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# Double Characters: James and Stevens on Poetry-Philosophy

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## Abstract

In this paper, I will explore how the work of Wallace Stevens constitutes a phenomenology that resonates strongly with that of William James. I will, first, explore two explicit references to James in the essays of Stevens that constitute a misrepresentation of a rather duplicitous quote from James' personal letters. Second, I will consider Stevens' little known lecture-turned-essay, "A Collect of Philosophy," and the (conventional) poem, "Large Red Man Reading," as texts that are both *about* a conception of poetry-philosophy as well as being performances of poetry-philosophy. Finally, I will compare James' and Stevens' thought on the imagination, highlighting both form and content and the poetic-philosophical union or blend that makes possible (or virtual) those similarities.

## Keywords

Stevens – James – poetry

In the most propitious climate and in the midst of life's virtues, the simple figure of the youth as 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 philosophical poets.

—WALLACE STEVENS<sup>1</sup>

1 From Wallace Stevens, "The Figure of the Youth as Virile Poet," in *The Necessary Angel*, in *Wallace Stevens: Collected Poetry and Prose* (New York: Library of America, 1997), 676–77; hereafter cited as *CPP*, followed by page.

## 1 Stevens on James

[I]t is of Bergson's *L'Evolution Creatrice* that William James said in a letter to Bergson himself: 'You may be amused at the comparison, but in finishing it I found the same after-taste remaining as after finishing *Madame Bovary*, such a flavor of persistent *euphony* (*CPP*, 666).

Stevens is here quoting James as one among two other quotes, which Stevens takes to express a sceptical and critical stance toward philosophy qua philosophy. In doing so, these three quotes are supposed to support the first line of Stevens' essay in which they appear: "The Figure of the Youth as Virile Poet" in *The Necessary Angel*. This first line is as follows: "It appears that what is central to philosophy is its least valuable part" (*CPP*, 666). The elaboration of this idea is that the content of philosophy, the ideas qua ideas, the great systems, are of only illusory value. Surprisingly, it is only the style or expression that counts for anything.

An indirect quotation of the above James quote appears in a different and much less well known essay of Stevens, originally given as a lecture entitled "A Collect of Philosophy." The purported gist of this essay is a pursuit of "inherently poetic ideas," and the reference to James appears during the phase of the pursuit in which he distinguishes the concept of "inherently poetic ideas" from similar and related concepts such as, in this particular case, the idea of a "poetic way of writing."

Stevens sets up the reference to James by remarking that the "formidable poetry of Nietzsche, for example, ultimately leaves us with the formidable poetry of Nietzsche and little more."<sup>2</sup> Nietzsche, apparently, for Stevens, is a thinker whose style of philosophy is eminently poetic, so much so that Stevens refers to it not as poetic philosophy but simply as poetry. The ideas expressed or developed through that "formidable" poetry, on the other hand, evidently have nothing of the "inherently poetic" quality for which Stevens is searching.

Moving on from Nietzsche, Stevens then turns to Bergson as another example of a philosopher with a poetic way of writing. "In the case of Bergson," Stevens writes, "we have a poetry of language," which Stevens would presumably contrast with his idea of the "the poetry of thought."

I now return to Stevens' reference to James. Stevens remarks that this "poetry of language" of Bergson "made William James complain of its incessant euphony" (*CPP*, 854). Therefore, Stevens has now claimed that the quote from James reveals both a critical and skeptical attitude towards both the content or

2 Wallace Stevens, "A Collect of Philosophy," in *CPP*, 854.

ideas of philosophy in general and the philosophy of Bergson in general *as well* as a critical attitude toward the form or style of Bergson's philosophy too—an “incessant euphony” in the sense of too much of a good thing that grates on the nerves, an excessive beauty that strains the ears.

That this should be James' orientation toward Bergson seems strange, given that the two of them were good friends, and that James openly appreciated both the thought and the style, the form and the content, of Bergson's work. It is not necessary, however, to turn to biographical information in order to undermine Stevens' dual interpretations of James' remarks. One has merely to turn to the broader quote from James from which Stevens is quoting in order to encounter a strikingly different appearance:

O my Bergson, you are a magician, and your book is a marvel, a real wonder in the history of philosophy. . . . In finishing it I found the same after-taste remaining as after finishing *Madame Bovary*, such a flavor of persistent euphony, as of a rich river that never foamed or ran thin, but steadily and firmly proceeded with its banks full to the brim.<sup>3</sup>

