

## REVIEW ESSAY

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### Poetry and Epistemology

Jacek Gutorow, *Luminous Traversing: Wallace Stevens and the American Sublime*.  
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Wallace Stevens, an efficient insurance businessman with a rich range of secret cravings for sophisticated pleasures of both body and mind, a provincial American who deliberately maintained his provinciality in the form of a dull burgher inhabiting the unattractive state of Connecticut in order to spin a lifelong effort at a poetry which, although said to be of earth, often radiates with extraterrestrial beauty, never ceases to fascinate and bewilder critics. While other modernists become the monuments of their own literary professionalism, Stevens's amateurish clinging on to poetry as the sole redeeming, if secret, light of a harshly excised personal life, continues to grow in significance and evocative power in our endless discussions on the intricate, impalpable, ephemeral uses of poetry.

It is fascinating to review the hall of master critics coming to Stevens oeuvre in order to profess and confess their own key formula, their own paramount investment in the art of reading poetry. For the earlier J. Hillis Miller, Stevens's heroic oscillation between "imagination" and "reality" achieves a balance in the poet's late "poetry of being." Miller was, however, to realize later, under the influence of Derrida, that the Heideggerian grounds are no grounds at all, but abysses whose glimpse we get through and in the endlessly mercurial figural play. For Hellen Vendler, Stevens's stylistic shifts are undulations of tone and mood, the poet looking for states of internal balances, and achieving them fully at least once, in the splendid "harmonies" of the famed *Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction*. Finally, Harold Bloom wants to see in Stevens's art another

instance of the poetic as a vehicle and realization of the basic imaginative power with which the human transcends itself and morphs away from the human as defined before.

In these various readings we observe a revolving kaleidoscope of approaches to the undefined lure of poetry. Does poetry come close to what really is and, as a more ephemeral, more enticing sister of philosophy and religion, bestow epistemological and spiritual truths on us? And if it does, if the most lasting and poignant poems give us the truth, is this the truth discovered, one that was waiting for poetry as a representational tool? If so, what then happens to poetry itself?

Jacek Gutorow's careful and balanced study of Stevens's entire creative career is a tribute to the richness of such a discussion and the Stevensian critical lore. It impresses and rewards the reader with beautifully organized and meticulous discussions, in which the author manages to summarize elegantly and tactfully the existing critical mappings, in order to extend them or in fact reformulate and move beyond them.

Gutorow's focal point and perspective with which Stevens's artistic ambitions are held together and presented to form a fluid developmental narrative is the aesthetic category of the sublime. In the opening chapters, the author presents us with a concise but effective review of the lineage of the term, from Hobbes, Burke, and Kant, to the Romantics, with Longinus later to be joined to this group. The task of the discussion is to remind the reader that the concept of the sublime aesthetic experience will inescapably be connected with another concept which brings together the classical theory, the Romantics, and Stevens—the imagination. If the problematic of the sublime touches on the liminal powers of representation, it leads us to imagination, as a tool, or faculty, responsible for the work of representing, picturing, or actually producing that which we think we represent. But the essential link that Gutorow traces and exposes between the sublime and the imagination is the motif of limit, of the transgressive moment in which the imagination will renounce itself, indeed get dispersed, in its sublime surrender to what it discovers to precede it: the bare rock of that which merely is. The question then will remain, will Stevens, as both man and poet, withstand the burden of this discovery, the awful finding made by his poetic “capable imagination,” will he be faithful to its own discipline, even as it jeopardizes the very imaginative capability?

