

Wallace Stevens: The Development of Pure Poetry

by

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I

In late 1915 Harriet Monroe received from Arthur Davison Ficke (poet, critic, and novelist) an enthusiastic letter about Wallace Stevens. Ficke had read Stevens's "Sunday Morning,"¹ which was published in the November issue of *Poetry* (founded in 1912 by Monroe herself), and could not resist transmitting his excitement. Stevens was then thirty-six and was the resident vice-president, second in charge of Equitable Surety Company's New York branch. In the letter Ficke wrote:

"Sunday Morning" tantalizes me with the sense that perhaps it's the most beautiful poem ever written, or perhaps just an incompetent obscurity. Such restraint! Such delicate dignity! And such ambiguity!

Have you known Stevens? He's a big, slightly fat, awfully competent-looking man. You expect him to roar, but when he speaks there emerges the gravest, softest, most subtly modulated voice I've ever heard—a voice on tiptoe at dawn! A personality beside which all the nice little poets in the world shrink to cheese-mites!²

Ficke's observation is tantalizing, as he saw an interesting contrast between Stevens's bulky figure and his soft, subtle voice. Also Ficke makes a very neat comment about Stevens's graceful voice: "a voice on tiptoe at dawn!" This romantic

expression may instantly remind one of John Keats' poem "I stood tip-toe upon a little hill" or Arthur Rimbaud's poem "Aube," both of which beautifully describe the fresh and nimble movement of a poetic spirit skipping in the dewy morning. Ficke's admiration for Stevens's poetic competency is perhaps one of the superlative eulogies. Actually, Ficke was hoping for the appearance of new powerful poets and regarded Stevens as one of them. Above all, Ficke saw in Stevens a kindred mind and hoped to invite Stevens into his group, the Spectrist School. The name of the group came from the collection of poetry *Spectra: A Book of Poetic Experiments* (1916), which Witter Bynner, poet and critic, and Ficke published together, trying to poke fun at the prevalent flood of extremist schools of poets and critics. The hoax school, later joined by Chicago poet Marjorie Allen Seiffert, actually gained some fame and a following yet it lasted for less than two years. Stevens, however, was only marginally involved in it. The school advocated "a poetry of intensity, immediacy, vividness, and humor" (Schaum 16) against the current poetic fashions dominant in the literary scene. The members of the school considered Stevens's poetry as representing these elements. When the Spectrist School was in full swing, he had already completed three collections of verse and published his celebrated poems, including "Peter Quince at the Clavier," "The Silver Plough-Boy," "Disillusionment of Ten O'clock," and "Sunday Morning," in such magazines as *Poetry*, *Others*, *Rogue*, *Soil*, and *The Little Review*. At that time he was already considered a promising poet.

Notwithstanding whether he represented the current fashion of American poetry, the most important point is that he was trying to modernize his poetry and was about to find his own voice. Notably, Stevens was interested in a particular type of poetry. That was pure poetry. For instance, in a letter to his friend Henry Church (June 1, 1939), Stevens wrote, "I am, in the long run, interested in pure poetry."³ Also, in a letter of 1940, he said, "I have in mind pure poetry. The purpose of writing poetry is to attain pure poetry" (L. 363-64). Why was he so interested in pure poetry? To provide an answer to this question, this essay will discuss Stevens's relationship with pure poetry. And it will show that pure poetry occupies the central part of his poetry not only in technique but also in aesthetics.

II

In Harvard University where he entered as a special three-year student, Stevens chose to learn French, and there is no doubt that he was well read in French pure poetry. He was already trying to write his own poetry, and some of the poems he actually wrote then show some experiments with pure poetry, though most of them were romantic and did not have much of the finesse of his later poetry. Such a poem as "Ballade of the Pink Parasol," which was published in the *Harvard Advocate* in 1900, shows some characteristics of the pure poetry of *Harmonium* (1923). What is particularly important for the development of Stevens' idea of pure poetry is that in his apprentice days in college and in New York where he worked as a journalist he came to know and absorb various contemporary art theories and ideologies. Till his emergence as an established poet preparing for *Harmonium*, he had met various poets and artists and was baptized into such contemporary avant-garde artistic movements as Imagism, Dadaism, Surrealism, and Cubism. Before *Harmonium*, he had written three collections of poetry, the "June Book" of 1908, the "Little June Book" of 1909, and the "Carnet de Voyage" of 1914, and they all show his efforts to find a new direction for his poetry. A number of poems from these collections were later chosen for *Harmonium*.

In his New York days (roughly 1900–16), Stevens was friendly with such Harvard graduates as the aforementioned Witter Bynner, Arthur Davison Ficke, Walter Arensberg (editor), and Pitts Sanborn (editor of *Trend*), and from them he learned the most current literary trends. Also, Stevens became acquainted with such controversial writers as Donald Evans, Djuna Barnes, Mina Loy, and Carl Van Vechten. (Van Vechten later helped to cajole Alfred Knopf into printing Stevens's *Harmonium*.) From them Stevens could learn contemporary avant-garde art theories. One of the important events in Stevens's New York days that helped him to have an awareness of new trends in modern arts was the opening of the Armory Show of Post-Impressionist Art (February 1913). It was a shattering experience for him, and the impressions he received from the fine arts of Duchamp, Picasso, Braque, Van Gogh, and Gauguin urged him to meditate on the relationship between visionary art and literary art. The influence of the fine arts on Stevens was indelible throughout his life, and he never lost his interest,

particularly, in painting. In his later life he was a frequent purchaser of a number of French paintings, and he discovered many mutual complimentary points between painting and poetry.