Taken thus in its completion, James' remarks are anything but pejorative. James opens with a warm and affectionate greeting. The words *magician*, *marvel*, and *wonder* all suggest power and greatness. James' use of imagery from the sensory modalities of taste and hearing—“after-taste,” “flavor,” and “euphony”—demonstrates one aspect of his literary, poetic flair and thereby reinforces the complimentary nature of his remarks. Lastly, James compares this “persistent euphony” to one of the most prominent images in all of his work, perhaps even the metaphor for which he is most famous—that of the river or stream, as in the stream of consciousness. And the river Bergson has created, according to James, is of a near-perfect nature, never foaming or running thin, but “steadily and firmly proceed[ing] with its banks full to the brim.”

Evidently, when one plugs this more exhaustive understanding of James' quote into the two quotes from Stevens above, one recognizes that Stevens has completely obscured, misrepresented, and disguised James' perspective on Bergson. And this disguise thereby extends not only to James' evaluation of Bergson's style but also—with regard to the first quote from Stevens—to the content of Bergson's philosophy and to the content of philosophy in general as well. My next step in this now suspiciously attuned investigation is to turn to a closer examination of the entirety of Stevens “A Collect of Philosophy.”

3 James to Henry Bergson, Chocurua, New Hampshire, 13 June 1907, in *Letters of William James*, ed. Henry James, vol. 2 (Boston: Atlantic Monthly Press, 1920), 290–91.

## 2 Stevens on Poetry-Philosophy

"I am not a philosopher," Stevens writes in this philosophically rich essay positing the existence of poetic philosophical ideas. This first irony aside, he defines these ideas as "ideas that are inherently poetic, as, for example, the concept of the infinity of the world" which "is a poetic idea because it gives the imagination sudden life" (*CPP*, 860, 851).

The title of the essay, "A Collect of Philosophy," refers to the *collect*, "[a] brief prayer that is used in various Western liturgies before the epistle and varies with the day."<sup>4</sup> The title, then, suggests that Stevens is thinking of these remarks on poetic philosophical ideas as somehow (a) religious, (b) preparatory, and (c) of a transient nature. (These are all critical aspects, too, of James' pragmatism—it is open to religion, prepares always the way for future truths, and is fundamentally attuned to a world of transience.) This religiosity is suspicious, however, in a thinker such as Stevens, who sets up art as an attempted replacement of religion.

In beginning his investigation of inherently poetic ideas, Stevens makes it clear that there are three related issues in which he is not interested. The first issue with which he is not concerned is "a poetic style or way of thinking," which he elucidates as follows: "A poet's natural way of thinking is by way of figures, and while this includes figures of speech it also includes examples, illustrations and parallel cases generally" (*CPP*, 852). Philosophers, for Stevens, have access to this mode of thought as well: "Poets and philosophers often think alike, as we shall see" (*CPP*, 853). Among poetic-thinking philosophers, Stevens includes Leibniz, to whom he refers as "a poet without flash."

It is worth while stopping to think about him a moment because with all the equipage of a poet he never exposed any of a poet's brilliant excess in accomplishment. . . . It is worth while stopping to think of him because he stands for a class: the philosopher afraid of ornament. . . . *Leibniz, to sum it up, was a man who thought like a poet but did not write like one, although that seems strangely impossible; and, in consequence, his Monadology instead of standing as one of the world's revelations looks like a curious machine, several centuries old.*" (*CPP*, 853; italics added)

After observing that "[m]en engaged in the elucidation of obscurity might well feel a horror of the metaphor," Stevens refers to philosophers such as Leibniz as belonging to a class "to which metaphor is native and inescapable, which

4 *The American Heritage College Dictionary*, 3rd ed., s.v. "collect."

chooses to make its metaphors plain, and thinks from the true abundance of its thought" (*CPP*, 853). Surely, one would include James in this class of metaphor-inclined thinkers as well.

The second issue with which Stevens is not concerned is "a poetic way of writing" (*CPP*, 853). "Plato," he offers as an example, "wrote in a poetic way and certainly the doctrines of which he was so constantly prolific are with great frequency poetic concepts per se" (*CPP*, 854). Stevens also refers, as discussed in the preceding section, to "the formidable poetry of Nietzsche" and Bergson's "poetry of language." Finally, Stevens remarks of his personal friend, philosopher, and poet George Santayana that "the exquisite and memorable way in which he has always said things has given so much delight that we accept what he says as we accept our own civilization" (*CPP*, 854). For this second club, too, James again seems a natural candidate for membership, on the strength of his authorship of such lines as the following: "Alternatives are wrapped in proper names, as if it were indecent for a truth to go naked."<sup>5</sup> Surely this qualifies as a "poetic" way of writing.

