



***Not at the Centre of a Diamond:  
How the Paradoxical Relationship Between Reality  
and Imagination Works in Wallace Stevens’  
“Esthetique du Mal”***

Jackie Deskovich  
Monmouth College

*One of Wallace Stevens’ main concerns in his poetry was the relationship between imagination and reality. This relationship is complicated because it is paradoxical and the worlds seem to run in conflict with each other more often than not. This article looks at how that conflict is expressed through other paradoxes—mostly those of pain and language – within the poem “Esthetique du Mal.” Analyzing “Esthetique” as a whole can illuminate the major themes addressed in the work. This article posits that by confronting the paradoxes in the poem, Stevens shows the true nature of existing in the world as it is. Despite a painful world, joy can be found according to this interpretation of “Esthetique du Mal.”*

In *The Necessary Angel*, Wallace Stevens claims that “imagination is the power of the mind over the possibility of things” (136). He believed that imaginative power was intrinsic and that the imagination was vital (Stevens 146). By giving such power to the imagination and conceiving of it as its own entity, Stevens saw the dichotomy between imagination and the physical world that has so often been explored by philosophers and artists alike. Reality is the physical, the material, the sensual, the bodily, the natural, the actual; imagination the ephemeral, the incorporeal, the thoughtful, the spiritual, the invented, the possible. Reality, especially because of those attributes of physicality, will always have imperfections categorized by pain, suffering, and evil, and for Stevens, the imagination becomes a way to combat those imperfections. However, that combative ability does not allow the imagination to overtake reality and therefore eradicate pain; nothing allows for an overtaking of reality. That establishes a tension that creates both imperfection in the world and a sense of paradise that we should enjoy (Riddel “Visibility” 483). That tension is fully explored in the poem “Esthetique du Mal” through the familiar narrative structures of parable, myth, ancient and modern history, and philosophical speculation. The tense but symbiotic relationship between reality and imagination

proves to be a paradoxical conflict that attests to the fact that a world without one realm or the other could not exist.

Within the fifteen smaller poems that make up the poem as a whole, the conflicting relationship between reality and imagination is explored in a number of different ways. Stevens' poem is really a series of paradoxes but none are greater than the major conflict of the poem, the tension between imagination and reality. Because this is the great struggle of the poem, I will refer to it as the sole "conflict," whereas the others remain minor paradoxes within the central conflict. Stevens addresses all of those paradoxes in order to fully explain the conflict between reality and imagination. The biggest paradox shown in the poem is the existence of pain. Because pain is something that man strives so hard to get away from, and because it sends him inward into self-pity or outward for absolution, pain becomes so integral to human life that without it man would not exist. Pain does not see, as Stevens puts it, "that which rejects it saves it in the end" ("Esthetique du Mal" ii 21).

That connection is also shown through an exploration of the paradox of language. Expressing things through language changes reality only by changing perception, and changing perception does not truly change anything material. Despite the inability to alter reality, or perhaps *because* of the ability to alter perception, language helps create pain, or at least makes it register as a negative sensation instead of simply a natural, neutral one. Still, expressing pain through language, that is, attempting to give it meaning, is the only way to overcome pain. This idea seems both utterly nonsensical and perfectly logical simultaneously and receives meditative treatment from Stevens in the poem. This paradox is embraced because it is an inescapable part of the world in which we exist.

The exploration of that paradox begins within the title itself. Titling the poem in French signals that the reader might look to French for a connotation of "esthetique" since it seems to be the more ambiguous term; "mal" is always a sort of badness and therefore is easier to pinpoint. The reason for an aesthetic of evil needs an explanation to most readers. Studying the French Symbolists and Post-Symbolists leads Stevens to a sense of the aesthetic as the highest means available for an artist to express himself, and thus the most human of human activities (Riddel "Visibility" 482). Making something artistic or beautiful is a human drive toward expression. "Aesthetic" is not simply beauty in this context though; it is also perceptiveness (Bloom 226). With this idea of perception, the fragmentary style of the poem can be justified again; the title of the poem could literally be "perceptions of evil." The necessity of evil is one of the major components of the conflict between reality and imagination.