Gutorow's is an academic analysis beneath which there resounds a long and loving attachment to a great poet. And even though Gutorow's approach is not biographical, being immersed in philosophy and literary theory, the critic's theoretical apparatus gives us also a man in the poet. The author sees a man in the artist who sometimes gives in and bends under the grandeur of his aesthetic findings. Stevens will often balk at and flinch away from the sublimities produced by his verse. Or at least, such are the conclusions frequently reached in the book. For in this respect,

the Polish scholar does not differ from his renowned American predecessors: he also comes to Stevens to reverently pronounce his key formula. And in this case the formula is: dissolution and dispersal. Gutorow's sublime in Stevens is the sublime of "deconstructive vibrancy," a cognitive and imaginative coming apart of language, faculties of mind and expression, at the threshold moment of approaching the bare inhuman ground of reality as it is, beyond the human.

Now, the fascination of this reviewer is in finding out that this reading will make the author want to catapult his subject, a poet, beyond even the scope of poetry. Poetry may in fact constitute an obstacle on the way to the deconstructive sublime, as it stubbornly refuses to yield its illusions in the face of the pressures exerted by the dispersing powers.

Gutorow's Stevens oscillates between not so much imagination and reality, as it is the case in the Miller of *The Poets of Reality*, as between the urges of making and unmaking. The oscillation is found in the poet early on, and Gutorow shows how *Harmonium*, Stevens's uncannily late and powerful debut, is not only a book of imagination, a standard critical label, but a book of fancy, too. Fancy, however, is here thought to be a force and faculty whose vector is opposite to the compositional powers of imagination. Thus the author proceeds with a discussion in which he reworks the standard Coleridgean terms. As a reversal of the synthetically compositional forces of imagination, fancy "seems to subvert the very coherency of the mind" (37) whose operations may have been imaginatively integrated. Gutorow reaches for those poems in *Harmonium* in which Stevens plays with the excess or lack of meaning, fortuity of sound structure, the bizzaria of imagery. These poems, an abundant group in *Harmonium*, are presented as cubistic exercises in which the intention is to bring about the "swooning of perceptive faculties" (41). Here, we have to do with the sublimity of disjunction. A poet of imagination, Stevens appears as a poet of the opposite thrust too, for whom fancy "was about disintegration and dispersal" (39).

The stylistic dispersions exercised in *Harmonium* change into repressions of the poetic self in Stevens's next volume, *Ideas of Order*. We enter the region of the Freudian sublime, the sublime connected with the processes of repression and willful renewal of the self, its ability to depart toward new shapes. These clearly Bloomian agendas, however, are quickly moderated by Gutorow. Against the theorist of the anxiety of influence, the critic points to those moments of the volume in which the interest and value is in the instances of stalling and hesitation. Stevens had a long period of creative silence after the publication of *Harmonium*, and Gutorow senses the new collection as full of abiding pauses, hesitations, and uncertainties. Indeed, the volume witnesses poetry attaining points of "complete paralysis" (64). To be sure, it is a stalling that the critic sees the poet to be intentionally investigating. Stevens is said to be interested in: "uncertainty, silence . . . terror" (65). In these post-*Harmonium*

pieces, the point is not violently “capable imagination”—Bloom’s usual bounty—but images which “fade away rather than flood consciousness” (65). It is also here that, according to Gutorow, Stevens’s former interest in stylistic dispersal of fancy matures into a serious, metaphysical interest in violent disorder. The critic reads the wildly aphoristic “Like Decorations in a Nigger Cemetery” and concentrates on the speaker’s finding “the eccentric to be the base of design” (qtd. in Gutorow 66). Such offhand perceptions, seemingly marginal, grow to be the gates through which the poet plays with the forces of chaos, death, and destruction. Whenever the poems in the volume observe the construction of order, as it is the case in the famous “Idea of Order at Key West,” Gutorow shows them to incur the costs of heavy repressions, repressions of disorder, of that which, as the feminine in Nietzsche, stands for the ephemeral, indeterminate, ever distanced and spectral. That is, all construction of order trails behind it the fear of its attendant repressed other.