Though Stevens's growth as a poet was slow, what is important is that he emerged as an avant-garde literary figure. While frequenting Walter Arensberg's apartment in New York and absorbing the inspirations of various contemporary art movements, Stevens nurtured his poetic mind and began to write the poetry of his own. Stevens submitted his poems to the various magazines that were mushrooming at that time, such as *Poetry*, *Others* (sponsored by Walter Arensberg and Alfred Kreymborg in 1915), *Soil*, *Rogue*, *The Dial*, *The New Public*, *Broom*, *Secession*, *The Modern School*, *The Little Review*, and *Contact*. The *Contact* was founded by William C. Williams and Robert McAlmon in 1920, and it advocated the tenets of fresh discovery, pure perception, and immediate contact with the facts of the American environment. Without doubt these tenets influenced Stevens, and he was compelled to recreate and develop his poetic ideas accordingly. In particular, Williams' pure perception in the doctrine of contact was a powerful influence on Stevens, helping him to form the concept of pure poetry.

III

As touched upon above, Stevens's connection with French pure poetry started in the earlier part of his life, and it is important to observe that the connection helped to constitute the basic foundation of his poetry. Stevens was trying in every way to make his poetry modern, and the first thing he recognized he must do was to break away from the current dominant romantic tradition of poetry. Stevens tried to set himself free from the self-sufficient doctrine of art for art's sake and to make poetry useful and worthy for life. Among the number of French poets he read by the time of the publication of *Harmonium* were Baudelaire, Laforgue, Rimbaud, Verlaine, Mallarmé, and Valéry. (He also read such prose writers as Pascal, Rousseau, Rochefoucauld, Fénelon, Stendhal, Dumas, Joachim du Bellay, André de Chénier, Charles D'Orleans, and Romain Rolland.) That the French literature was a great resource for Stevens's poetry is without doubt.

Though the appellation of pure poetry is generally accepted as pointing to a particular sort of poetry, the concept of pure poetry for the French symbolists,

however, differs from one poet to another especially in terms of the place of emphasis. Despite this difference, the common definition of pure poetry may be made as follows: pure poetry purports an ideal of the beauty of language, an ultimate form of poetry that focuses on the vividness of images through depriving a poem of prosaic elements, and it aims to achieve a great degree of concreteness, objectivity, and musicality. According to Paul Valéry, who is the most theoretical among the French symbolists and whom Stevens read deeply, pure poetry is the ultimate form in search of the beauty of language. He says,

La poésie, sans doute, n'est pas si libre que la musique dans ses moyens. Elle ne peut qu'à grand'peine ordonner à son gré les mots, les formes, les objets de la prose. Si elle y parvenait, ce serait *poésie pure*. Mais c'est là un nom qu'on a fort critiqué. Ceux qui m'en ont fait le reproche ont oublié que j'avais écrit que la poésie pure n'était qu'une limite située à l'infini, un idéal de la puissance de beauté du langage. . . . Mais c'est la direction qui importe, la tendance vers l'œuvre pure. Il est important de savoir que toute poésie s'oriente vers quelque *poésie absolue*.⁴

/ Poetry is, perhaps, not so free as music in its methodology. Only with difficulty can poetry freely order the words, the forms, and the objects of the prose. If it achieves this, it will be pure poetry. But this is an expression that has been strongly criticized. Those who have reproached me have forgotten that I wrote that pure poetry was only a limited effort that aimed at infinitude, an ideal of the power and beauty of the language. . . . But it is the direction and the struggle toward pure poetry that is significant. It is important to recognize that all poetry aims to achieve *absolute poetry*. /

What is, then, Valéry's idea of absolute poetry? In another essay, he remarks,

La poésie absolue ne peut procéder que par merveilles exceptionnelles; les œuvres qu'elle compose entièrement constituent dans les trésors impondérables d'une littérature ce qui s'y remarque du plus rare et de plus improbable. Mais, comme le vide parfait, et de même que le plus bas degré de la température, qui ne peuvent pas être atteints, ne se laissent même approcher qu'au prix d'une progression épuisante d'efforts, ainsi la pureté dernière de notre art demande à ceux qui la conçoivent de si longues et de si rudes contraintes qu'elles absorbent toute la joie naturelle d'être poète, pour ne laisser enfin que l'orgueil de n'être jamais satisfait.⁵

/ Absolute poetry is only achieved in exceptional circumstances. These works are the imponderable treasures of a literature and are remarkable for being extremely rare and most improbable. But like the unattainable perfect vacuum or absolute zero in temperature, absolute poetry can only approach its goal through a tiring progression of efforts. The final striving for purity in our art thus demands

of those who conceive it such long and rough constraints that they absorb all the natural joy of being a poet, so that at the last there is left only the hubris of dissatisfaction. /

For Valéry, absolute poetry is an ideal of poetry that is extremely difficult to attain.

