

INTRODUCTION

This study proposes to show that the poetry of Wallace Stevens points to a new, 'postmodern', phenomenological poetics and represents a significant shift in poetic sensibility that is manifesting itself in our times. This shift can be broadly understood in terms of poetry's movement away from the creation of a subjective realm of abstract and atemporal ideality toward the disclosure of the concrete richness of existence and its celebration of temporality. When the poetic self does not view the 'objective' world from the perspective of 'pure' subjectivity, but relocates itself in the circumambient world, its sense of the world changes radically. Instead of having the world in its 'inner', private reflections, it moves outward toward the discovery of the essential presence of the visible and tangible world, at once familiar and yet infinitely strange. In thus giving up the abstract, cognizing stance, the self is ultimately able to recover and reveal the inexhaustible plenitude of actual things and find its authentic dwelling amidst them.

The shift in poetic sensibility that Stevens' poetry illustrates is not only evident in other contemporary poets -- William Carlos Williams, René Char, Charles Olson, A.R. Ammons, to name a few, -- but is eminently reflected in the philosophical enquiry of the age, especially in that of the German philosopher Martin Heidegger. Heidegger's 'destruction' of the

Western logocentric metaphysical tradition points to a new, phenomenological hermeneutics — an interpretive thinking that is grounded not in absolute subjectivity but in the facticity and historicity of the world. It is thus revelatory not of the isolated consciousness but of the world that precedes consciousness. Hermeneutics, for Heidegger, is a theory of ontological disclosure. It makes manifest the essential integrity and interiority of things; it lets things be what they are. Heidegger's radical notion of human understanding provides modalities that are helpful in elucidating and formulating the poetic affirmations of a poet like Stevens.

In his preface to The Necessary Angel, a collection of essays on poetry, Stevens says that he had "nothing but the most ardent ambitions"¹ to contribute to the theory of poetry. He did not mean, of course, "one more Ars Poetica having to do, say, with the techniques of poetry" (NA, viii). But he believed that "one function of the poet at any time is to discover by his own thought and feeling what seems to him to be poetry at that time" (NA, vii). Stevens' entire corpus, his poetry, his essays and his letters, are an unending meditation on the nature and function of poetry in our times. Stevens, unlike any other poet of the age, singlemindedly addresses himself in all his poetic writing to creating an understanding of poetry that will suffice. As he said, "the theory of poetry" is "the life of poetry" (CP, 486). For him writing poetry and writing about poetry, that is, poetry and poetics are indistinguishable. The affirmations of poetry that emerge from his Collected Poems, taken together

with the seminal ideas in The Necessary Angel, the aphoristic utterances in Adagia and the insights into the nature of poetry that he chose to share with others in his Letters are thus a concentrated effort to create a new poetics that is of and for our times.

Stevens' poetry, and his thinking about poetry, originate from a deeply felt need and desire to return to earth, to discover things as they essentially are. Stevens envisions his poet to be "the necessary angel of earth" in whose sight we "see the earth again" (CP, 496). A return to earth in its integral unity, a return to "pure reality" (CP, 471), however, demands a complete reorientation of one's way of perceiving it. Poetry certainly cannot be either a naturalistic representation of the external world nor an idealistic transformation of the existential into an atemporal reflection. It cannot, in other words, take the existential mystery for granted by turning it into abstract images. Reality, says Stevens, is "a land beyond the mind" (CP, 252), something "wholly other" (CP, 237),² the spatio-temporal world that is prior to, and independent of, the mind's representations of it. Poetry, then, must direct itself to, what Stevens calls, the "decreation" (NA, 175) of all our habitual ways of seeing things, all our conceptual and metaphorical encrustations that cover and conceal the primordial, independent reality, so that we may retrieve and discover things in their individual wholeness.

It is in this pre-conceptual world that the poetic self

must ground itself. Stevens shows his misgivings about the self that is conceived as a "sovereign ghost" (CP, 27), an abstract, transcendent subjectivity that assumes superiority over things and deprives them of their existential richness by locating their truth in the inner self. Instead, he introduces a self that is "composed / Of the external world" (CP, 51), that is, a self that is embedded in the world and is defined only in terms of its belonging to the world. Instead of viewing the 'objective' world from outside it, the self steps "barefoot into reality" (CP, 423) and encounters and experiences things in their living immediacy. The creative act, consequently, does not involve a transformation of things into a realm outside the flux of time and natural space. It is rather a fuller realization, a becoming manifest, of the presence of actual and tangible things, of the mystery of the uttermost concreteness. The function of poetry, for Stevens, is no less or other than this phenomenological/ontological disclosure.

The supreme importance of poetry lies in that without it we have no real access to things. It is only in and through poetry that things disclose themselves, and so come to exist more fully. Poetry, in other words, is an existential act, "Part of the res itself and not about it" (CP, 473), for it is in poetry that things first come to be and are. It is this relationship between poetry and ontology, between the creation of fiction and the revelation of reality that is central to Stevens' thinking on poetry. Poetry and reality, words and things, cease to be antithetical. They become simultaneous and identical. In Stevens' words, "as and is are one" (CP, 476).

Stevens' emphasis on reality, his idea of 'decreation', his conception of the poetic self and his notion of the simultaneity of poetry and reality point to the essential phenomenological nature of his poetic thinking. His poems, intuitively realized, are 'notes toward' this new poetics.

Stevens' poetry thus moves beyond the earlier poetic tradition and its notion of aesthetic consciousness as pure and transcendent subjectivity which transforms the temporal process of the world into its abstract, atemporal creations. It introduces, at the same time, a more originary notion of creative activity that is capable of preserving and disclosing the temporal existence in all its rich concreteness. It marks as important a shift in the tradition of poetry as that accomplished by Coleridge or Valéry. It distinguishes itself from both Romantic and Modernist poetry, for it rejects the Romantic notion of the imagination that imbues the world with a deep subjective value as well as the Modernist notion of the imagination that either denies or redeems the independent existence of the world by transmuting it under the created gestalt of the self. It rejects, in other words, the epistemological structure of the imagination conceived as absolute subjectivity and the consequent subject-object duality that define both Romantic and Modernist poetry. In the process, it develops a new poetics that responds to, and celebrates, the independence of reality and employs the creative imagination for the discovery of the mystery of the familiar, of what Stevens calls the "infinite of the actual" (CP, 451).

Far from creating an ideal or transcendent realm, separate from our shared, historic existence, it roots us back in it and helps us to see the earth again in its rich plenitude. In thus moving away from the abstract, spatializing poetic stance and introducing a more radical, temporal stance, Stevens' poetry is able to reveal, ultimately, the essential identity of poetry and reality.

This study is in three parts. The first part attempts to formulate the basic affirmations of Stevens' phenomenological poetics in the context of Heidegger's thinking. The second part, which forms the main body of the study, is devoted to a detailed discussion of Stevens' poetic works, as an illustration of the affirmations developed in the first part. The third part, by way of conclusion, attempts to place Stevens' poetry in the larger context of the Romantic and Modernist poetic tradition and show how it moves beyond it. Stevens' poetry appears to be difficult and has been variously interpreted by critics. By showing the essential phenomenological nature of his poetry this study hopes to offer one way of approaching the important and major poems of Stevens so that they make sense both individually and in the context of the total corpus of his writing.