The third and final issue not concerning Stevens' concept of poetic-philosophical ideas is "philosophical poetry, as, for example, the poetry of Lucretius, some of the poetry of Milton and some of the poetry of Pope, and those pages of Wordsworth, which have done so much to strengthen the critics of poetry in their attacks on the poetry of thought" (*CPP*, 854)."

With this last phrase, the *poetry of thought*, one finally arrives at the issue with which Stevens is concerned in regard to the inherently poetic ideas. "Theoretically," he writes, "the poetry of thought should be the supreme poetry." But, for Stevens, the "great poetry" he "has projected is compensation of time to come" (*CPP*, 854-55):

A poem in which the poet has chosen for his subject a philosophic theme should result in the poem of poems. That the wing of poetry should also be the rushing wing of meaning seems to be an extreme aesthetic good; and so in time and perhaps, in other politics, it may come to be. (*CPP*, 854)

The structure of the remainder of Stevens' lecture in regard to the identities of poetry and philosophy becomes very perplexing. I will attempt here to trace the movements as faithfully as possible, taking note of the bouncings back and forth as they occur.

After noting that "the poetry of thought should be the supreme poetry," Stevens then identifies as "the themes of the supreme poetry" such philosophical

5 William James, *A Pluralistic Universe* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1996), 15.

conceptions as Hegel's idea that "negation is a force" (*CPP*, 855). He thus moves from poetry as the supreme poetry of thought to the occurrence of the supreme poetry of thought in philosophy. Speaking of the writings of philosophers, Stevens then notes that "philosophy is poetic in conception and doctrine to the extent that the ideas of philosophy may be described as poetic concepts" (*CPP*, 856). Thus, philosophy, to a certain degree, is a form of poetry, so the supreme poetry of thought, though initially projected as a form of poetry, and then located instead within philosophy, is now to a certain degree restored to poetry insofar as philosophy is itself, to a certain degree, poetry.

Stevens then returns to his first example of an inherently poetic idea, the infinity of the world, noting that it is "equally a perception of philosophy and a typical metamorphosis of poetry" (*CPP*, 856). Similarly, he claims that the "problems of perception as they are developed in philosophy resemble similar problems in poetry" (*CPP*, 858). Stevens then elaborates on this essential similarity between the two disciplines or genres, noting that there "are levels of thought or vision where everything is poetic" (*CPP*, 856). He then describes one of these inherently poetic ideas as producing "in the imagination a universal iridescence, a dithering of presences and, say, a complex of differences."<sup>6</sup>

Stevens then proceeds to talk about specific and entire philosophical works as poems, such as Schopenhauer's *The World as Will and Representation*, which he describes as "the text of a poem although not a happy one. It is, in a way, the same poem as the poem of Leibniz although the terms are different" (*CPP*, 859). After describing philosophical texts as poems, Stevens notes that he is interested not "in the philosophy of poets but in the poetry of philosophers" in which class—that is, philosopher—as I noted above, he does not place himself (*CPP*, 860).

Having dwelled on the essential similarity between the poets and the philosophers, Stevens then returns to an elaboration of their differences, as though made anxious by how close to identification of the two he had come. Stevens claims that although the "habit of forming concepts unites [the poets and the philosophers]," the "use to which they put their ideas separates them" (*CPP*, 862). This is a significant point in that many thinkers separate philosophy and poetry by saying the former focuses on concepts, whereas the latter focuses on sense perceptions. For Stevens, however, "all men have in common the habit of thinking," which he connects to creating integrations, or integrated concepts, out of the basic stuff of human experience. He then elaborates that the "habit of probing for an integration seems to be part of the general will

6 *CPP*, 858. One hears here a precursor to Derrida's deconstructive thinking and its linguistic vehicles.

to order. We must, therefore, go a step farther and look for the respect that separates the poet and the philosopher in the kind of integrations for which they search. . . . The philosopher intends his integration to be fateful; the poet intends his to be effective" (*CPP*, 863). For philosophers, then, the search is for the truthful; for poets, the search is for the strategic.