Then, what idea did Stevens have about pure poetry? In a letter (31 October 1935) to Ronald Lane Latimer, editor of the Alcestis Press which published Stevens's *Ideas of Order* (1935) and *Owl's Clover* (1936), Stevens wrote, "... when *Harmonium* was in the making there was a time when I liked the idea of images and images alone, or images and the music of verse together. I then believed in *pure poetry*, as it was called. I still have a distinct liking for that sort of thing" (L. 288). His remark is very intriguing, because some of his ideas of pure poetry are similar to those of Symbolism and Imagism. Stevens seems to consider that the poetry which gives priority to vivid and concrete images and music is pure poetry. But in another place, he also says, "In poetry, you must love the words, the ideas and images and rhythms with all your capacity to love anything at all" (OP 188). He does not relinquish the importance of ideas. Also, in "The Man with the Blue Guitar," he writes: "Poetry is the subject of the poem, / From this the poem issues and / To this returns" (XXII), indicating the importance of poésie. In the same vein, in the essay "The Irrational Element in Poetry," he says, "pure poetry is a term that has grown to be descriptive of poetry in which not the true subject but the poetry of the subject is paramount" (CPP 786).

In considering Stevens's concept of pure poetry, one needs to examine what Stevens thinks about poetic form and content. What is striking is that in pure poetry Stevens strives for an ideal balance and fusion between form and content, and he does this in order to achieve his greatest aim, the purity of poésie. What was needed for Stevens, therefore, was to liberate his poetry from impurities in both form and content. He tried to eliminate prosaic elements from his poetry, and he enhanced musical beauty by setting tone and rhythm in order. All in all, Stevens attempted to make his poetry something like distilled water, which has no impurities except H₂O, and in order to produce it, he tried to cleanse his language.

Among a number of poems in *Harmonium*, "The Load of Sugar-Cane" reflects Stevens's struggle to make pure poetry. Though this beautiful poem is rarely discussed by critics, it shows how Stevens tried to create pure language and poésie:

The going of the glade-boat
Is like water flowing;

Like water flowing
Through the green saw-grass,
Under the rainbows;

Under the rainbows
That are like birds,
Turning, bedizened,

While the wind still whistles
As kildeer do,

When they rise
At the red turban
Of the boatman.

(CPP 10)

The poem reveals some characteristics of pure poetry: the arrangement of vivid, concrete images after the resistance of prosaic elements, resounding verbal music with flowing rhythms and refrains, and the autonomy of the beauty of language free from intellectual and moral sense. These elements evoke the purity of *poésie*. The first two lines may appear simple but are in fact brilliantly original. The ample use of such vowels as /ou/, /ei/, /a:/ indicates the deep and slow stream of the water, and the boat appears as if it floats on the stream of vowels. Noticeably, this drifting, smooth image is suddenly broken in the fourth stanza by such sharp consonants as /w/, /hw/, and /k/, making a sudden tonal and thematic change. Also, the semicolon at the end of the second line, while, of course, it indicates the slight stop of the flow of meaning, is placed as if to set the rhythm of the movement of an oar. The boat as a tenor is transvalued into the water as a vehicle, and while rhetorical assimilation between the boat and water is achieved, the boat disappears, and the reader's consciousness turns into water and flows with ease and freedom.

The refrain of the second stanza emphasizes the above assimilation, and our consciousness flows through the green saw-grass and under the rainbows. Here, actually, the green saw-grass and the rainbows also look assimilated, and the image of the leaves appears turned into rainbow colors by the dazzling light. This transvaluation of images is made possible by Stevens's tremendous poetic

power. In the third stanza the rainbows (i.e. saw-grass) which are recognized like a number of "turning, bedizened" birds yields an image of multiple colors mingling with the shades of flickering light. The light flickers because of the wind, so in the fourth stanza, "the wind still whistles."

The sudden change of the sound in the fourth stanza portends an omen, which leads to the sudden appearance of a red turban in the fifth stanza. The red turban is probably a symbol of the sun. Interestingly, the poem prepares a rhetorical trick at the end: just as the birds are startled by the red turban, the reader of the poem is designed to be awakened from a temporary imaginative dream, in which the reader was drifting like the water decorated with the rainbow colors of light. In all, starting with the scene of the glade-boat and returning to the appearance of the boatman, the poem reveals a cyclic vision, the vision of an arch which seems to rise like a rainbow over the water. The rainbows rise like the beautiful colors of birds, and in contrast with the weighty load of sugar-cane, the poetic imagination soars with the lightness of vivid beauty. That Stevens makes a beautiful imaginative world with limited materials is really admirable.

Interestingly, in a George Herbert's poem that I came across by chance, there were following lines:

Lovely enchanting language, sugar-cane,
Honey of roses, whither wilt thou fly?
("The Forerunners")

Herbert probably uses the "sugar-cane" as a symbol of the beauty of language. In the poem he says ironically that he may have to relinquish the earthy worth of poetic language in place of celestial grace. Stevens probably read this poem and mused over the metaphorical importance of poetic language. The metaphorical power of "sugar-cane" is autonomous and independent, and it cannot be negated. What was required for Stevens was to measure the load (power) of poetic language.

In *Harmonium*, "The Snow Man" is another splendid pure poem which reveals Stevens's concern with purity. This frequently discussed poem shows the extremity of Stevens's reductionist vision, and his investigation of absolute reduction is, in a way, a search for original form and content:

One must have a mind of winter
To regard the frost and the boughs
Of the pine-trees crusted with snow;

And have been cold a long time
To behold the junipers shagged with ice,
The spruces rough in the distant glitter

Of the January sun; and not to think
Of any misery in the sound of the wind,
In the sound of a few leaves,

Which is the sound of the land
Full of the same wind
That is blowing in the same bare place

For the listener, who listens in the snow,
And, nothing himself, beholds
Nothing that is not there and the nothing that is.