The poem lends itself to another reading of "esthetique". A necessary evil fits the reading of aesthetic as a sense of rightness, "a sense of place," that develops from our relationship with nature (Bates 178). That sense of rightness is just a sense of appropriateness, a sense that Milton J. Bates equates with a sense of territory, similar to what we would feel when we arrived at a place we

considered our home (178). Reading the title in this way goes directly to the point that the poem is attempting to make. With the title, Stevens postulates that pain and evil and suffering are meant to be in our world; they are natural and necessary for how we live. The problem is that this connotation of “esthetique” is a rather esoteric one, so the title remains abstruse to most readers, making “Esthetique” easier to dismiss as “random” or “pretentious.”

In “Esthetique’s” first poem, Stevens more overtly initiates all the themes that will be explored in the the work by introducing pain and therefore grounding the poem:

He was at Naples writing letters home  
And, between letters, reading paragraphs  
On the sublime. Vesuvius had groaned  
For a month. It was pleasant to be sitting there  
While the sultriest fulgurations, flickering,  
Cast corners in the glass. He could describe  
The terror of the sound because the sound  
Was ancient. He tried to remember the phrases: pain  
Audible at noon, pain torturing itself,  
Pain killing pain on the very point of pain.  
The volcano trembled in another ether,  
As the body trembles at the end of life. (i 1-12)

The main character, usually seen as a scholar or poet, is traveling in Italy and is reading the Romantics (Bertholf 675). His choice of reading shows the importance of seeking the sublime, especially through art, which Stevens develops as a theme throughout “Esthetique.” Even while seeking the sublime, the poet is grounded in the physical world: it is oppressively hot in the city of Naples, something indicated not only by the use of “sultry” but also by the alliterative fricatives of “fulgurations, flickering” which are used to slow the line down much as summer heat seems to slow down the world (i 5). Those flashes from Vesuvius tie both the past and present together. In 1944, Vesuvius erupted after being dormant for decades and for days spilled ash and smoke and eventually a river of lava that engulfed San Sebastian, so those fulgurations are images of pain happening in the present (Bates 169). Yet, that groaning is described as “ancient,” showing an archetypal terror. It is not only the present pain that is shown in those fulgurations, but the eruption of Vesuvius in Classical times as well. By describing the terror as “ancient” and referencing the past eruption, Stevens shows one of the paradoxical divides only minimally addressed in the poem: the divide between past and present. The past affects the perception of the present, but it does not really change the present; as Stevens stated himself in an earlier poem “the dead know that the past is not part of the present” (“Dutch Graves in Bucks County”). Neither past nor present can change the other, but they both depend upon and influence each other by being viewed from the lenses of the other. But the poet in the café is not feeling the pain of those present people in the town surrounding Vesuvius or the terror of

those ancient people; he is enjoying the sight of the fulgurations and the atmosphere in Naples. However, the stanza is still grounded in the physical world, articulating the body, when the repetition of the word “pained” is paired with visceral verbs such as “torture” and “kill” (i 11,9,10). The last two lines of the stanza tie the body and that terrifying volcano together, equating their trembling, in order to embody terror and give it meaning.

That same command to think of the body is present in the second stanza as well, but the blasé, rather than the catastrophic, is juxtaposed with the sublime:

It was almost time for lunch. Pain is human.  
There were roses in the cool café. His book  
Made sure of the most correct catastrophe.  
Except for us, Vesuvius might consume  
In solid fire the utmost earth and know  
No pain (ignoring the cocks that crow us up  
To die). This is a part of the sublime  
From which we shrink. And yet, except for us,  
The total past felt nothing when destroyed (i 13-21)

The very first line goes from food to pain, both bodily things, but very different bodily things. This first line also reminds the reader that despite the previous stanza’s big and wide-ranging ideas, the poem is still localized in a café in Naples at midday. The poet is still living his mundane life regardless of his intellectual ideas and regardless of any pain going on around him. Reminding the audience of that with “it was almost time for lunch,” Stevens then moves abruptly to the declaration that “Pain is human” (i13). By placing those two declarative, factual sentences together, Stevens makes sure that we recognize the second half of the line as a reminder; just as we know that food is a necessary part of living, we must recognize that pain is as well. It also prompts us to recognize that this specific mundane life contains pain; it is not only the pain that is related to recalling epic events such as Vesuvius’ eruption, it is also the pain that this hungry poet feels.