However, it is not just the ends but also the means that are different for philosophers and poets. "[T]he probing of the philosopher is deliberate. On the other hand, the probing of the poet is fortuitous" (*CPP*, 863). Different, too, is the style. "If the poet moves about in the same sphere or spheres, and occasionally he may, he is light-footed. He is intent on what he sees and hears and the sense of the certainty of the presences about him is as nothing to the presences themselves."<sup>7</sup> Stevens further distinguishes the orientations or attunement of the poets and philosophers as follows:

[T]he philosopher's world is intended to be a world, which yet remains to be discovered and which, at bottom, the philosophers probably hope will always remain to be discovered . . . the poet's world is intended to be a world, which yet remains to be celebrated and which, at bottom, the poets probably hope will always remain to be celebrated. (*CPP*, 864)

Stevens then differentiates the poets as makers. "The poet's native sphere, to speak more accurately, is what he can make of the world" (*CPP*, 863).

Having thoroughly elaborated the differences between the figures that he has previously presented as almost identical, Stevens then proceeds to almost identify them again. He begins by remarking that one "finds it simple to assume that the philosopher more or less often experiences the same miraculous shortenings of mental processes that the poet experiences" (*CPP*, 862). In other words, intuition is open to philosophers as well. Further, "[Poets and philosophers have] in common the idea of creating confidence in the world" (*CPP*, 864). Like James, Stevens sees the ideal poetry-philosophy as deeply rooted in concrete reality.

Stevens then articulates a process wherein philosophy becomes poetry at the moment of its highest strivings. Of these limit-experiences within philosophizing, he asks, "Does not philosophy carry us to a point at which there is nothing left except the imagination?" (*CPP*, 865). He then further asks,

7 *CPP*, 863. For Nietzsche, at least, this light-footedness is something toward which the philosopher too should struggle. It is after all, the "first attribute of divinity."

If we rely on the imagination (or, say, intuition), to carry us beyond that point, and if the imagination succeeds in carrying us beyond that point (as in respect to the idea of God, if we conceive of the idea of God as this world's capital idea), then the imagination is supreme, because its powers have shown themselves to be greater than the powers of reason. (*CPP*, 865)

In conclusion, he notes that the ideas of philosophers are "often triumphs of the imagination . . . when [reason and the imagination] act in concert they are supreme" (*CPP*, 865). It is, again, far from obvious that Stevens' own work here is anything other than the ideas of a philosopher as a triumph of his able imagination. The twists and turns of the logic of this lecture have left us disturbingly uncertain as to the identities—or, perhaps, identity—of poetry and philosophy. Whether this uncertainty is the product of an honestly uncertain author or is the strategic effect of a devilishly deceptive author will perhaps become clearer by turning next from an instance of Stevens' problematic prose to an instance of his equally problematic verse.

Before turning to my own interpretation of the poem "Large Red Man Reading," I will now briefly consider three other interpretations in the secondary literature, focusing on the question of the identity of the ghosts in the poem. First, Mark Irwin focuses on the Red Man as (a) an example of Native American stereotypes, (b) resonant with Kafka's conception of the Native American as so connected with things-in-the-world that those things functionally disappear for the Native American, and (c) a Heideggerian poet bringing truth as unconcealment and un-forgetting.<sup>8</sup> Although Irwin offers no explicit suggestions as to the identity of the ghosts, this latter turn to Heidegger anticipates my own linking of the ghosts to the philosophers.

Second, D.L. MacDonald sees the poem as, above all, an example of Bloom's concept of "*Apophrades*, or the return of the dead."<sup>9</sup> Making connections to both classical literature from Homer to Shakespeare to Emerson, MacDonald first identifies the ghosts, quoting Stevens' poem "Esthetique du Mal," as "the non-physical people, in paradise, / Itself non-physical," that is, as souls in heaven (*RD*, 25). MacDonald goes on to link these souls to what in Homer gets translated by the English word "ghost," namely, *psukhe* [*sic*], which MacDonald

8 Mark Irwin, "Gravity and Ghosts: The Physics of Wallace Stevens' 'Large Red Man Reading,'" *Wallace Stevens Journal* 1,7 no. 1 (Spring 1993): 126–28.