(CPP 8)

In this poem, Harold Bloom notes Stevens's efforts to eliminate pathos from his poetry. Bloom says that "no modern can write a poem without tropes of *pathos* dominating, yet he writes a poem that *seems* to exclude *pathos* or at least announces as its manifesto the intention of such an exclusion" (Bloom 56). What Bloom treats as a problem is that of pathetic fallacy, which, he insists, doomed the Romantic vision of Wordsworthian and Coleridgean "reflective" poetry. Of course, it is possible to read "The Snow Man" as an exemplar of the exclusion of pathos, but this poem can also be read more precisely as Stevens's search for absolute pure poetry.

About this poem, Stevens says in a letter (18 April 1944 to Hi Simmons) that "I shall explain The Snow Man as an example of the necessity of identifying oneself with reality in order to understand it and enjoy it" (L. 464). As Stevens says, the identification of self with reality is a crucial problem, but that is half the content of this poem. Bloom finds Stevens's persistent exploration of extreme perception revolutionary. He focuses on the verbal difference of Stevens's use of the words "regard" and "behold" in the first and second stanzas and explains in an Emersonian vein that "regard" can be considered as a negative trope of Fate while "behold," because of its pathetic tenor, is a positive trope of Power. Bloom finds the change of poetic content from Fate to Power in the poem and sees Stevens's revision of perception accomplished in the most reduced human figuration (Bloom 63). Bloom's reading seems idiosyncratic in a sense, but it reveals interesting points, displaying various literary sources and influences.

On the other hand, what should not be ignored is that the reduction of "The Snow Man" is closely associated with the purifying function of pure poetry and that reduction without purification makes impure poetry. Stevens knows that a simple reduction does not lead to purification. Therefore, in "The Snow Man" he uses such inorganic words as sound, wind, frost, and snow, and he keeps the identification of "one" and "listener" secret. The poem begins with the line that "One must have a mind of winter." What is "a mind of winter"? It is a psychologically independent and enclosed realm of the essence of winter. The essence of winter is purity and death. The pine-trees crusted with snow therefore signify the figuration of pure death. For Stevens, the pine-trees are the object of corporeal rapport, as he writes in the poem "In the Carolinas": "The pine-tree sweetens my body."

The first line of the second stanza is "And have been cold a long time." Why "a long time"? Does it make any difference if it is 'a short time'? The part should be "a long time"; otherwise, the poem would be totally different. Being cold a long time, the "One" of Stevens appears more involved in the world of death than, for instance, the speaker of Frost's "Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening," who attempts only a temporary intrusion into the world of death. In "The Snow Man," the sound of the wind and the sound of a few leaves are assimilated to give a touch of universality to the poésie of this poem. As Bloom does, it may be possible to read in the few leaves the connotations of various sources of such predecessors as Homer, Virgil, Dante, Milton, and Shelley (Bloom 59), yet that the image of death pervades the poem should not be ignored, and one is advised not to think that there is any misery in it. Why? Because death is universal, and it is exactly "the sound of the land." Stevens's "listener" listens to the universal sound of death and transforms himself into "nothing," and being nothing, he becomes transparent like Emerson's eyeball. As to transparency, Bloom says that it "had entered Stevens's poetry out of Emersonian tradition, where it had been an emblem of inspired perception" (Bloom 265). This transparency is the most purified condition of human perception, and the poem is deftly constructed to follow the process of purification from having "a mind of winter" to feeling "cold a long time" to eliminating intelligence ("not to think") to baring the mind and to "nothing himself." As if standing on the "bare place," the listener comes close to the most purified condition of mind—no joy, no fear, and no desire. This condition is a realm which even goes beyond the imagination to a world of absolute purity. Thus, "The Snow Man" goes through a process

of distillation to the ultimate discovery of a pure being.

IV

Stevens's next collection of poetry *Ideas of Order* appeared after more than a decade after *Harmonium*. During the long interval which produced no outstanding poetical work, Stevens continued to keep an interest in pure poetry. In July 1935 the Alcestis Press of Ronald Lane Latimer published a limited edition of *Ideas of Order*, and on the dust jacket of the book Stevens added an introductory statement of his poetic theory. He wrote, "The book is essentially a book of pure poetry. I believe that, in any society, the poet should be the exponent of the imagination of that society. *Ideas of Order* attempts to illustrate the role of the imagination in life, and particularly in life at present. The more realistic life may be, the more it needs the stimulus of the imagination." Stevens emphasized the role of the imagination, but was Stevens's idea of pure poetry in *Ideas of Order* similar to that of *Harmonium*? Some poems from this book need to be examined.

"Botanist on Alp (No. 1)" and "Botanist on Alp (No. 2)" are twin poems that reveal many interesting points of pure poetry. Each poem has its own different thematic meaning, yet by mutually influencing each other, they create a unique world of order. Nevertheless, what the titles mean is still difficult to solve:

Panoramas are not what they used to be.
Calude has been dead a long time
And apostrophes are forbidden on the funicular.
Marx has ruined Nature,
For the moment.

For myself, I live by leaves,
So that corridors of clouds,
Corridors of cloudy thoughts,
Seem pretty much one:
I don't know what.

But in Claude how near one was
(In a world that was resting on pillars,
That was seen through arches)
To the central composition,
The essential theme.