The full discussion of the tropes of centrifugal imperceptibility enters the picture when Gutorow discusses the volumes of the forties, with a particular emphasis on Stevens’s preoccupation with the figure of the “hero” or the “central man.” The genealogy of the central man is Emersonian, with the debt to the Longinian connection between genius, divinity and transgression, making Emerson an inheritor and continuator of the motif of the sublime. Gutorow’s reading of Emerson, just as his earlier rereading of Coleridge’s fancy, is as focused as it is peculiar. Emerson may have been a preacher of the powers of the self, but his treatises are shown to veer toward explorations of the abyssal, dispersive, and chaotic. Emersonian texts, rather than integrative of the powers of the spirit, are shown as suffused with “basic deconstructive vibrancy” (80). True, Emerson speaks of departures toward ever greater “circles” of being, but these departures are to be seen as transgressive bursts and openings toward energies which never take definitive shapes. So while Stevens may play at the theme of centrality when offering his figures of the major man, Gutorow is careful to redefine this centrality away from fixedness and toward the ephemeral. This centrality is more like an ability to “perceive and record scenes of [its own] absence” (81).

This reading will separate Gutorow from J. Hillis Miller and Andrzej Ziarek in the way all three of them read Heideggerian motifs in *Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction*. For the two latter critics, Stevens attains a kind of sublimity of the “here,” the visible merging with the invisible, which leads Ziarek to talk about how Stevens makes his hero a true inhabitant of Being, the rift between Being and thought bridged by the power of the poetic language. Such story is too smooth for Gutorow, who, although he agrees that Stevens’s “first idea” might fruitfully be read in the context of Heidegger’s philosophy of Being, sees Being as a term signifying radical dispersals of meaning, “eluding any essence and fixed character” (102). In other words, Gutorow’s “Being” is a sphere of transgressive dissemination; and so will be his approach to Stevens’s

“major man.” This creature is an angel of the indeterminate, mutable, and fluid, who is defined by “the abyss of negations” (102), the only element by the help of which we might get glimpses of this post-human figure.

The negative sublime in Stevens, according to Gutorow’s scheme, reaches its culmination in “The Auroras of Autumn,” or, more precisely, in the first several cantos of this long poem. This phase of Stevens’s development presents his coping with the realization that the figures achieved in *The Notes*, which for such critics as Vendler are Stevens’s strongest balances and harmonies, are not to be maintained. The ongoing poetic and psychic mutabilities, the poet’s own imperative of “it must change,” demand a venture beyond even the most supreme rhetorical domes, and a confrontation with the truly inhuman essence of the real, the real that repels and defeats any rhetorical and poetic supreme fiction. That Stevens attempts this confrontation in the first seven cantos speaks for his poetic honesty and power; that he is able to bring the poet in him to renounce rhetoric in the face of the violently inhuman destructiveness revealed in the aurora borealis spectacle is one of his biggest triumphs, one, however, which, as Gutorow is forced to note in the light of Stevens’s struggle against the lights, the poet is simply unable to maintain for long. In this discussion, “The Auroras” fail, as the remaining cantos attempt to divert away from the overpowering but still point of the sheer chaos reigning beyond the life of rhetoric, an attempt that Gutorow sees as forced and unconvincing. Stevens, in this retreat, is unfaithful to his own experiment in “decreation,” an ethico-aesthetic strategy that the poet glimpsed in the writings of Simone Weil, saw at work in modernist painting, and tried to employ himself.

This pattern, the rhythm of the poetic language coming in touch with something beyond it, almost yielding, in its total dissolution, to the reigning, primordial, definitive IT of it—the base of the real that lasts impervious to the actions of language and imagination—which is then followed by an awkward, if not totally embarrassing, regrouping of rhetorical forces, is also found to be the glory and failure of “The Rock.” In the first sections of it, Gutorow praises the hierophantic approach to the theme of the “rock,” which here becomes a new, allegedly ultimate name for Stevens’s life-long concern with the base of the real. The treatment of the “rock” is a chance to finally rest the useless rhetorico-poetic march and come into a sublime touch with an entity that will repel any attempt to intellectualize it, to enmesh it in relations and thus subordinate it to the transforming powers of poetry. Instead, it is the rock, like the auroras before it, that arrests the flow of language and stands apart and supreme as, in Gutorow’s phrase, “the blank wall of reality” (165). But, again, the poet flinches. Instead of withstanding the brunt of the first two thirds of his own poem, he squanders this rare opportunity and strays into the “‘idle talk’ of the third section . . . in which the rock becomes one more supreme fiction” (165).