That historic pain is once again explored in this stanza, but this time it is more explicitly made part of the sublime. The consumptive destructiveness of Vesuvius itself feels no pain, and in the last bit of the stanza it is said that “the total past felt nothing when destroyed” so the only thing that does feel pain is “us” (i 21). The past cannot feel pain because it is the past; it is done, and the only feelings it can have are feelings imbued upon it by those in the present, so any pain felt in the past is really pain felt by us. “Except for us” is repeated in lines 16 and 20 and both instances are used to contrast us with those who feel no pain, Vesuvius itself and the whole of the past, leading to the conclusion that it *must* be us who feel the pain. Though we may shy away from pain, it is part of the sublime according to line 19. We do not think we need to feel the pain because “[the poet’s] book /made sure of the most correct catastrophe;” art apparently allows us to feel some sort of certainty about big events, especially bad events, and that certainty is a way of giving them mean-

ing. That certainty, however, also means that we can miss certain human experiences, either in the mundane or in the catastrophic, and the poem reminds us to attend to both.

That certainty is gained through not just art, but language. This idea returns to the paradox of language that helps explore the conflict of imagination and reality at the heart of the poem. That paradox is examined here with the parenthetical “(ignoring the cocks that crow us up/ To die)” (l 18-19). One way of reading this line is simply that Vesuvius is ignoring the roosters that are waking people up, which shows how unfeeling nature is in regards to mankind and therefore how painful existence can be. Another way of reading this statement is to define “ignoring” as “except.” The hypothesis that we are the only people to feel pain is in that way tweaked, then; the roosters may feel pain as well but that pain is dismissed by Stevens, as shown by the parentheses. This dismissal may occur because of the roosters’ inability to express pain through language— yes, they can crow, but that is not an expression of personality or feeling in the same way language is, and their crowing is to wake us up. Language may not be able to change anything other than perception, but pain as a sensation is truly only considered pain through perceiving it as a negative, so language changes pain. Pain is a natural occurrence, yet it is something from which man shies away because it is perceived as bad. The rooster, because it is not a sentient being like man is, cannot perceive of pain in such a manner, so in some respect, it does not really feel pain. However, that pain is only “ignored,” which does not necessarily mean unfelt; it is simply that Stevens implies that it is unfelt by dismissing the roosters’ pain. With this one parenthetical line, Stevens shows that he has thought through the relationship between pain and language and come to no real conclusion other than the fact that the relationship is a natural conundrum caused by the intersection of reality and imagination.

In poems two through four, Stevens uses the symbol of the moon as well as allusions to Dante and Beethoven to demonstrate how insufficient it is to try to order the world by strictly either imagination or materiality when the worlds that exist inextricably ties the world of imagination and the world of reality, is inextricable. However, man still feels the need to order the world and seeks for order in searching for a way to live. The fifth poem contrasts those insufficiencies by showing the combination of those two poles.

Instead of simply explaining the incorrect ways to live—overbalancing reality against imagination, for instance—Stevens begins, in poem five, to move towards showing a better way to exist. The poem shows the irony and futility of attempting to exist in an incorporeal world alone because of the strong and lovely connection between it and the physical world. He starts this illustration with an allative call:

Softly let all true sympathizers come,  
Without the inventions of sorrow or the sob  
Beyond invention. Within what we permit,  
Within the actual, the warm, the near,

So great a unity, that it is bliss,  
 Ties us to those we love. For this familiar,  
 This brother even in the father's eye,  
 This brother half-spoken in the mother's throat  
 And these regalia, these things disclosed,  
 These nebulous brilliancies in the smallest look  
 Of the being's deepest darling, we forego  
 Lament, willingly forfeit the ai-ai  
 Of parades in the obscurer selvages. (v 1-13)

He asks for “true sympathizers” to come without any ostentation. He does not want any emotions that are invented, only emotions that are true. Stevens expresses the idea that there needs to be no invention in the next four lines, stating that there already exists such a strong and lovely connection within the real that one does not need to be invented or imagined. The familiarity of what we love allows us to forget affectation and to show affection. But this true affection is not without its own ties to ephemerality; the things that can bring about these emotions can be “regalia,” “things disclosed” or “nebulous brilliancies” (v 9,10). “Regalia,” without the ceremonial meaning with which man imbues them, are just robes and objects and it is what those robes mean that reminds us of the “familiar”; “Things disclosed,” without needing to be present and physical, are just facts known and it is what those facts mean that remind us of the “familiar”; “nebulous brilliancies,” without being physical or real at all, are just clouds and it is what we see in those clouds that remind us of the “familiar.” These imaginatively imbued things can create real connection and by using them in this stanza, Stevens illustrates how impossible it is to exist in simple reality without imagination or invention even when venerating physical reality. Even though invention may be a “lie,” it is a necessary lie (Tate 108).