What composition is there in all this:
Stockholm slender in a slender light,
An adriatic *riva* rising,
Statues and stars,
Without a theme?

The pillars are prostrate, the arches are haggard,
The hotel is boarded and bare.
Yet the panorama of despair

Cannot be the specialty
Of this ecstatic air.

(CPP 109)

Claude most likely refers to Claude Lorraine (1600–1682), a French painter, who was noted for his mastery use of poetic light.⁶ In the history of French painting, he was the first to paint the sun from the front. The first stanza suggests that after the appearance of Claude the perception of sight changed. Rhetorics become useless in the face of the magnificent Alpine nature, though Marx certainly changed the interpretation of nature. His idea of nature is an object of exploitation which has consequently been deprived of transcendent meaning. It is well known that since the publication of *Ideas of Order* Stevens was often criticized by such Marxist critics as Stanley Burnshaw of the *New Masses* for his lack of consciousness of social matters and that in response to such criticism he wrote “Owl’s Clover.” Without doubt Stevens studied the effectiveness of social ideologies. In a letter to Henry Church (1 June 1939) Stevens wrote, “. . . pure poetry is rather older and tougher than Marx and will remain so” (L. 340).

The second stanza uses Romantic tropes to show the unity between nature and the speaker, a unity which commits a pathetic fallacy. The corridors of clouds come to be regarded as those of thoughts, and there is not much difference between the two. The “leaves” reminds one of those in “The Snow Man,” and there may be some associative implications. In the third stanza and thereafter, the uniqueness of Claude’s perception comes into focus, and his perception is described as extending beyond the simple fusion of an object and the mind. Claude’s profound attention is paid to “the central composition, / The essential theme.” What he paints is not the faithful representation of such objects as Stockholm, statues, stars, pillars, arches, and hotel but his impression of them. Through his eyes the “panorama of despair” begins to assume an “ecstatic air.” In order to attain a close, sensational, spiritual, and poetic connection

with nature, Claude actually discarded the faithful, imitative perception of objects and tried to achieve a pure liberation of feeling by evading or controlling conceptual and analytic thinking. His connection with nature was 'objective,' and he tried to discover and define the minute relationship between light and color. In his painting he always tried to bring the idea of authentic structure and the arrangement of colors and coating. These elements were studied with his profound intelligence and sensibility. Claude tried to examine a phenomenon at its extreme limit, and he held the idea that the phenomenon had an intimate relationship with an unknown reality. He believed that this unknown reality was not something detached from the reality of our world.

The "central composition" Stevens saw in Claude is the advanced form of pure perception, and it is a much deeper perception than a Romantic one endangered by pathetic fallacy. "Botanist on Alp (No. 1)" shows Stevens's poetic sympathy with Claude, and it reveals Stevens's efforts to learn how to express the profound entity of objects and how to obtain, for this purpose, a pure perception. Claude had an eye like Emerson's transparent one. Stevens says, "Conceptions are artificial. Perceptions are essential" (OP 191).

"Botanist on Alp (No. 2)" reveals Stevens's splendid imaginative power. In comparison with "Botanist on Alp (No. 1)," this poem is more refined and is full of Stevensian meditative tone:

The crosses on the convent roofs
Gleam sharply as the sun comes up.

What's down below is in the past
Like last night's crickets, far below.

And what's above is in the past
As sure as all the angels are.

Why should the future leap the clouds
The bays of heaven, brighted, blued?

Chant, O ye faithful, in your paths
The poem of long celestial death;

For who could tolerate the earth
Without that poem, or without

An earthier one, tum, tum-ti-tum,
As of those crosses, glittering,

And merely of their glittering,
A mirror of a mere delight?

(CPP 110)

Stevens in this poem is most likely endeavoring to describe the “essential theme” of “Botanist on Alp (No. 1)” by illustrating the crosses on the convent roofs. The image of the crosses is sharp and vivid almost like a picture. Prosaic elements are eliminated to the utmost, and solemn verbal music pervades the poem. Also the purification of the symbology of the crosses is accomplished by the sharp contrast between heaven and earth, and the crosses are endowed with a fresh meaning. The purity of the image is made possible by the careful choice of words. Very often the contrast between earth and heaven is a major theme for Stevens, as is beautifully described in “Sunday Morning.” But more clear-cut than “Sunday Morning” does, “Botanist on Alp (No. 2)” reveals a sharp difference in the elements of religion, poetry, transcendence, and reality.

First, Stevens examines the value of poetry, which he believes is essential to human life. For Stevens, the “poem of long celestial death,” which likely refers to religious chants, has a *raison d'être* as long as it helps humans to survive on the earth. Stevens does not deny the necessity of religious faith completely. But rather than the poem of celestial death, he seems to search for the poem of earthly life: in his words, “An earthier one.” He believes that the earthly poem can take the place of the celestial poem. Stevens says, “Poetry is a means of redemption” (OP 186), and in “A High-Toned Old Christian Woman” (CPP 47), he writes that “Poetry is the supreme fiction,” aligning supreme poetry with religion. The alignment is ultimately carried on to Stevens’s masterwork “Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction.” Yet in “Botanist on Alp (No. 2)” an irony remains if the crosses really shine as the symbol of religious faith or merely as the mirror of reflection. The last two lines of the poem suggest a matter-of-fact reality, negating a transcendence. It is possible to divest the crosses of traditional religious tropes, and when this is done, they begin to shine of their own accord. When the crosses are purified, a fresh chant of original life will be sung. In a letter, 28 October 1942, Stevens says: “If you take the varnish and dirt of generations off a picture, you see it in its first idea. If you think about the world without its varnish and dirt, you are a thinker of the first idea” (L. 426–27). The way to reach for the first idea is the process of purification, and an absolutely pure idea can be discovered and grasped only in pure poetry.