On this reading, Stevens is more successful in his previous long attempt at the sublime, "An Ordinary Evening in New Haven." Here, through an intense and focused meditation, he is able to enter the Heideggerian mode of dwelling as thinking the place of dwelling, which is also a mode of a sublime merging with the thingly character of reality, and, by extension, of the poem itself. For the critic, however, this kind of "the existing human being's ecstatic entry into the unconcealment of Being"—as Heidegger puts it in "The Origin of the Work of Art" (192)—opens us on the sublime indefiniteness of the threshold non-place of Being. In evocations of Heideggerian clearings, which Gutorow traces in "An Ordinary Evening" and in the masterly late lyrics, such as "The Plain Sense of Things," "for Stevens, The House of Being starts at the threshold, in a kind of non-place . . . devoid of essence but essential" (151).

Now, how should we welcome these findings of the search for the negative sublime, with their attendant search for "deconstructive vibrancies." The critic's impulse to follow his key formula—the order-defiant chaotic dissolution in the destructive element of the negative sublime—is very strong in this reading, and it tends to put pressure on some allegedly established theoretical schemes. Gutorow's is a courageous project, one of going back to a series of received traditions and injecting a rereading energy into them. Some of these attempts are promising; others demand a greater discussion, which, if conducted at greater detail, could be of great interest. Let us do justice to some of these critical anticipations.

Is fancy a deconstructive force that Gutorow sees in it? In the classical eighteenth-century aesthetic theory, and in Coleridge, our primary source here, fancy is merely a faculty of the mind arranging materials that have already entered the mind through the sensual apparatus. Coleridge's point, however, was not that fancy should work against order, coherence, or meaning. On the contrary, fancy, in Coleridge, belongs among the forces of composing wholes. It does so, however, on a level that is beneath the capacity of the imagination. It belongs among the mechanical compositional forces, as an inheritance bequeathed to the Romantics by the eighteenth-century mechanistic and atomistic aesthetic theory. Fancy is "mechanical" and "passive" (Coleridge's vocabulary). Tied to what M. H. Abrams, commenting on the "psychological atomism" of the empirical tradition, calls "atoms of the minds" (160), it deals with "fixities and definites" (Coleridge), and "must receive its materials ready made from the law of association" (Coleridge). As such, Coleridge makes fancy inferior to some truer compositional forces, those of imagination, which, being more holistic, organic, and synthetic in their work, are free of the temporal, spatial, but also logical bounds of the existing material elements provided by the merely sensual instruments. In fact, contrary to Gutorow's discussion, it is the faculty of "secondary imagination," not fancy, that does the work of "dissolution, diffusion, and dissipation," which operations are performed for the sake of new compositions and organic

integrations. In other words, Gutorow's reading is a complete reversal of Coleridgean terminology. To read fancy as a force that counterpoints the synthetic compositional actions of imagination, to read this faculty as the actual dissolving drive, might in fact be a revealing act of reinterpreting an area of the aesthetic tradition. Such departure, however, should give us pause and be accompanied by a fuller discussion.