The enjambment of that catalogue of things that cause connection across the stanzas highlights the emotionally overwrought “ai-ai” at the end of line 12 and acts as a way for Stevens to transition into the next stanza. By using “selvages,” Stevens indicates that all of those things tied with the familiar are the things that keep us from unraveling. However, “selvages” also invites misprision, which calls attention to the idea of a “self” as opposed to the “we” that has represented mankind in general at the end of line 13. With that misprision, Stevens marks the move towards more of a duality of the “you and I” sort, “selves” and not only “selvages.” This duality happens briefly only to allow a more nuanced interpretation of the second stanza of the poem:

Be near me, come closer, touch my hand, phrases  
 Compounded of dear relation, spoken twice,  
 Once by the lips, once by the services  
 Of central sense, these minutiae mean more  
 Than clouds, benevolences, distant heads.  
 These are within what we permit, in-bar  
 Exquisite in poverty against the suns

Of ex-bar, in-bar retaining attributes  
 With which we vested, once, the golden forms  
 And the damasked memory of the golden forms  
 And ex-bar's flower and fire of the festivals  
 Of the damasked memory of the golden forms,  
 Before we were wholly human and knew ourselves. (v 14-26)

That move toward a duality of two people mirrors a move toward the more physical as well, as attention is now drawn to proximity. Drawing attention to proximity allows Stevens to address the senses more fully. It is not only the lips that give these commands, but also the “central sense” and that gives them even more power. These ideas are not just spoken, but are rather communicated by means other than words as well. This confuses Stevens’ earlier dismissal of a feeling that was unexpressed by language, but that confusion shows how nothing can truly be dismissed because we live in a world of resemblances, that is, the combined world of the imagination and world of reality, not simply a world of one or the other. This fifth poem in “Esthetique” can also be seen as being from a completely different perspective than the first poem. This acknowledgment would eliminate the confusion since the poem can be read as fifteen different meditations on pain, and reality and the imagination. Even with a change of perspective, we are still within the world of resemblances, so those unspoken commands and the connections they cause are “the minutia that mean more/ than clouds, benevolences, distant heads” because of the fact that they are grounded in reality, not solely imagined (v 17,18). Since they are “within what we permit” they are part of the “in-bar,” the central sense or subjective self (v 19; Bertholf 678; Riddel “Metaphysical” 71). Those minutia are then able to stand out in opposition to inventions or coverings of the external world, the “ex-bar” (v 21; Bertholf 678; Riddel “Metaphysical” 71). Stevens asserts that the attributes man gave to the things of the real world before we were self-conscious were the same attributes that man had and continues to have, reminding the reader of the inability to change human nature. That assertion also adds to the slight contradiction of poem one’s allegation that self-awareness or sentience creates meaning, when man was capable of infusing reality with meaning “before [he was] wholly human and knew [himself]” (v 26). Contradiction adds another layer to the conflict of the two worlds, and shows a perspective focused on the power of imagination, as in poem one, and another on the power of reality, here in poem five.

Moving from these sorts of assertions and contradictions, the sixth and seventh poems turn to parable to make the points that have been set up in “Esthetique” so far. In poem six, the imperfection of the natural world is addressed more fully. The paradox of language is further explored by using only metaphor to show the imperfection of the natural world. Then in poem seven, a soldier’s wound is ironically symbolized by a “red rose” which allows, in some ways, for the parable to be interpreted as an affirmation of the potential for an aesthetic value to suffering as well as the sense of rightness that suffering has been given previously in the poem (vii 1). The last stanza of the para-

ble supports this reading with the line “his wound is good because life was,” which shows the ability of the imagination to alter the perception of reality (vii 17). This last stanza hints that perhaps by altering the perception of reality, reality itself can be altered if perhaps only after death.

That ability of the imagination to alter reality appears more explicitly in poem eight, where the imagination is elevated with an unequivocal power:

The death of Satan was a tragedy  
For the imagination. A capital  
Negation destroyed him in his tenement  
And, with him, many blue phenomena.  
It was not the end he had foreseen. He knew  
That his revenge created filial  
Revenues. And negation was eccentric.  
It had nothing of the Julian thunder-cloud:  
The assassin flash and rumble . . . He was denied.  
Phantoms, what have you left? What underground?  
What place in which to be is not enough  
To be? You go, poor phantoms, without place  
Like silver in the sheathing of the sight,  
As the eye closes . . . (viii 1-14)

