is merely the inevitable result of memory condensing vibrations into sensible qualities.

VII. Example

In “Domination of Black” the basic tenets of Stevens’ theory of poetry and its relation to Bergson’s theory of perception and memory come together. The poem starts from what Stevens calls “a particular”--the leaves--and, despite a proliferation of resemblances which create a slight transcendence, adheres to the real in which it originates. The resemblances originate in the material world but, as one resemblance is not only extended into a new one--extended forward--but also extended retrospectively backward, adding new nuances to the resemblances already established earlier in the poem, the series of affinities move naturally from the immediate, the visible, the sensory to the invisible, the unreal, so that eventually the affinities exist not only in the eye but in “the other eye” (“The Bouquet,” CP 448). The affinities perceived in the mind, however, are not added to those in the eye; they are just the latter’s intensifications. The affinities in the material world become possible thanks to a source of light--the fire in the room. James Baird finds a connection between the continuity between eye and mind in Stevens’ theory and George Santayana’s reflections on sight in *The Sense of Beauty*: “Sight...is a method of presenting psychically what is practically absent; and as the essence of a thing is its existence in our absence, the thing is spontaneously conceived in terms of sight”(Santayana qtd. in Baird 129). The image then is the natural psychic equivalent of the materiality of a thing, which we take to be its essence. The priority of sight in the real world is transferred to the realm of the imagination. Since both perception and imagination are equally determined by sight, they differ only in degree, not in kind. Bergson is justified in calling objects “images” since we determine the essence of a thing in terms of sight and thus we turn it into an image. “Domination of Black” begins in the immediacy of perception (the colors of the leaves), which is then complicated and extended through a series of analogies pointing out resemblances between the things perceived, until the perception becomes the occasion for a recollection (just as in Bergson, perception is an occasion for memory to try to slip in its images), which, in turn, complicates the already begun series of resemblances. The colors of the leaves turning in the room (even though the leaves

themselves are supposedly outside) is the first term in the series of affinities. The colors, turning, resemble the leaves, which, too, are turning. The basis of the resemblance is motion itself. Color, supposedly an attribute of a solid object (the leaves), is abstracted from substance and the leaves' materiality dissolves into subtlety: "the thing seen becomes the thing unseen"(OP 193). The imagination functions like light: it does not add anything to the object perceived. Light, as Baird observes, is for Stevens "a constant of reality" but the imagination is "the faculty capable of varying the appearances of phenomena in the act of seeing"(Baird 120). Light being the only constant, it becomes possible to dissolve the substance/quality distinction and to make of the two terms analogues. A material thing (leaves) is subtilized into a quality, color, while the supposedly immaterial quality acquires an independent existence. If the spontaneous method of the mind in Santayana's doctrine is "the act of presenting psychically what is absent"(Baird 130), Stevens' subtilizing of reality, in the process of which his language expands the significance of the object (Baird 130), aims at returning the object to the original flux of reality from which perception has isolated it.

Although the poem starts from a particular (the leaves), this particular is abstracted as memory intervenes and affects the original perception of the leaves. The beginning of the poem suggests that night has already come but the end of the poem undermines this: "I saw how the night came." The difference between the perception with which the poem starts and the modified perception with which it ends is the difference between ordinary perception and its intensification by the imagination. The difference has been accumulating throughout the poem through an interchanging of different parts of speech. Metaphors are constructed by simply varying the syntax as when, for example, the verb "turn" is applied to different nouns (leaves, colors, tails, flames, planets) or the verb "stride" to both "colors" and "the night." The effect this juggling with language achieves--an effect of mobility, instability, dizziness--is naturally translated into a mobility of the real objects of perception. The mobility of language is paralleled by the mobility of the phenomenal world. Language ceases to be a medium and becomes transparent. The poem starts from a perception, the perception becomes the occasion for a memory (the memory of the peacocks, which itself is already broken down into a series of resemblances), the memory is matched to the perception and thus made analogous to it, then the memory itself is affected by the perception that occasioned it so that the resemblances in the perception are extended into the memory. Finally, the poem returns to the perception from which it started, and the original perception, now complicated by the memory, produces an emotional response in the speaker (fear). The speaker now remembers again--only this time, he remembers consciously unlike the first time, when his memory was involuntary--the peacocks and 'understands' his emotional response. The poem comes full circle as the speaker realizes how his memory has informed his perception. The imagination has played a crucial role in this process since it is only because the original perception is already imaginative (as the similes in the first stanza

suggest) that the involuntary memory starts pushing into the perception and even replaces it until the third stanza. The poet's perception of a real object stimulates memory, which then alters the perception retrospectively i.e. it 'explains' how the speaker saw the night coming. However, the poem does not distinguish between perception and memory--only our analysis does that. The "ego's duration," the duration of the speaker's ego, remains an "indivisible and indestructible melody where the past enters into the present and forms with it an undivided whole... We have an intuition of it, but as soon as we seek an intellectual representation of it we line up, one after another, states which have become distinct like the beads of a necklace"(Bergson, *CM* 83).