An even more fascinating inquiry should result in a closer examination of the relations between Heidegger's jargon—the monumental apparatus that includes the thought of the “Being of beings”—and the earlier, much more established concept of the sublime. Gutorow links the two notions very naturally and reads the connection into Stevens. And so, Stevens's enigmatic “First Idea” easily becomes a synonym of the thought of Being. In the next step, this equalization is naturally brought to the experience of the sublime, specifically Gutorow's sublime of the endlessly fast and elusive work of negation, doubt, and hesitation. Are we really justified, however, in making this easy leap from Being to the sublime? Our first intuition here should be contrary: after all, Being is a term created for the purpose of leading philosophy beyond the scope of the idea of “representation,” and the very provenience of the concept of the sublime grounds it in such philosophy. Its genealogy binds it strongly to some essential metaphysical distinctions, such as the one between the sensible and the super-sensible.

This is not to say that Gutorow's inclinations are erroneous. Not at all. This is just to say that Gutorow's deconstructive impetus rolls over a tad too quickly over large and difficult areas. What is so natural for the Polish critic is found to be a surprise, if not a scandal by, say, Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe who, in a text called “Sublime Truth,” claims that Heidegger's discussion of the event of “truth” in the work of art is nothing but a return of this anti-representationalist philosopher to the very essence of the concept of the sublime: “What this text [“The Origin of the Work of Art”] describes, in its own way and at a depth doubtless unknown before it, is the experience of the sublime itself” (Lacoue-Labarthe 95). Should we arrive at this point, we might also press further, into the very heart of the problem, the negativity that Gutorow finds in the moment of the “unconcealment” of Being. By concentrating on the notion of Being, Gutorow wants to stress the trembling and disruptive “inessentiality” of this term, its ever operative disseminating activity, the activity of that which prepares space for particular beings to appear, itself remaining hidden and dissolving. Lacoue-Labarthe, meanwhile, concentrates on the defamiliarizing uncanniness of the event of the work of art itself, which allows us to glimpse the Heideggerian “void” founding beings. Does the defamiliarizing experience of the uncanniness of the ordinary push us inevitably into the abysses described by Gutorow, or does it allow us to re-enter the ordinary in a new mode?

Beyond these adjustments, some of the author's theoretical treatments demand not so much a discussion as a full scale debate. If the event of the work of art speaks

of the rending forces of negativity, the Emersonian tradition, which is decidedly Stevens's tradition, treats this recognition as the enabling event of potentiality. That is why, when Gutorow reads "deconstructive vibrancy" in Emerson, when he concentrates on this thinker's disruptive moment—the constant falling over, away and beyond any established order—or when he reminds us of Emerson's recognition of endless uncertainty inscribed in our condition, he also remains blind, with a blindness necessary to his entire argument, to the Emersonian moment proper. This moment is the moment of Power, which in Emerson means the stubborn, integrative clinging onto the act of purposive departure from one system of meanings—one constellation of tropes, one "circle"—to another. The element of uncertainty and of incoherent and inchoate dispersal of forces is there for sure; but this is merely "nature" as the initial mechanical jolt ushering in the integrative work of subjective forces which are pushed on toward new shapes. So the "eccentricity" that Gutorow finds in Stevens's aphoristic propositions of "Like Decorations in a Nigger Cemetery" is not a spillage toward disorder. It is the very Emersonian power-hungry thrust away from that which has already been established, the literal "it" of the existing system of tropes. Further, this "power" hunger should not be thought of as an imperialistic and teleologically naïve belief in any finality of orders, but as a desire for poetry—the imaginative power to depart toward new formulations. The falling away is not *into* dispersal, but *toward*—it is a key word in Stevens—the next "circle". Emerson's wonder is not at dispersal and chaos—these are always found abundantly at hand. His wonder is at the poetic capacity of spanning the voids of nature, the capacity of re-forging the inchoate into a shape. "Eccentricity" is the ability to leave the existing "circle." The ability itself does not partake of dispersal. "Dispersal," that of nature, is the environment in which poetry can happen. When it happens, it does smack of dissolution; but it is only the first step in a continuous evolution of the trope. The action of departure itself is predominantly integrative. That is why when Emerson speaks against "consistency" in "Self-Reliance" it is against the "foolish consistency . . . the hobgoblin of little minds," the minds fully enclosed in the literalness of the now. To renounce this form of "consistency" is not to favor disorder; it is to use "disorder," by getting better of it, and make room for a greater coherence of a future "character," invisible to those around the agent. This "character" emerges as "one tendency": "all the sallies of his will are *rounded* in by the law of his being . . . the inequalities of Andes . . . are insignificant in the *curve of the sphere*" (265, emphasis mine). The moment of departure from the given, the "eccentric" moment, is in fact fully integrative: "It is the . . . power of divine moments that they *abolish our contradictions*" ("Circles" 411, emphasis mine).