Riffing on Thomas Carlyle’s idea of the “everlasting yea” and “no,” Stevens says that “a capital negation” destroys Satan (viii 2-3). Reading the character Satan literally makes God the “capital negation” that destroys him and makes Satan himself the everlasting yea in opposition. This literal reading supposes a Miltonic figure of Satan who is the first to imagine something different, something other than constantly worshipping God. Milton’s Satan knows his imaginings have consequences and those consequences move outwardly, “eccentrically,” but he could not foresee such an extreme denial as the one he receives (viii 7). He and his phantoms are cast from Heaven and into Hell. Stevens asks “What place in which to be is not enough/ To be?” and both Heaven and Hell can be thought of as a place like that; neither place is enough—Heaven because it allows for no imagination when it is run by the immortal nay that is God and Hell because it technically is still just a void (viii 11-12). Because of this, the “poor” phantoms leave like light does when the eye closes (viii 12). This imagery grounds the characters in a sensory experience, while at the same time, the use of metaphor brings the world into the symbolic experience, again showing how closely entwined the two worlds are. The “many blue phenomena” distance the poem from just a literal reading because the phrase is not specific enough to represent any sort of real character, unless one reads them as angels “destroyed” with Satan (viii 4, 3). More suggestively, however, what may be “destroyed” is imagination itself, hinted at by Stevens’ use of blue to represent the imagination in much of his poetry (Beckett 74). This suggestion of a historical literary reference with Milton’s Satan further shows the influ-



ence of the past upon the present and the present upon the past.

The caesura that continues the stanza as marked by the ellipsis in line 14 echoes the closing of the eyes that symbolize the leaving of those phantoms. The world of the poem and the poem itself have changed because of that leaving in the space of the ellipsis, much like the world has changed via perception and time by the closing of the eyes. It also makes this transition from allegorical story to simple observance more obvious.

The second half of line 14 begins to move the stanza from the specific story of Satan to the general idea of a world without imagination:

[...] How cold the vacancy  
When the phantoms are gone and the shaken realist  
First sees reality. The mortal no  
Has its emptiness and tragic expirations.  
The tragedy, however, may have begun,  
Again, in the imagination's new beginning,  
In the yes of the realist spoken because he must  
Say yes, spoken because under every no  
Lay a passion for yes that had never been broken. (viii 14-22)

Lines 14-16 make it much easier to see Satan symbolizing the imagination as a whole; the switch from Satan to “the shaken realist” now allows the reader to place herself in the poem since it has returned to a more recognizably human world (viii 15). That recognizable world is not a happy one, however. When the imagination is gone, the world is cold and empty, because man is forced to view reality simply as is. Categorizing the realist as “shaken” shows just how integral the imagination is to the world; even one who thinks he sees the world for what it is, a “realist,” becomes rattled when imagination is stripped away (vii 15). There is no room for possibility when there is no imagination, so the lack of possibility that is “the mortal no” has power. Yet, there is no way for that imagination-free world to exist. Even in a world without a representative Satan, the imagination has a new beginning. Even “the shaken realist” must give in to the immortal yea and say “yes” to the phantoms of imagination because there is absolutely no way not to do so. That proclivity to give in and say yes can be seen as a confirmation of the “aesthetic,” or rightness, of the imagination, even though it is aligned with the negative nature of Satan and his phantoms in this poem (Bates 171). There can be no way to live in a world that has no potential for difference, which is what imagination gives us, and there can be no way to extricate the imagination from the real world.

After extensively looking at the horror of a world without imagination, Stevens moves on to explain exactly what the mind can do in the real world. In the ninth poem, Stevens once again asserts that the imagination’s power to imbue meaning is only important in conjunction with the sensual world. The tenth poem displays man’s drive to return to reality, which is shown by his “studying” of “nostalgias,” according to Frank A. Doggett (x 1;

Doggett [1958] 40). That drive toward reality is also a drive toward the imperfect since nostalgia can only imperfectly and harshly recreate an absent past, showing exactly how the past can affect the present.