V

Stevens's interest in pure poetry furthermore persists through his later collections of poetry. In a letter to Hi Simons, 28 August 1940, touching on the content of "Owl's Clover" in *The Man with the Blue Guitar* (1937), Stevens stated that the "idea of pure poetry, essential imagination" is the "highest objective of the poet" and that it can be universal, "extended beyond local consciousness" (L. 369–70). Apparently, in *The Man with the Blue Guitar* Stevens aimed to write pure poetry and sought for the pure use of the essential imagination.

After *Harmonium* and *Ideas of Order*, what is crucial is that Stevens's idea of pure poetry developed and that the purifying power of pure poetry began to be increasingly emphasized. For Stevens, who aimed to reach the first idea, the purifying power of the imagination became an essential tool and a firm aesthetic basis for pure poetry. Briefly, his idea of pure poetry progressed from the early inherited concept of French pure poetry to the emphasis of its transformative and purifying force. Stevens's attention to the recreative and purifying power of the imagination is rightly a modern consciousness. Stevens says that "Poetry is a purging of the world's poverty and change and evil and death" (OP 193), emphasizing the purifying power of poetry. Though W. H. Auden, for instance, stated that 'poetry makes nothing happen,' Stevens believed in the recreative power of poetry: he says that poetry is "a Destructive Force" (CPP 178) and even possible to "kill a man" (CPP 178). The power of the imagination is powerful; so is its purifying power. The purifying process of the poetic imagination is, for instance, brilliantly described in the original version of *Owl's Clover* (1936):

To Be Itself,

Until the sharply-colored glass transforms
 Itself into the speech of the spirit, until
 The porcelain bell-borrowings become
 Implicit clarities in the way you cry
 And are your feelings changed to sound, without
 A change, until the waterish ditherings turn
 To the tense, the maudlin, true meridian
 That is yourselves, when, at last, you are yourselves,
 Speaking and strutting broadly, fair and bloomed. . . .

(CPP 575)

A physical, emotional, and spiritual transformation to the most purified form of entity is concisely described. That the colored glass can be transformed into the "speech of the spirit" suggests a verbal transfiguration, an object is internalized into the spirit, and what comes out of the spirit at the most intense moment in the form of poetic cry and sound assumes a high degree of clarity and liberation.

Stevens's interest in pure poetry does not flag either in the next collection *Parts of a World* (1942), which was published when he was at the age of 62. As seen above, Stevens's idea of pure poetry is profoundly connected with its transforming and purifying power, and this brilliant power also functions beautifully in this collection. One example is "The Poems of Our Climate," a poem which is probably the most important in this collection:

I

Clear water in a brilliant bowl,
Pink and white carnations. The light
In the room more like a snowy air,
Reflecting snow. A newly-fallen snow
At the end of winter when afternoons return.
Pink and white carnations—one desires
So much more than that. The day itself
Is simplified: a bowl of white,
Cold, a cold porcelain, low and round,
With nothing more than the carnations there.

II

Say even that this complete simplicity
Stripped one of all one's torments, concealed
The evilly compounded, vital I
And made it fresh in a world of white,
A world of clear water, brilliant-edged,
Still one would want more, one would need more,
More than a world of white and snowy scents.

III

There would still remain the never-resting mind,
So that one would want to escape, come back
To what had been so long composed.
The imperfect is our paradise.
Note that, in this bitterness, delight,
Since the imperfect is so hot in us,

Lies in flawed words and stubborn sounds.

(CPP 178–79)

Stevens does not simply illustrate the transforming and purifying power but recreates an image. The carnations in the bowl of fresh water is the most simplified and purified form of image. In such a static condition, however, Stevens asserts that “one desires / So much more than that.” Why does one desire more? Is not the most perfect form enough? What Stevens implies is that one cannot live too long in an extremely simplified and purified world. In other words, that perfect world is inhuman: though it is significant in its own perfectness, it is too perfect and absolute for humans, who have “the never-resting mind.” Overall, “The Poems of Our Climate” insists on the importance of the most delicate balance between the perfect and the imperfect, the pure and the impure; and in the precarious movement of the mind between these polarities, Stevens tries to search for a fresh poetic order. Stevens discovers that this can be found solely in the unity of the pure and the impure and that such elements are essential to the basic formation of the world; as he insists, “The imperfect is our paradise.”

Thus, the pure poetry of the early Stevens is rejected, and a fresh idea of pure poetry is established in his poetics. Stevens’s pure poetry is recreated in the profound perception of the most difficult and delicate balance of the extremes between the perfect and the imperfect and between the pure and the impure. This does not mean, of course, a decline in the quality of the perfection of Stevens’s poetry; it means a change of quality. *After Parts of a World*, the kind of pure poetry, which sought for absolute purity as in *Harmonium*, becomes less and less emphasized; and his new poetic world becomes much deeper and wider. “The Blue Buildings in the Summer Air,” for instance, is such an example, representing a unique example of the blend of purity and imperfection:

I

Cotton Mather died when I was a boy. The books
He read, all day, all night, and all the nights,
Had got him nowhere. There was always the doubt,
That made him preach the louder, long for a church
In which his voice would roll its cadences,
After the sermon, to quiet that mouse in the wall.