9 Harold Bloom. *The Anxiety of Influence: A Theory of Poetry*. (New York: Oxford UP, 1975), 15, quoted in D.L. MacDonald, "The Return of the Dead in 'Large Red Man Reading,'" *Wallace Stevens Journal* 12, no. 1 (Spring 1988): 21–34; hereafter cited as *RD*, followed by page.

describes as “the last breath, the principle that leaves the body at the point of death,” related to the image in a dream (*eidolon*) and also the concept of a shade or shadow (*skia*) (RD, 26). Later, MacDonald further specifies these ghosts/souls as “ancestral ghosts” (RD, 28). Similarly, my interpretation of the ghosts also traces a certain fixation on ancestry in the poem, but in regards to a philosophical lineage that reaches Emerson instead through Plato (rather than MacDonald’s “literary” one, which reaches Emerson through Homer).

Finally, Alan Perlis’ essay takes a deconstructive approach to the poem, drawing primarily on the work of Paul de Man, to explore the way that the interposition of a reader within the poem (between the external reader and the poem as a whole) creates a distance or detachment between the external reader and the poem’s metaphors.<sup>10</sup> In other words, the fact that there is a character within the poem engaged in the act of reading some other text creates a kind of cognitive dissonance that alerts the reader to the complexity of what is happening in the poem. For Perlis, this dissonance leads, helpfully, to an emphasis on the importance, ubiquity, and creativity of interpretation, and illustrates Stevens’ “ultimate concern with the phenomenology of perception” (WSR, 72). In his explicit invocation of the philosophical methodologies of both deconstruction and phenomenology, Perlis comes perhaps closest of the three to my own reading, which begins with a consideration of each line of the poem individually.

Although prevented by copyright-related restrictions from reproducing the entire poem here, I strongly encourage the reader, in conjunction with the analyses below, to consult the entire poem online or in an alternate source.<sup>11</sup>

Let us now consider each line of the poem carefully.

(1) The first line introduces us to ghosts, leaving it open as to whether we are considering a horror poem or a spiritual poem. “There were . . .” is of course the English syntactical construction for bare existence. One is struck immediately by the (potentially demonic) power of the large red man to summon the spirits of the (presumed) dead to the phenomenal world using only the phrases of his speech, which are evidently not magic incantations in any strict sense.

(2) The large red man reads aloud; this is part of his charm. Others can share in his experience, via what one assumes to be a beautiful, strong baritone for no particular reason. He reads the “great blue tabulae,” which one might

10 Alan D. Perlis, “Wallace Stevens’ Reader Poems and the Effacement of Metaphor,” *Wallace Stevens Journal* 10, no. 2 (Fall 1986): 67; hereafter cited as WSR, followed by page.

11 See, for example, the following web address: <http://knopfdoubleday.com/2010/04/28/large-red-man-reading-stevens/> or Wallace Stevens, “Large Red Man Reading,” in *CPP*, 365.

interpret instinctively as the blue skies, although why plural "tablets" is used for a usually singular "sky" remains an open question.

(3) The ghosts have come from "the wilderness of stars," as opposed to, say, a spiritual paradise or richly inhabited limbo of the dead; they come from emptiness to a world of fullness enunciated by the reading man. But did they expect more from the afterlife, which turned out to be a star-wilderness, or did they expect more from the world to which they returned?

(4) Now one knows why at least some of them have come—"There were those..."—to hear the large red man read from the poem of life. Apparently, though many would not suspect it, life has a poem, and it can be read by (at least) one man. And those who expected more can perhaps return to hear it read aloud, perhaps in a rich baritone voice.

(5) Undoubtedly to the disappointment of some of the more loftily sentimental dilettantes, the poem of life includes (as presumably representative passages) lines on pots, pans and tulips. The ghosts have traveled far for kitchen minutiae. As Perlis puts it, the poem is "perhaps Stevens' most Whitmanesque poem," in part due to "the catalogues which, like Whitman's own, are meant as a simple listing of objects rescued from the clouds of trope and returned to their literal selves" (WSR, 68).

(6) These ghosts would have wept, being now presumably unable to weep, or perhaps having spent their lives in states preventative of weeping, for the chance to step without shoes or socks into "reality," which is apparently an external source in some way. A reality out there can be approached with feet naked, and certain ghosts so long to do so that they would have wept in counterfactual conditions.

(7) Along with the weeping, however, or perhaps commensurate with the weeping, there would have been happiness for the ghosts, and the visceral reaction of shivering in the cold, which is a kind of thing one imagines that ghosts cannot do and would not want to do even if they could.

(8) On the contrary, these ghosts would even "cry out" just to freeze, and would have completely absorbed themselves in the pure tactile relation of fingers to leaves.

(9) So taken are they with the pure visceral, these ghosts, according to the speaker, would even have grasped the most painful of objects, latched onto the most unattractive.