VIII. Light

The poem attests to the privileged status of vision in Stevens' poetry. Light, by itself, creates the unity whereby every object participates in every other object. Light is also the basis of Bergson's ontology in *Matter and Memory*. Bergson's ontology is an example of what Stevens calls a poetic philosophical idea. Indeed, with its suggestion to view matter as luminous and the relationship between things as expressible in terms of rays of light refracting off one another, Bergson's ontology provides a perfect illustration of what Stevens calls the "transformation of substance into subtlety" (*NA* 174). The only difference is that whereas in Bergson this subtlety is a fundamental characteristic of reality, for Stevens this subtlety is the work of the imagination. The difference is very subtle since the imagination itself is a fundamental characteristic of the real. The Bergsonian Impressionistic universe of rays interconnecting and intercutting is analogous to Stevens' vision of the real as a realm of infinitely proliferating resemblances. The relevance of Bergson's 'imagistic' ontology to Stevens lies in the analogy Stevens himself draws between light and the imagination. The imagination's relationship to the world is analogous to that of light to objects: "Like light, it adds nothing, except itself"(NA 61). The imagination is not an addition to reality: "To be at the end of fact is not to be at the beginning of imagination but it is to be at the end of both"(OP 200). The role of light is to establish all things as one, participating in one another. Light is the constant, the unifying substratum not only of the real world, where it puts objects at certain distances from one another, but also in the imagination, where resemblances are again a function of distance (distance being the effect of light), which determines the degree of difference or similarity between objects: "The light alone creates a unity not only in the recedings of distance, where differences become invisible, but also in contacts of closer sight"(NA 71). Light places objects at various distances from one another and at the same time provides the constant with respect to which these distances can vary so that objects are more or less related to one another. Resemblances between things are possible because all things are 'bathed' in the same light. Resemblance in metaphor is not mimetic i.e. it is not mere identity, identity being "the vanishing point of resemblance"(NA 72). Natural resemblances between

things are produced by the light's effects on things. Similarly, the vision of the mind, which is an analogue of that of the physical eye, produces a network of distances and out of those distances or resemblances, it produces things that resemble each other. The resemblances in poetry are analogous to natural resemblances since their sources--the eye and "the other eye"--are analogous. The resemblances between things that poetry posits are "one of the significant components of the structure of reality"(NA 72). The objectivity of the world proceeds from the inhumanity, the impersonality and constancy of light, which is both the source of life and the source of imagination. In "Nuances of a Theme by Williams" (CP 18), Stevens celebrates the reality of light, which, though things vary in it, does not vary itself. In "Sea Surface Full of Clouds," the sea is the only real object and the rest of the world in the poem is 'created' by the light and its affect on the sea: "Who, then, in that ambrosial latitude/Out of the light evolved the moving blooms,/Who, then, evolved the sea-blooms from the clouds"(CP 99). The work of light on the sea surface is enough to produce a network of refractions and reflections and, out of that, other objects. The clouds in the sky are not objects existing side by side with the sea, as separate objects with identifiable borders, but a part of the sea simply by way of the light's effect on the sea. The light needs only one object to create various degrees of distance, and thus to situate the object in a position relative to other objects, which exist at different distances from that one object. The materiality both of perception and of the imagination is suggested in the first stanza of "New England Verses," 'entitled' The Whole World Including the Speaker--"All things in the sun are sun"(CP 104)--as well as in "Valley Candle" (CP 51), in which the candle and its image are the same: the beams of the night coverge upon the candle and its image in the same way. The light of the candle (whether it signifies perception or imagination) is not something that illuminates the world or creates it; rather, the world is the candle's source of light.

IX. Conclusion

Poetry is the life of the mind fulfilled in the highest intensity of thought and feeling. Any object, once intensely thought and felt, is lifted up from the materiality of the world and becomes a poetic image, participating in the life of the imagination. If all of the material world could thus be lifted up, life would coincide with poetry. This lifting up of the object is not the same as merely poeticizing it: this would reduce poetry to the romantic, which disparages poetry. The object is not beautified or idolized but purified, made lighter, seen as part of a continuity of changes and movements. It is no longer a solid, heavy, immobile object extended in space and external to other objects but all other objects participate in it as it participates in them. Poetry, for Stevens, does what intuition does for Bergson: "It represents the attention that mind gives to itself, over and above, while it is fixed upon matter, its object"(CM 92). Poetry, Bergson says, is "the esprit de finesse," the reflection of the intuition in the intellect"(CM 94), an intensification of life. Poems are things thought and felt to their fullest. The relationship between reality