The eleventh poem also looks at the harshness of the world by playing on expectation, the heart of the relationship between the imagination and reality:

Life is a bitter aspic. We are not  
At the centre of a diamond. At dawn,  
The paratroopers fall and as they fall  
They mow the lawn. A vessel sinks in waves  
Of people, as big-bell billows from its bell  
Bell-bellow in the village steeple. Violets,  
Great tufts, spring up from buried houses  
Of poor, dishonest people, for whom the steeple,  
Long since, rang out farewell, farewell, farewell. (xi 1-9)

Stevens begins this poem with two related declarations that show the darkness of the world via metaphor; life is bitter, not shiny and beautiful, and it is malleable, not inflexible. There is no way to exist in diamond enclosed “crystal isolation” from a world where pain occurs (Bertholf 685). Yet somehow, since Stevens must remind us “pain is human,” it seems as though mankind expects to live in a world where it does not need to experience pain; because that utopia can be imagined, we expect to be able to achieve it (i 13). Those gaps between expectation and reality are shown in the images of the last seven lines of the stanza. The vision of the paratroopers falling is associated with war, but as those paratroopers are falling they are mowing the lawn. This idea is so disjunct from our expectation that we are returned to the idea of the extreme and mundane coexisting. More importantly this disjunction jars the reader in order to remind her that expectation, when dealing with the sense of sight, cannot be trusted. The same is true for the sense of hearing, as shown by the example of the sound of the bells heralding not anything pleasant, but rather the sinking of a ship. That image toys with the reader doubly because of the enjambment of lines 4 and 5; by breaking the sentence at “waves” the image seems fairly obvious and vaguely sad, but when it is shown that the ship is sinking in “waves/ of people” (my emphasis), that sadness is less vague and more horrifying. In order to draw attention to sound, Stevens also plays with language here, repeating the phonemes of /bell/ or /bill/ five times within one line, which causes the reader to pay attention to, and which also mimics, the engulfing quality of the waves (xi 5,6). The final gap in expectation comes from the last image of violets, which, like all flowers, tend to be associated with beauty. Violets also specifically give the connotation of honesty, loyalty, and innocence because of their association with Ophelia. However, these violets that spring up in great tufts are growing on the graves of “poor, dishonest people” (xi 8). The three examples show how our expectations can lead to disappointment or pleasant surprise, demonstrating the ambivalent nature of imagination.

The expectations noted above spring from man's ability to imagine, a power only increased by language. Language has the ability to change the perception of reality, not only for ourselves—imagination's purview—but also for others, and that power is shown by the next two lines of the poem: "Natives of poverty, children of Malheur/ The gaiety of language is our seigneur" (xi 10-11). With this line, Stevens posits that people suffering have one sure way to alter their situation and that is language, even though earlier in poem one of "Esthetique" the inability to use language was what may have saved the rooster from pain. Because of the ability of language to alter a situation, language becomes "our seigneur," our lord; it is a lord both in the sense of owning and controlling and the sense of doling out rights and abilities. Language is one of the most powerful ways to express anything, including suffering, but the limitations of it, which own and control us in a way, are vast. Language may be able to alter perception, but it does not actually alter reality. Despite the difference in signifier, the signified stays the same; the imagined as expressed through language changes, while the real remains. The paradox of language lies at the heart of poem eleven and is made more explicit in order to give a perfect example of the power of the imagination.

Within the next stanza, those limits are recognized:

A man of bitter appetite despises  
A well-made scene in which paratroopers  
Select adieux; and he despises this:  
A ship that rolls on a confected ocean,  
The weather pink, the wind in motion; and this:  
A steeple that tip-tops the classic sun's  
Arrangements; and the violets' exhumo. (xi 12-18)

This "bitter man" is not one with whom we as readers identify, because for ten stanzas, we have identified ourselves with the poet, who by trade cannot despise language, and we do not want to be bitter; we may be the "shaken realist" from poem eight but that means we have said yes in the face of suffering, and this bitter man obviously has not. This stanza contrasts the previous stanza showing gaps in expectation by playing out the expectations of what we might have hoped to see: soldiers lovingly saying goodbye, ships sailing in pink weather, and violets in the sun. All the images are reimagined to be beautiful instead of oddly terrifying by the change of description; that reimagining is what "the bitter man" despises because nothing is truly changed. This is simply "a well-made scene" whereas the images in the previous stanza are associated with the reality of life, which shows that nothing has truly changed (xi 13). By placing these stanzas together, we see language's abilities and its limitations. Language changes things by altering perceptions but that means language cannot give us ultimate reality; if things can constantly be reimagined through language, then language cannot express an ultimate truth. This idea adds a layer to the already established paradox of language.

This new layer is addressed in the last stanza of the poem:

The tongue caresses these exacerbations.  
They press it as epicure, distinguishing  
Themselves from its essential savor,  
Like hunger that feeds on its own hungriness. (xi 19-22).