(10) In addition to weeping and happiness, the ghosts would also laugh, in response to the tabulae now purple on the tongue of the red man.

(11) The ghosts have now encountered some serious philosophy. Unlike the blue tablets, which suggested skies and spoke of pots and pans, they are now faced with purple tablets, which might suggest royalty, and which speak of

"[t]he outlines of being and its expressings," which makes one wonder what sort of a thing "being" must be such that it could have an outline and be capable of expressing (itself?). The large red man also articulates not only the "law" of being but also its very "syllables," suggesting very meticulous and thorough reading material indeed.

(12) *Poesis*: the Ancient Greek word for "activity, making, crafting, positing, etc." from which the English word "poetry" descends. This, repeated twice, constitutes at least the syllables of the law of being, if not its "expressings" and "outline" as well. More specifically, the "syllables of the law of being" are the "literal characters" of *poesis*—presumably the actual letters of written language—and the "vatic" (prophetic, oracular) "lines," are the lines of power that these "literal characters" as "poesis" trace.

(13) The hearts of the ghosts are apparently so weak and worn down that they have actually thinned. The hearts are so drained, so overexerted, that "spent" is too mild an adjective to describe them—a new word "spended" must be coined to do the job. But they are not so "spended" that, along with the ghosts' ears, they cannot still provide a dwelling for the symbols and prophecies of *poesis*: the law of being.

(14) In that broken dwelling place, in the thin hearts of certain ghosts, the outline, expressions, and syllables-of-the-law of being—*poesis*—are made flesh, are restored to or stored as the phenomenal reality of being.

(15) Here, in the last line, one encounters something or someone (perhaps the large red man again, perhaps the ghost hearts) speaking, making-voice "the feeling" either "for" the ghosts in the sense of "on behalf of" and/or "for" the outline, expressions, and law of being in the sense of "delivering that which belongs to something else." Thus, either the ghosts or the outline, expressions, and law of being have lacked what either the reading man or the ghosts' hearts supply. The poem obviously concludes in a rich ambiguity.

Having concluded the line-by-line analysis, my more holistic interpretation will turn on the following three questions of identity within the poem: (1) who is the speaker of the poem? (2) who is the red man? (3) who are the ghosts?—although whether these discrete identities will survive my questioning is another matter. For that matter, identity as a concept may not even survive. I will probably be, and rightly, suspected as a diabolically untrustworthy interpreter.

The speaker of the poem here seems to be a perhaps divinely or demonically informed but not omniscient spectator of the scene, someone sitting beside the red man as he reads to the ghosts. He or she does not seem to be one of the ghosts, or the red man, because of his or her referring to both parties in the third person throughout, and through espousing (a) a degree of holism

(of thought and feeling) specifically lacking in the ghosts, and (b) a reflexivity not suggested in the large reading figure.

The red man—proposed at the risk of criticizing Stevens' multicultural sensitivity—seems likely to be connected to the idealized Native American figure who possesses an intrinsic and profound connection to the earth. (And a figure connected by earlier Europeans to devil-worship.) The red man's reading seems almost mechanical in its inexorable driving forward; one is told nothing of his even being aware of his listening audience or of the possible philosophical significance of the syllables he utters.

One also wonders why the man reads only, instead of engaging in dialogue with the ghosts or anyone else, instead of performing or dramatizing the poem of the world. The text suggests that he may be the source of the supply of feeling that influxes into the ghosts, yet I see no evidence of his capacity for feeling in any way. Would an audio recording of his reading be sufficient for the startling effect that the live reading exerts over the ghosts? It is difficult to find a necessary reason why not.

These aspects further suggest the caricature of the Native American as comparatively inarticulate with regard to his connection to nature—aside from an instinctive necessity to embody the poem of the world with a living larynx. Instead, the red man requires a third person, in this case the speaker of the poem, to supply the articulation of his work that would perhaps even be sullied by his articulating it himself (as has often been suggested in romanticized Amerindian narratives.)

The ghosts are the philosophers. And understood as such, they do not have to be understood as even dead yet; they are incorporeal spirits in the sense of having neglected their corporeal spirits, the wisdoms of the body, to the degree that those bodies and those wisdoms have functionally ceased to exist. These philosophers-as-ghosts "return to earth" not from the afterlife (in any conventional sense) but from the stale skies of their abstraction and speculation. They return, thus, perhaps not *after* life to the world of life but perhaps simultaneously *from* an afterlife, in the sense of life lived after the wisdom of living is lost to a site and enunciation of living life that calls to the philosophers' all-but-dissolved corporeality. The ghosts come to hear the red man as the philosophers come to the poets to read before bed at night, as the philosophers who, like Maimonides in his *Guide of the Perplexed*, close their philosophical masterpieces with quotations of poetry.