II

Over wooden Boston, the sparkling Byzantine
 Was everything that Cotton Mather was
 And more. Yet the eminent thunder from the mouse,
 The grinding in the arches of the church,
 The plaster dropping, even dripping, down,
 The mouse, the moss, the woman on the shore . . .

III

If the mouse should swallow the steeple, in its time . . .
 It was a theologian's needle, much
 Too sharp for that. The shore, the sea, the sun,
 Their brilliance through the lattices, crippled
 The chandeliers, their morning glazes spread
 In opal blobs along the walls and floor.

IV

Look down now, Cotton Mather, from the blank.
 Was heaven where you thought? It must be there.
 It must be where you think it is, in the light
 On bed-clothes, in an apple on a plane.
 It is the honey-comb of the seeing man.
 It is the leaf the bird brings back to the boat.

V

Go, mouse, go nibble at Lenin in his tomb.
 Are you not le plus pur, you ancient one?
 Cut summer down to find the honey-comb.
 You are one . . . Go hunt for honey in his hair.
 You are one of the not-numerable mice
 Searching all day, all night, for the honey-comb.

(CPP 196)

The transcendence of Mather's seemingly perfect theology is impaired by a taint of doubt about the celestial life. (Similarly, Emily Dickinson has a poem which expresses her doubt about heaven: "Narcotics cannot still the Tooth / That nibbles at the soul—" (#501).) In an ironical vein, the theological perfection is contrasted with the imperfect reality of the earth: heaven is compared with a church dilapidated by a mouse and moss, the sparkling Byzantine with wooden Boston, asceticism and the sexuality of a woman on the shore, the church's crippled chandeliers with the brilliant light of the shore, the sea, and the sun. Stevens says that heaven "must be where you think it is," and he emphasizes a

subjective vision. Because the subjective vision, like Noah's leaf, may bring a sign of heaven.

In the same tone, Leninism, which seems to be a perfect social idealism, is not flawless. Only the mouse, which Stevens says is the most primitive representative of earthy life, may be able to discover a sweet honey-comb. Stevens calls the mouse "le plus pur," and he regards the innate force of earthy life as best. In this poem, Stevens contrasts the perfect with the imperfect and the pure with the impure, and he presents an ironical image. The traditional orthodoxy of religion and isms is debunked by a simple animal of primitive force, and this ironical reversal may be called an instance of the American Sublime.

Stevens's vision of pure poetry develops further in the next collection *Transport to Summer* (1947). Despite his advanced age of 67, Stevens's creative energy seems unflagging. In the beautiful Keatsian poem "Credences of Summer," Stevens achieves the most exquisite and profoundest mixture of the perfect and the imperfect and of the pure and the impure—a rare blend of the imagination and reality. This poem is one of the heights of Stevens's meditative poems. First, Stevens urges one to have a pure perception: "Let's see the very think and nothing else. / Let's see it with the hottest fire of sight." Then one should see the "essential barrenness" and make it an eternal center, "green's green apogee." The world of such an ideal center is created as an actual reality:

One of the limits of reality
Presents itself in Oley when the hay,
Baked through long days, is piled in mows. It is
A land too ripe for enigmas, too serene.
There the distant fails the clairvoyant eye

And the secondary senses of the ear
Swarm, not with secondary sounds, but choirs,
Not evocations but last choirs, last sounds
With nothing else compounded, carried full,
Pure rhetoric of a language without words.

Things stop in that direction and since they stop
The direction stops and we accept what is
As good. The utmost must be good and is
And is our fortune and honey hived in the trees
And mingling of colors at a festival.

(IV CPP 323–24)

Stevens considers this part as one of his favorite sections in “Credences of Summer” (L.782). Oley is a town in the Oley Valley, Eastern Pennsylvania, where some of his mother’s ancestors, the Zellers, settled a long time ago, and this genealogical connection urged Stevens to compose a poem “The Bed of Old John Zeller.” Stevens became interested in genealogy around 1942, and his interest continued for the next ten years. In Stevens’s words, Oley is “a valley full of farms which was settled in part by Huguenots in the 17th Century. An accord with realities is the nature of things there” (L.719). In Oley, Stevens discovers “One of the limits of reality” and a harmonic unity between reality and imagination. As to this poem, Stevens says, “At the time when that poem was written my feeling for the necessity of a final accord with reality was at its strongest: reality was the summer of the title of the book in which the poem appeared” (L.719). In Oley, the real verges on the unreal, and ordinary visual and auditory senses become useless. What Stevens can hear is the “last choirs, last sounds,” which resound in the form of “Pure rhetoric of a language without words.” Briefly, Stevens hears the most refined sound of poetic music, which is the purest form of poésie. “The utmost” is perceived as good, and an absolute world is envisioned. His experiment with pure poetry in search of absolute purity is now perfected with the exquisite accord of reality and imagination. In the poem “Montrachet-le-Jardin” in *Parts of A World*, Stevens expressed his urge toward “an inaccessible, pure sound” (CPP 237), and now in “Credences of Summer” he achieves it.