If "power" and "character" are the names of this integrative game, it is not "teleology." There is no "telos" here in the sense of a point of arrival. The future shapes,

the specific contents of the successive circles, are unpredictable (and unimportant). If “power” is the name of the Emersonian game, then it is the power of departure. Departure from the literal is also the real topic of Bloom’s theory, which is no theory at all, but an apology for the rhetorical capacity and activity of the poetic. When Gutorow finds the contradiction between the rhetorical—the unpredictable, the reformulative, the figuratively incalculable—and the allegedly “teleological” in Bloom, he is, I guess, unwilling to thematize the coalescing power of the poetically rhetorical, because his entire argument goes against this power. To thematize it would mean to admit that any cubistic dismantling of architecture, such as the one Gutorow finds in the cubistic poems of *Harmonium*, is itself a feat of the imaginative, integrative action, an imaginative achievement of the poem itself. In other words, the dismantling itself is a rhetorical device, a ploy, a strategy. And all such strategies are necessarily rhetorical: they are a stage in the endless evolution of tropes. This evolution is Bloom’s only theme and no teleology is incurred since no final shapes of the evolution can be predicted.

By extension, the critic is also unwilling to find Stevens a poet of desire, more basically than the poet of epistemology. Gutorow takes Stevens’s ever new formulas in the “imagination” vs. “reality” dialectic to be exercises of epistemological nature. In this way he seems to be able to dismiss the Bloomian story of the coherent growth of the poet’s self, the story which requires a coalescence of rhetoric and will. By foregrounding the epistemological element, Gutorow brings rhetoric and epistemology together and cleanses both of desire and will. This move is one of the most problematic strategies presented in his study. First, regardless of the various dissatisfactions we might have with Bloom (e.g. Bloom’s persistent patterning of the rhetorical development of the poet, the persistence that might be mistaken for a form of teleology), to divorce rhetoric from the work of the will is to go against a powerful theoretical grain and coalition, consisting of the Emersonianism not only of Nietzsche, but also of William James, a figure who should not be ignored in Stevens scholarship, not even to mention the further continuation of Nietzsche, found in Foucault’s major dismissal of the divisions between knowing, willing, wielding power. While Gutorow is careful—and correct—to distinguish between Nietzsche’s fantasy of the *übermensch* and Stevens’s “major man,” he never mentions James or Foucault in their insistence on the inseparability of will and knowledge.

More importantly, however, the insistence on an epistemological cleansing of Stevens’s rhetorical mastery forces the critic to limit his readings to investigating the unstable career of the moves at “representing” reality in Stevens. This limitation means an almost sublime inability to accept a huge other area of the poet: the area in which he delights in his own powers of diverting from any shape or content of “knowledge” his own poems may have brought him. This area is not something

separate from the work of aligning “reality” and “imagination”; rather, in this poetry, the very attempt at such aligning is a result of a will and a desire for the real, a desire which makes epistemology a tool and a vehicle rather than an objective in itself.