The “exacerbations” refer to the toying Stevens has done with images via language previously in the poem, which means that grammatically the “they” in line 20 refers to the same toying, since “exacerbations” is the only antecedent available in the poem. “Exacerbations” press the tongue as “epicure” attempting to distinguish themselves from the tongue’s “essential savor.” While this may seem nonsensical since the tongue itself does not have a flavor, it must be looked at as simply a reminder that the experience of saying language, the physical sensation of moving one’s tongue in a purely hedonistic way— one definition of “epicure” according to the Oxford English Dictionary— is different than the meanings of those formed words. Toying with language to alter perception is not the same as toying with language for the physical sensation of it, nor the same as toying with language for the sonic qualities of it; those differences must be acknowledged, as Stevens attempts to do here. The signified may or may not be real, but the sensations the signifier makes are always grounded in reality, showing another somewhat paradoxical facet of the nature of language. The focus on the tongue itself brings in a new sensual experience that the poem has not addressed; the sound of language has been shown with Stevens’ use of alliteration and repetition and other linguistic tropes, but the physicality of language has not been examined. Language not only has this dual sensuality of the sonic and the tactile, but it also has a dual sense of power that makes it paradoxical; that is, while we long for something more from the world and attempt to create that world via language, it is only the imagination expressed through language that allows man to long for anything other than the real world. Language both creates longing and answers that longing. This tangled existence matches the paradox of pain brought up in the second stanza specifically, as well as the relationship between real and imaginative.

The dichotomy of that relationship is brought up again in poems twelve through fourteen with a reminder to acknowledge the material world. In twelve that reminder is a view of the illogicality of dichotomizing the world; in thirteen, a memorial that man expresses himself through the body; in fourteen, an allegation that too much reason leads to lunacy. Attempts to exist solely in one realm, either imaginative or real, have their drawbacks and ultimately fail.

Despite his general valorization of imagination, Stevens drives home the danger of eschewing that material, sensual world the last poem:

The greatest poverty is not to live  
In a physical world, to feel that one's desire  
Is too difficult to tell from despair. Perhaps,  
After death, the non-physical people, in paradise,

Itself non-physical, may, by chance, observe  
The green corn gleaming and experience  
The minor of what we feel. The adventurer  
In humanity has not conceived of a race  
Completely physical in a physical world.  
The green corn gleams and the metaphysicals  
Lie sprawling in majors of the August heat,  
The rotund emotions, paradise unknown. (xv 1-12)

The enjambment of the opening two lines adds layers to the meaning of this bold statement; it is a detriment not to live within a physical world by abstaining from that world and it is a detriment not, in a physical world, to live. In this physical world, Stevens wants to make the paradox abundantly clear here in the final poem of "Esthetique" that desire can turn into despair and despair leads to desire. If the rest of the poem has been looking at pain from different angles, poem fifteen is the conclusion to which the combination of those perspectives has led. Those who live in a nonphysical world, those in paradise, still look to the material world and maybe experience some of what we feel. The repeated sentiment of "perhaps" in this sentence indicates a distance that has previously not been present in the poem; throughout the rest of the poem, Stevens has been incredibly declarative, but here possibility remains (xv 9). This may be because of the lack of existence of a "non-physical" world (xv 5), even a paradisiacal one; there is no way to be certain of how such a world operates and therefore it must be set up with a "perhaps." Even a poet, neither Stevens nor the poet speaking in "Esthetique," cannot truly conceive of a world solely imaginative, so it must be speculative. It could be an attempt to move the idea of a world without pain even further from possibility as well; if "Esthetique" is a poem attempting to show the pain of the world, the "muscle or nerve" of the world, then it must remove the real world from a world without pain by as many degrees as possible (Bates 173). A world without pain in a poem would be removed from the real world to begin with, simply by virtue of being a poem; in this last section though, Stevens does not reify that world, but rather confirms that it is only a part of the imagination; it is only something that can be hypothesized, not anything proven real.

Possibility is also shown through the symbolism built into the image of the corn in line six. By observing the "green corn gleaming," the "non-physical people" are observing a new season in the material world, overtly full of signs of fertility, which is a trait associated with reality earlier in poem ten (xv 6, 4). Stevens matches showing possibility through the corn with showing possibility through the choice of "minor" in line 7 as well. By using a musical term, the reader is drawn back into the senses; "minor" reminds us that sound has layers and potential. We do not only hear one chord, we hear a progression. Of course, the nonmusical definition of the word is appropriate as well: nonphysical beings could only understand a fraction of the human experience because the human experience is so tightly tied to physical sensations.