Unfortunately, sleep descends not long after the reading, and by the morning, the poetry is again forgotten. And the red man, who is thus re-understood as the archetype of the theoretically, meta-discursively mute poet, is abandoned to return to the afterlife within life that is the philosophical

wilderness of the stars, the wilderness of bright shinations in imagined isolation. The only continuity between the philosophers and the poet is the speaker of the poem, re-understood as the poet-philosopher, a figure perceived as so grotesquely a bastard (or demonic) that he becomes either completely invisible, as the speaker of this poem who does not appear in the poem, or incorrectly identified with one group or the other (the speaker as red man—poet or ghost-philosopher.)

In other words, the speaker of the poem, the speaker of the text of philosophy, is Stevens, understood as refusing to adopt the identity of either the red man or the ghosts. It is Stevens as the comprehension of both of these roles, as the negotiation between the two roles—the demonic excess of either, the devilish blurring of the boundaries—as the amnesiac coming-home of the poets and the philosophers, as the poet who sings theory, as the philosopher who speculates emotionally, as the writing of the poem of life, as its audition, as *poesis*.

### 3 Stevens as James

As a final attempt at persuading the reader of the poetry-philosophy at work in Stevens, I will now consider a few resonances between his and James' thought on the imagination. If further fundamental identities of both form and content emerge between an acknowledged poet and an acknowledged philosopher, is not the distinction between poetry and philosophy thereby rendered even more unnecessary and arbitrary? If I can reveal James as merely a mask of Stevens, and vice versa, will that not also help to reveal philosophy as merely the diabolical mask of poetry, and vice versa?

Imagination is of course the byword of Wallace Stevens, the concept for which he is most known. Although the imagination is of course critical for virtually all poets, its particular centrality for Stevens is suggested, in part, by his famous book of essays, *The Necessary Angel: Essays on Reality and the Imagination*. "The imagination is the power of the mind over the possibilities of things; but if this constitutes a certain single characteristic, it is the source not of a certain single value but of as many values as reside in the possibilities of things."<sup>12</sup> The imagination actualizes the virtualities of the phenomena, the things of the world of experience. Pragmatism is similarly oriented toward imaginatively actualizing the virtualities of the real world, and toward creating actual change in that world. Seconding Stevens' valorization of the imagination

12 Stevens, "Imagination as Value," in *CPP*, 738.

in art and life, James remarks that, "We have heard much of late of the uses of the imagination in science. It is high time to urge the use of a little imagination in philosophy."<sup>13</sup> In a somewhat humorous addendum to this thought, James further remarks that his critics also "certainly need more imagination of realities."

If the imagination, for Stevens and James, is creative, then it is no surprise that the wielder of that imagination, the poet or philosopher, should also possess creative power. "I think that [the poet's] function," writes Stevens, "is to make his imagination theirs and that he fulfills himself only as he sees his imagination become the light in the minds of others. His role, in short, is to help people live their lives."<sup>14</sup> The creator, a creator via the power of the imagination, is thus after all a member of the helping professions, directed towards the improvement of the quality of life. James is famously passionate about the application of thought to the improvement of life via pragmatism's doctrine of meliorism. Philosophy, in pragmatism, is returned to its vital, practical, local origins.

Not just the poets and philosophers wield this power of creation, according to Stevens and James. "[T]here can be lives," Stevens writes, "in which the value of the imagination is the same as its value in arts and letters" (*CPP*, 734). In other words, there are individuals whose lives are creative work-ings of art. It seems that for James this artistic aspect of life is a matter of different degrees in different individuals, at the empty end of which is the "man with no philosophy in him," whom James describes as "the most inauspicious and unprofitable of all social mates."<sup>15</sup> At the fullest end, as noted above, James endorses Swami Vivekananda's naming of the Supreme Being as "He the Great Poet."<sup>16</sup> But everyone in between these two extremes is capable of creation as well, for James, at least insofar as "[m]an needs a rule for his will, and will invent one if

13 William James, *Pragmatism* (New York: Dover, 1995), 90; hereafter cited as *P*.

14 Stevens, "The Noble Rider and the Sound of Words" in *The Necessary Angel*, in *CPP*, 660–61.

15 William James, *Some Problems in Philosophy: A Beginning of an Introduction to Philosophy* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1996), 8; hereafter cited as *SPP*.