That Stevens considers the delicate harmony of reality and imagination as more and more important in his idea of pure poetry can be seen in the other parts of *Transport to Summer*. For instance, he says that “To speak humanly from the height or from the depth / Of human things, that is acutest speech” (CPP 267), that “to be real each had / To find himself his earth, his sky, his sea” (CPP 276), that “The greatest poverty is not to live / In a physical world” (CPP 286), and that an abstraction must be “blooded” (CPP 333), because “the imagined” is “On the real” (CPP 339). Though Stevens’s attempt to acquire absolute purity is ceaseless, as seen in the poem “No Possum, No Sop, No Taters” [in the “savagest hollow of winter-sound,” “we reach / The last purity of the knowledge of good” (CPP 262)], the subtle alchemy of the delicate and pure blend of reality and imagination becomes Stevens’s major concern. The concern also persists in the following collection *The Auroras of Autumn* (1950), though this collection reflects more the meditative side of the poet. In the

poem "An Ordinary Evening in New Haven" (IX) Stevens reveals an ultimately pure integration of reality and imagination:

We keep coming back and coming back
To the real: to the hotel instead of the hymns
That fall upon it out of the wind. We seek

The poem of pure reality, untouched
By trope or deviation, straight to the word,
Straight to the transfixing object, to the object

At the exactest point at which it is itself,
Transfixing by being purely what it is,
A view of New Haven, say, through the certain eye,

The eye made clear of uncertainty, with the sight
Of simple seeing, without reflection. We seek
Nothing beyond reality. Within it,

Everything, the spirit's alchemicana
Included, the spirit that goes roundabout
And through included, not merely the visible,

The solid, but the movable, the moment,
The coming on of feasts and the habits of saints,
The pattern of the heavens and high, night air.

(CPP 402)

As already seen, in "Credences of Summer" Stevens focused on the purity of poetic language; yet in "An Ordinary Evening in New Haven" he pays more attention to the existence of pure reality beyond the language and objects. The "pure reality" Stevens envisions is close to the perception of the naked reality that William C. Williams advocated in his famous tenet of "contact," which aimed at establishing a direct contact with the reality of objects. Yet compared minutely, Stevens's sense of pure reality appears a little more detached from the direct expression of the naked entities of objects as Williams does. Stevens's world of pure reality is beyond, but not completely detached from, the realm of word and objects, and it contains everything of the universe, including the alchemy of the spirit. It is an autonomous world of *poésie*. The poem of pure reality transfixes "by being purely what it is," and the poem becomes the creative center of

the world. Like the jar placed in the wilderness of Tennessee, Stevens's poem of pure reality has universal dominions of order.

Stevens ultimately reaches the world of the sublime pure reality beyond the words and objects, and this is the height of his search for pure poésie in his pure poetry. Though his search for pure poésie seems to continue in the last collection *The Rock* (1954), he does not excel what he has already attained.

VI

In conclusion, Stevens's relationship with pure poetry is a complex yet central matter in his poetics. Through his long poetic career, he never lost his interest in pure poetry, and he continued to strive to write pure poetry. For Stevens, poetry meant pure poetry. When he started his career as a poet, he eagerly embraced the avant-garde ideas and techniques of poetry particularly from the French Symbolists and Imagist poets, and he developed his own idea of pure poetry. He absorbed various contemporary ideas of arts, including painting, and experimented with them in order to modernize his poetry. For one thing, he tried to discover the true entity of reality, purify it, and imprint it in poetry. For another, he used the method of reduction and decreation to get down to a fresh reality, aiming to purify poetic images by eliminating delusive illusions. With these efforts, he succeeded in making his poetry pure.

Stevens's idea of pure poetry develops from an imitative mode at an earlier stage to the problem of rhetorical and epistemological poetics in the middle and later stage of his career. At one time, he believed in the absoluteness of pure language, as expressed by "a beau language without a drop of blood" (CPP 274), yet later on he came to regard the pure reality of this world as important in the formative element of poetry. Above all, what Stevens ultimately aimed is to grasp and imprint the purity of the reality of the world, and he makes the exquisite pure blend of the reality and the imagination. The world of this exquisite blend, which usually lies beyond the reach of human reason can only be expressed in the absolute beauty and truth of pure poetry.

Notes

1. Only five sections of the poem (I, IV, V, VII, VIII) appeared in the issue.
2. Cited by Samuel French Morse, *Wallace Stevens: Poetry as Life* (N.Y.: Pegasus, 1970) 73.
3. *Letters of Wallace Stevens*, ed. Holly Stevens (Berkeley: U of California P, 1996) 340. Hereafter, the citations from this book will be indicated with the abbreviated L. with page numbers.
4. Paul Valéry, "Stéphane Mallarmé," *Œuvres* (Paris: Gallimard, 1957) 676-77.
5. Paul Valéry, "Avant-propos à la connaissance de la déesse," *Œuvres* (Paris: Gallimard, 1957) 1275-76.
6. I owe the identification of Claude to Professor Joseph Carroll at the University of Missouri, St. Louis, who kindly answered to my question. He referred me to the *Letters of Wallace Stevens*, in which Stevens says that "The Claude of THE BOTANIST is, of course, the painter and not the musician" (293). Also, according to Prof. Carroll, in the field of painting Claude invariably refers to Claude Lorrain, and the fact that Stevens is speaking of poetic landscapes helps confirm the supposition. See also Prof. Carroll's *Wallace Stevens's Supreme Fiction: A New Romanticism* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State UP, 1987), p. 70.

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