Just as a poet cannot picture a world of imagination alone, according

to line 8, even the adventurer, one who seeks to live solely in the body through adrenaline, cannot think of a purely physical world. It is the “metaphysicals” who seem to be unconcerned with such thoughts, instead sprawling in the August heat, feeling, seeing, hearing as indicated once again by the corn, the musically connoted “majors,” and the heat (xv 10, 11). They are concerned with the phenomena happening around them so instead of imagining new worlds, they allow the “rotund emotions” and “paradise” to go unknown (xv 12). The metaphysicals allow the phenomena, not anything invented such as false emotions or idealisms, to affect them. Stevens uses “metaphysicals” here not only to call to mind the poets that concerned themselves with pairing the physical and spiritual in their philosophy, but also to point out the idea of a “meta-physical.” These people sprawling in the heat of August are people not just thinking about the physical, but people who are thinking beyond the physical into the imaginative and how it affects the real. The “meta-physicals” are beings who have found the aesthetic of the world of resemblances, the world of imagination and the world of reality.

Leaving the last specific scene in the poem, the use of “this” in the next two lines is deliberately vague: “This is the thesis scrivener in delight,/ The reverberating psalm, the right chorale” (xv 13-14). “This” has no obvious antecedent; it could be the previous stanza, or it could be “Esthetique du Mal” as a whole. The stronger reading refers it to just poem fifteen itself, since this last poem acts as the culmination of the discussions that have previously been going on in “Esthetique” as a whole. Any of those possibilities still allow for the same conclusion that will be expressed in the final stanza:

One might have thought of sight, but who could think  
Of what it sees, for all the ill it sees?  
Speech found the ear, for all the evil sound,  
But the dark italics it could not propound,  
And out of what one sees and hears and out  
Of what one feels, who could have thought to make  
So many selves, so many sensuous worlds,  
As if the air, the mid-day air, was swarming  
With the metaphysical changes that occur  
Merely in living as and where we live. (xv 15-24)

The last stanza deliberately calls the physical, sensual world to mind. Sight is highlighted in lines 15 and 16, but not as something simply beautiful; sight allows us to see ill. Lines 17 and 18 call both hearing and speaking to mind, but once again, as things that allow us to perceive evil. Line 21 brings both emotions and tactility into the picture, giving one final connection to the senses and the spirit. “What one feels” is separated from “what one hears” and “what one sees” by the “and” in line 19 so that it can be given the double meaning of tactility and emotions. The double meaning should be read there to balance the syntax, so we know that our world does not have to be built strictly on sensation. Out of those things, man should, and does often, make himself. Frequent-

ly man reaches beyond himself in order to create, but it is not necessary. The mundanity of the quotidian that runs throughout “Esthetique du Mal,” expressed in the first poem by “it was almost time for lunch” and connected here in this last stanza with “the mid-day air,” does mean something; it is not only the grandiosity of Vesuvius’ eruption or paradise that matters. Man forgets, because of the imperfections he sees in the world, that where he is in time and in place and what he does can be good enough. Many critics, and Stevens himself, have pointed out that the poem technically should end with a question mark (Bloom 238; Bates 178). Harold Bloom suggests that this lack of punctuation is a moment of Stevens being “remarkably free of the anxiety about being self-deceived” (238). This affirmation of the importance of accepting and rejoicing in existence as it is does not necessarily have to be read as self-deception though. If the poem has been about searching for a reason for pain, it has found one. Stevens said that he could not bear to end the poem with the question mark (Bloom 239). It was not necessary because the “who” should represent everyone; this last poem is truly a suggestion, not a question. This last poem suggests that it is possible to be happy with the way the world as it is. It is difficult not to read it as such when the space between “who” and the ending of the poem is filled with such sensuousness that it makes one forget it was a question.

That sort of forced forgetting shows what the world can be. The tension between imagination and reality does not necessitate a relationship of dominance of one or the other; they can, and should, in fact, exist equally. We should allow ourselves to stop worrying about the power structure of the relationship and simply exist as we are, accepting every paradox with the same aplomb because they each add to the experience of living. The phenomena of every day, changing metaphysicals, can be the first principle of life. “Esthetique du Mal” not only shows the pain of the world, but also shows that it can have a sense of rightness and purpose; pain helps create the world as we know it. By embracing that sense of rightness, we accept and embrace the paradoxically conflicting relationship between reality and imagination.

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