and the imagination is not one of transposition or translation but one of intensification. Poetry is life in its most concentrated or condensed form. The poet does not create a transcendent world but the world of the imagination is decreated from the real world: “thus poetry becomes and is a transcendent analogue composed of the particulars of reality, created by the poet’s sense of the world, that is to say, his attitude, as he intervenes and interposes the appearances of that sense”(NA 130). But since a poet’s sense of the world is a matter of biology, the transcendence he achieves remains vital, real, not metaphysical. It is the transformation of substance into subtlety. In Stevens’ theory every difference dissolves into a difference of degree. The imagination and the intellect are intimately related, resemblance being their common ground. The imagination is analogous to perception, “an activity like seeing things or hearing things or any other sensory activity”(NA 145). Stevens is interested not only in the imagination as it is revealed in the arts but in the imagination as a sensory activity, as an everyday kind of metaphysics, as constitutive of perception and a basis for the formation of concepts. According to Bergson, in perception we determine things as our possibilities for action. Stevens’ definition of the imagination is similar: “The imagination is the power of the mind over the possibilities of things”(NA 136). Stevens and Bergson agree that the indetermination and mobility of the material world constitute its spirituality. “[P]ure change,” writes Bergson, “...is a thing spiritual or impregnated with spirituality. ...Its real domain being the spirit, it [intuition or, in Stevens’ case, art] would seek to grasp in things, even material things, their participation in spirituality”(CM 37).

Joseph Carroll’s book-length study of Stevens’ “New Romanticism” treats Stevens’ poetic development as “a struggle to overcome the metaphysical limitations of a simple dualism and to achieve a poetic absolute”(1). Carroll rejects both the already entrenched static dualistic reading of Stevens and its postmodern interpretation, which argues that “all modern poetry is [a] ‘quest for wholeness’...[which] always, necessarily fails”(2). Instead, Carroll reads Stevens’ poetry as a revelation of “a latent principle of spiritual fulfillment...[which] can be activated through the fictions of poetry”(4). The present study of some of the Bergsonian elements in Stevens’ theory of the imagination has shown why poetry, for Stevens, was not a failed attempt to overcome a dualism he accepted as a necessary premise, but indeed the revelation of the reality of the imagination and of the lightness and subtlety of the material world.

The Wallace Stevens Journal
Volume 26, Number 1 (Spring 2002)

Works Cited

Adorno, Theodor. *Aesthetic Theory*. Trans. C. Lenhardt. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1984.

- Baird, James. *The Dome and the Rock: Structure in the Poetry of Wallace Stevens*. Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins P, 1968.
- Baumgarten, Alexander Gottlieb. *Reflections on Poetry*. Trans. Karl Aschenbrenner and William B.Holther. Berkeley: U of California P, 1954.
- Benda, Julien. *Belphegor*. Trans. S. J. I. Lawson. New York: Payson and Clarke Ltd., 1929.
- Bergson, Henry. *Creative Evolution*. Trans. Arthur Mitchell. New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1911.
- . *The Creative Mind*. Trans. Mabelle L. Andison. New York: Philosophical Library, 1946.
- . *Matter and Memory*. Trans. Nancy Margaret Paul and W. Scott Palmer. New York: Zone Books, 1991.
- Bove, Paul A. *Destructive Poetics: Heidegger and Modern American Poetry*. New York: Columbia UP, 1980.
- Bradley, F. H. *Appearance and Reality: A Metaphysical Essay*. Oxford: Clarendon P, 1930.
- Carroll, Joseph. *Wallace Stevens' Supreme Fiction: A New Romanticism*. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State UP, 1987.
- James, William. *Essays in Radical Empiricism*. Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1976.
- Macksey, Richard A. "The Climates of Wallace Stevens." *The Act of the Mind: Essays on the Poetry of Wallace Stevens*. Eds. Roy Harvey Pearce and J. Hills Miller. Baltimore: The John Hopkins P, 1965.
- Nietzsche, Friedrich. *The Will to Power*. Trans. Walter Kaufmann and R. J. Hollingdale. New York: Vintage Books, 1967.
- Riddel, Joseph N. *The Clairvoyant Eye: The Poetry and Poetics of Wallace Stevens*. Baton Rouge: Louisiana UP, 1965.
- Stevens, Wallace. *The Collected Poems*. New York: Vintage Books, 1923.
- . *The Necessary Angel: Essays on the Reality and the Imagination*. New York: Vintage Books, 1942.
- . *Opus Posthumous*. Ed. Milton J. Bates. New York: Alfred A.Knopf, 1989.