16 James quotes Vivekananda in the context of his concession to absolute monism: "That there *may* be one sovereign purpose, system, kind, and story, is a legitimate hypothesis" (*P*, 56). But if God is "He, the Great Poet," and if the poets are essentially liars, does this mean God, too, is a liar? Does that not leave us again with Descartes' all-powerful Demon? Though James also concedes that "[w]e all have at least the germ of mysticism in us" (59), he nevertheless concludes that "it is clear that pragmatism must turn its back on absolute monism, and follow pluralism's more empirical path" (*P*, 62). The devil feigns allegiance to God, all the while darting in various libertine directions.

one be not given to him."<sup>17</sup> And by thereby merely adopting what suits one's life better, one is actually creatively adding, in a small way, to the objective world in which all perspectives are created. Thus, whenever "we espouse a cause we contribute to the determination of the evolutionary standard of right" (SR, 100). In this way, each individual creatively adds "to the mass M of mundane phenomena, independent of his subjectivity, the subject component x. . . . All depends on the character of the personal contribution x" (SR, 101, 102–3).

Finally, the imagination, though both grounded in and culminating in the real, is also capable of working with the unreal. Somewhat paradoxically, Stevens asserts that, "unreal things have a reality of their own, in poetry as elsewhere. We do not hesitate, in poetry, to yield ourselves to the unreal, when it is possible to yield ourselves" (CPP, 644). The unreal is actually real, but merely real in a different way, and when the unreal hovers close enough to the ground of our real, we throw ourselves into it with gusto. Similarly, James claims that "[t]here are then cases where faith creates its own verification" (SR, 97). Sometimes believing in something new and/or unproven can create the conditions that make that thing become true (in pragmatism's sense). James describes these moments of simple belief in the following way:

Ontological emotion so fills the soul that ontological speculation can no longer overlap it and put her girdle of interrogation-marks round her existence. Even the least religious of men must have felt with Walt Whitman, when loafing on the grass on some transparent summer morning, that 'swiftly arose and spread round him the peace and knowledge that pass all the argument of the earth.' At such moments of energetic living we feel as if there were something diseased and contemptible, yea vile, in theoretic grubbing and brooding. In the eye of healthy sense the philosopher is at best a learned fool. (SR, 74)

From this perspective, extending one's belief and trust into the realm of the (barely or somewhat) unreal is actually the most healthy, natural, and *real*, in the sense of what commonly, actually occurs in the real world. James uses this factor—success for typical minds in the real world—as a way to evaluate a given philosophy's success as well. "For a philosophy to succeed on a universal scale it must define the future congruously with our spontaneous powers . . . its ultimate principle must not be one that essentially baffles and disappoints our dearest desires and most cherished powers. . . . But a second and worse defect in

17 William James, "The Sentiment of Rationality," in *The Will to Believe, Human Immortality, and Other Essays in Popular Philosophy* (New York: Dover, 1956), 88; hereafter cited as SR.

a philosophy than that of contradicting our active propensities is to give them no object whatsoever to press against" (SR, 82). The imagination essentially struggles with reality, offers counterpoint through the unreal, and a philosophy that grants to the imagination its essential power of creation-via-unreality is, for James as well as for Stevens, the supreme philosophy.

In conclusion, the reader is now in a position to re-understand these analyses as having been shown to offer the following three conclusions: (1) Stevens' poetic (i.e., beautiful) prose betrays a poetic (deceptive) misinterpretation of James' poetic (polyvalent, deceptive) letters; (2) Stevens' poetic (disguised) philosophy on the philosophical poetry in "poetic" philosophy and his poetic (verse) philosophy on the poetic (misrepresented) separation of the poets and philosophers along with a poetic (dissembled) reunification of the poets and philosophers betrays his fundamental equivocation of poetry and philosophy; and (3) Stevens' poetic (disguised) resemblance to James betrays a poetic-philosophical core underlying both the very possibility of their striking resemblance as well as their actual manifestations. I close now with a final intention from Stevens that expresses my own:

Essentially what I intend is that it shall be as if the philosophers had no knowledge of poetry and suddenly discovered it in their search for whatever it is that they are searching for and gave the name of poetry to that which they discovered.

—WALLACE STEVENS (*CPP*, 856)

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