Stevens is a poet of desire in its versatile forms: the aesthetic, the erotic, the epistemological. Most crucially, however, he is the poet of the desire and will—a very narcissistic will—not to “know” but to keep knowing afresh. The changeability, the mutability of orders, grounds and cognitive systems that Stevens insists on—these are just so many exercises sustaining not the fantasy of the self as a coherent fixity, but the power of the self to renew itself. In the “It Must Change” section of *Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction*, musing on the need of transformation, Stevens finds it the essential ingredient of the health of the self, not its coming apart: “It is our own, / It is ourselves, the freshness of ourselves” (344). He never resigns this ambition, not even in his very late poetry, allegedly the poetry of “being” and dissipation of the subject.

This is why Gutorow must avoid those passages in Stevens in which the poet makes an effort to fight his own “epistemological” findings. The primary examples here are the remaining three cantos of “The Auroras of Autumn,” the cantos that continue past the catastrophic recognition of the unmaking powers of the auroras, and the parts of “The Rock” in which the “rock” is, again, tirelessly, caught in a network of tropes so that its finality can again be seen as an illusion, the illusion that death makes any statement at all.

The supreme rule of the “auroras” in their destructive majesty which repels all human rhetoricity becomes a source of fear for the “scholar of one candle” not because he senses an inability to divert from them, but because, in order to divert from them, he must assume their powers and thus leave, again, the former version of his self (the balanced self of *Notes*). But the joining is adversarial: it aims at erasing the “name” of the auroras, at annulling their terrifying “thisness.” The unmaking begins already in Canto VII, with the “eccentricity”—the poetic, rhetorical falling off from the literal. What “unmakes” the auroras is very little, a drop of poetry—“our flippant communication under the moon” (360).

Gutorow’s Stevens is a poet whose sublimity consists in his renunciation of desire for the sake of knowledge: the knowledge that the poetic clashes and crushes against a specifically understood finality. It may be the finality of chaos invading all linguistic formulation, the chaos that makes Gutorow wonder at the sublime indeterminacy of the word “like” in “it was like a new knowledge of reality,” one of Stevens’s farewell statements. In this reading Gutorow goes beyond Vendler, Bloom, and even Miller, both early and late. His reading is focused, devoted, and very strong, despite its author’s forays against the concept of a “strong” reading. It is one to be treasured for these very reasons.

In it, paradoxical as it may sound, the critic's veneration for the poet sees the poet as failing more often than not. Gutorow's Stevens fails in "Auroras," because they move "flippantly" away from the finality of the lights; he fails in "The Rock," which veers into "idle talk." The magnificent *Notes* are only a transient success, their supreme fiction not lasting beyond the trial of their own demand of mutability. Finally, Stevens seems to fail even in his much acclaimed final lyrics, whose balanced styles are here taken to be suggestive of "inertia" (168) more than the Heideggerian "nothingness."

So in this reading Gutorow may be coming close to another Heideggerian critic, Simon Critchley, who finds Stevens to be a poet gradually curing himself of the need for poetry, as he forsakes the poetic in order to merge with the life of things. Critchley is right when he claims that the final arrival at the life of things would mean the end of the poetic. This is because "the life of things" is an ephemeral remnant of epistemology which always aimed at the end of itself, the end of the rhetorical procession of all inquiry, the end that would be the result of achieving the final epistemological success. "The life of things" would be something that is independent of inquiry, human language, imagination. But this is precisely what would have happened in Stevens had he stayed mute at the "blank wall of reality," the bland fact of "the rock," the point at which Gutorow would most gladly see him stay. The paradox is that, although such point might be a highest form of sublimity, it would also be the end of poetry. Poetry, however, was about the only kind of lasting "health" that the poet knew (all his bodily pleasures, obsessions, and cares being a prop in his internal poetic theater). Thus, what for Gutorow is a sublime moment of poetry arriving at self-erasure may well be what Stevens devoted a life-time in poetry to get himself free of: the idea that one might finally get to know something final and stop writing poetry. Stevens knew that this kind of finality, this asceticism that lies at the heart of all epistemology, needed "itself to be imagined." Such ascetic finality is a rhetorical stance itself, and the value of his art lies in its overall sense that epistemology is second to poetry.

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